

Fallacies Arising from Ambiguity

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Fallacies Arising from Ambiguity

by

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For Karen, with love.

EDITORIAL PREFACE

We are happy to present to the reader the first book of our Applied Logic Series. Walton's book on the fallacies of ambiguity is firmly at the heart of practical reasoning, an important part of applied logic.

There is an increasing interest in artificial intelligence, philosophy, psychology, software engineering and linguistics, in the analysis and possible mechanisation of human practical reasoning. Continuing the ancient quest that began with Aristotle, computer scientists, logicians, philosophers and linguists are vigorously seeking to deepen our understanding of human reasoning and argumentation. Significant communities of researchers are actively engaged in developing new approaches to logic and argumentation, which are better suited to the urgent needs of today's applications. The author of this book has, over many years, made significant contributions to the detailed analysis of practical reasoning case studies, thus providing solid foundations for new and more applicable formal logical systems. We welcome Doug Walton's new book to our series.

The Editors

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PREFACE

The genesis of this book was the experience, revealed in teaching courses on informal logic and argumentation, that covering the area of fallacies relating to ambiguity, and related fallacies within language, proved difficult and frustrating. One problem was that the textbooks were all over the place, offering widely different accounts of these supposed fallacies. Another difficulty was the lack of nearly enough good examples that would convey clearly to the students what the fallacy and its variants consisted in, and why it was worth bothering about as a serious kind of error or trap of reasoning. Another problem was the question of whether some of the traditional fallacies included in the curriculum were really worth serious study, as opposed to being merely historical curiosities, handed down from one generation of textbooks to another since Aristotle's time.

Some early research with John Woods [Woods and Walton, 1979] had indicated that equivocation was a serious fallacy, well worth further study. But in the classroom, following the trend of the current textbooks, one had a hard time knowing what fallacies, if any, belonged in the same class as equivocation. Amphiboly and accent, much less the fallacy of figure of speech, could hardly be recommended to students as having any worth, or clear basis, as fallacies that are important to know about.

At the same time however, the opening up of new developments in the pragmatics of argumentation suggested that this class of fallacies could be advanced by looking at them from a dialectical point of view—that is, in a perspective of interactional argumentation, where two parties reason together in a goal-directed sequence of conversational exchanges.

What began to make the tools available for such an analysis was a joint research project with Erik Krabbe in 1987-88 at NIAS (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences), which resulted in the monograph, *Commitment in Dialogue* [Walton and Krabbe, 1995]. Commitment had been taken as the basic concept by Hamblin [1970] in his use of formal dialogue systems as the preferred structure for the analysis of fallacies. But Hamblin didn't develop the concept of commitment very far. Our project was to formalise this notion more extensively in different types of dialogue in which argumentation typically takes place, providing rules for the organisation of commitment in these different types of dialogue.

While this research continued, an invitation to be a member of a research group on 'Fallacies as Violations of Rules of Argumentative Discourse' at NIAS in 1989-90, was a big stimulus to working on various fallacies like begging the

question, appeals to emotion, slippery slope, and so forth. Much of this work has now appeared in print. But generally, this period of collaborative research and study provoked a rethinking of the concept of fallacy generally, and its role in informal logic.

Clearly these experiences of doing collaborative work with my colleagues, in an international setting, have had a profound effect on this study of the fallacies arising from ambiguity, in such a basic way that detailed acknowledgment of indebtedness is not possible. But individual thanks to a few individuals should be made.

First, I would like to thank Erik Krabbe, with whom I have jointly developed many of the basic concepts and categories utilised in this book. Erik contributed valuable insights and suggestions at so many points to the arguments of the book, and made so many detailed comments and criticisms on it, correcting errors and shortcomings, that detailed acknowledgement of these contributions is impossible. Thanks are also due to Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, who have done so much to build up the field of argumentation as an academic discipline. Their influence on this book has also been pervasive. Some other members of the Amsterdam School that I would like to thank for discussions and influences of one kind or another are Eveline Feteris, Francisca Snoeck Henkemans and Erik Viskil. Members of the NIAS group on fallacies in 1989-90 were: Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, Sally Jackson, Scott Jacobs, Agnes Haft van Rees, Agnes Verbiest, Charles Willard, and John Woods. Many discussions within this group have greatly influenced the approach to argumentation exhibited in this book.

I would also like to thank my research assistant, Victor Wilkes, for collecting material for me, during the period of 1990-93, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a research grant supporting the work of this period.

Special thanks are due to Amy Merrett for word-processing the manuscript, including the figures, through the various drafts. I would also like to thank Harry Simpson for help with the proof-reading.

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