“Fallacies are Common” first appeared in *Informal Logic*, XI.2, Spring 1989, pp. 101-106.

Professor Secor recently has replied to an article of mine in which I argued that fallacies are common in ordinary discourse.[[1]](#footnote-1) [13](#bookmark36)

Given what I believe is the importance of the specific issue (whether fallacies are common) as well as the more general issue (how relevant logic is as a discipline for assessing ordinary discourse), I feel that a reply is in order. Since I believe that many of her specific

criticisms involve some general confusion about what I was doing, I will begin by making four general points, and then turn to the specifics of her reply.

To begin with, let me remind the reader that to show that fallacies are common in structured political discourse (debates, news conferences, position papers and other campaign literature, interviews and so on) is of course not to show conclusively that fallacies are common in all ordinary discourse. It is merely to give some evidence to that effect. The examination of structured political discourse should be viewed as only the first step in a small but not uninteresting research program of examining large areas of ordinary discourse to see whether fallacies are common. Other steps in the program (if I may be permitted to foreshadow) might be to examine sales pitches, product guarantees, letters to the editor, newspaper editorials, and such like.

Second, we ought to be clear on what the claim that such-and-such is "common" means. When I claim that (say) ravens are common in my part of the country, I am not claiming that all other species of birds are uncommon, i.e., that only ravens are common. Much less am I claiming that the majority of birds are ravens, i.e., that ravens predominate. I am merely claiming that in my area of the country, one often sees ravens. Similarly, when I claim that fallacies are common in structured political discourse, I am not claiming that most things politicians say are fallacious, only that in such discourse one often hears fallacies.

Third, we ought to distinguish two principals of charity, the interpretive and the motivational. Roughly put, the interpretive principal of charity is that, before assessing someone's argument, we ought to state it in its strongest form. Under this principle of charity, we should try to fill in omitted premises that would make the argument strong, spell out key terms so as to make the argument clear, and so on. (Specifying exactly what interpretive charity amounts to is, however, not a trivial matter). Again, roughly put, the motivational principle of charity is that we ought to assume that the person putting forward an argument is doing so in good faith, i.e., is motivated by a sincere desire to communicate with his audience by logically decent rhetorical standards.

It seems to me that the interpretive principal of charity, for all the un-clarity about its application in particular instances, should be adopted by the logician. But the motivational principle of charity should not be adopted by the logician, for two reasons. First, it is dubious. People are quite often motivated by the desire to mislead their audiences, and use any rhetorical technique fair or foul to achieve their goals (sell a product, win an election, gain converts to a cult, or whatever). Second, it is irrelevant to the task of the logician. The logician is interested in the logical correctness of an argument, not the motives of the arguer who puts it forward. The fact that the arguer may be sincere, or under pressure, or that his audience may be satisfied with what he says, is irrelevant to the logical merits of what he says.

The last general point regards the definition of a fallacy, and the difference between the disciplines of rhetoric and logic. A fallacy is a logically incorrect (invalid or weak) argument. Whether a given type of fallacy is persuasive to a given group of people is an interesting rhetorical question, but is not strictly speaking a logical one. Very roughly, logic is the study of correct argumentation, while rhetoric is the study of persuasive communication. The two disciplines traditionally have had and continue to have different foci. It should be kept in mind that my focus is that of the logician.

Now, Secor's argument against my view seems to have three parts. First, the cases of ignoring the issue I cited are not in fact such. Second, the cases of false cause I cited are fallacious only by unreasonably high scholarly standards. Third, the cases of *ad populum* or *ad* *hominem* I cited are not fallacies at all, but are instead legitimate rhetoric. More globally, she argues that my occasional charitableness towards the participants undermines my concept of a fallacy, and that I have attempted to apply culturally universal ideals to public argumentation where no such ideals truly apply.

Let me begin with ignoring the issue. Let's be clear first on what counts as answering a question (i.e., addressing an issue), and what counts as evading it. Consider an example:

Have you stopped beating your wife?

This admits of a number of responsive answers: "I don't know" (direct declaration of ignorance on the issue); "I've never beaten my wife" (a correction of a false presupposition); "Yes, I have," or "No, I haven't" (both direct answers). But the following are non-responsive answers: "You know, I think violence is a real problem in today's world" (a general discussion of a topic, not a specific answer to a question); "Well, look at Fred—he's a bigamist, and he beats both his wives!" (the introduction of an irrelevant specific issue); "ask me some other time" or "Oh, get lost" (simply deferring or dismissing the issue).

One can ignore a question/issue by talking in generalities, raising "red herrings" (irrelevant issues), or simply pooh-poohing it (deferring or dismissing it). My contention is that, in debates, news conferences, interviews and such like, it is common for politicians to ignore by those various means many of the questions put to them.

My examples reflected that contention. For example, I cited the case where Nixon was asked whether new laws were needed to protect the public against excessive use of power by the labor unions (which he had indicated he favored earlier in his campaign), and what those laws would be. What would have been a logically responsive answer from Nixon? On analogy with our earlier simple case, here are a few examples:

1. I have not yet thought of any specific laws.
2. Your question is based on a false presupposition I have never suggested in my campaign that we need any new laws.
3. I have issued a position paper outlining my proposals in detail. Let me just mention one such law: in any strike shutting down a plant vital to national security, give the President power to order a 30 day "cooling-off" period.

Nixon did not answer in any of those ways. Instead, he said:

**Mr. Nixon*:*** Mr. McGee, I am planning a speech on that subject next week. Also, so that we can get the opportunity for the questioners to question me, it will be before the next television debate. I will say simply, in advance of it, that I believe that in this area, the laws which should be passed, as far as the big national emergency strikes are concerned, are ones that will give the President more weapons with which to deal with those strikes.

Now I have a big disagreement with Senator Kennedy, though, on this point. He has taken the position, when he first indicated on October of last year, that he would even favor compulsory arbitration as one of the weapons a president might have to stop a national emergency strike. I understand in his last speech before the Steelworkers Union, that he changed that position and indicated that he felt that government seizure might be the best way to stop a strike which could not be settled by collective bargaining. I do not believe we should have either collective bargaining or seizure. I think the moment that you give to the union, on one side, and to management, on the other side, the escape hatch of eventually going to the government to get it settled, that most of these great strikes will end up being settled by the government, and that will be in the end, in my opinion, wage control; it would mean price control—all the things that we do not want. I do believe, however, that we can give to the President of the United States powers, in addition to what he presently has in the fact-finding area, which would enable him to be more effective than we have been in handling these strikes.

Nixon in effect answers the question by saying a) ask me again later, b) here are a couple of laws I don't like, and c) generally I really do think we need those laws! Nixon, it is clear, ignored the question. Indeed, even Secor seems to see that something is inadequate about the reply. She avers:

In referring to his forthcoming speech Nixon might be criticized for being unspecific but not, I think, for being irrelevant. If the public can be protected from excessive union power either by directly restricting the unions or by increasing presidential power to intervene, Nixon clearly advocates the latter course of action. It may, of course, be in his political interest to withhold details until a future speech, but he is not really guilty of ignoring the issue. (p. 43)

But answering the question about which new laws the President should have to deal with strikes by saying he should have more laws to deal with strikes is a hopelessly general answer.

Let me digress a moment to talk about Nixon's motivation not a logical matter, as I indicated earlier. But since the motivationally charitable remarks I made in my first article were used against me (as I shall explain shortly), let me make some uncharitable remarks now. I suspect that Nixon did not want to admit that after urging new laws against labor activity, he hadn't thought of any. This would have made him look ignorant to the voters. Moreover, he did not support the most obvious candidates for such laws (vis., laws that would allow the President to seize plants or at least force the parties into arbitration) because that would cost him votes in organized labor. So he talked around the question. But whether we are motivationally charitable and assume he was not clear on the question he was asked, or motivationally uncharitable, and assume that he was being evasive to avoid looking stupid or alienating labor, is irrelevant to the assessment of his response.

Let's re-examine another example. Consider next the example I cited in which Kennedy was asked whether he considered the oil depletion allowance of twenty-seven and a half percent inequitable and whether he would lower it. He replied,

**Mr. Kennedy:** Mr. McGee, there are about a hundred and four commodities that have some kind of depletion allowance-different kinds of minerals, including oil. I believe all of those should be gone over in detail to make sure that no one is getting a tax break; to make sure that no one is getting away from paying the taxes he ought to pay. That includes oil; it includes all kinds of minerals; it includes everything within the range of taxation. We want to be sure it's fair and equitable. It includes oil abroad. Perhaps that oil abroad should be treated differently than the oil here at home. Now the oil industry recently has had hard times. Particularly some of the smaller producers. They're moving about eight or nine days in Texas.

But I can assure you that if I'm elected president, the whole spectrum of taxes will be gone through carefully, and if there is any inequities in oil or any other commodity, then I would vote to close that loophole. I have voted in the past to reduce the depletion allowance for the largest producers; for those from five million dollars down, to maintain it at twenty-seven and a half percent. I believe we should study this and other allowances; tax expense, dividend expenses and all the rest, and make a determination of how we can stimulate growth; how we can provide the revenues needed to move our country forward.

Secor finds his reply perfectly fine:

Jason comments that Kennedy "never specifically answered the questions." I would argue that although he says a great deal besides answering the questions, he does answer them. Kennedy says that in the past he voted to maintain the twenty-seven and a half percent allowance for smaller producers; we must therefore assume that he thought the allowance fair and reasonable at the time. Political wisdom being subject to change and development, he says that we "should continue to study this and other allowances." That is, he makes no guarantee that he would continue to support this specific tax provision in the future. The answer may not be equivocal, but it is not an ascent to generality that ignores the issue at hand. The questions, in this case and many others, are complex and often loaded, and the candidates need to answer them carefully. It would be misleading as well as politically imprudent for Kennedy to call the allowance unfair, especially when he voted for it, or fair, if he might withdraw his approval in the future. (p. 43)

But I stick by my original assertion that Kennedy's reply was evasive. To the conjunctive question "is the depletion allowance unfair, and will you lower it from its current twenty-seven and a half percent?” the following replies are responsive:

1. It is not unfair, and I will not lower it.
2. It is unfair, and I will lower it.
3. It is not unfair, but I will lower it.
4. It is unfair, but I will not lower it.
5. I honestly don't know.
6. You falsely presuppose that the allowance is twenty-seven and a half percent; actually it is only ten percent.

Kennedy could have given one of these basic responsive replies, embellished with all the rhetorical bells and whistles Secor could desire. But he chose not to. He instead ignored the issue by saying a series of nonresponsive things: there are a lot of things that also have depletion allowances (So what? maybe all depletion allowances are unfair); all depletion allowances should be examined to see whether they are fair (fine, pal, but is the oil depletion allowance— supported by your own Vice Presidential nominee—unfair?); perhaps oil abroad should be treated differently from oil here at home (irrelevant); the oil industry is going through tough times (yeah, so what—does this mean the allowance is fair?); ask me again later after I'm President because, hey, I'll look into it (sure—trust you, right?); I voted to lower it to its present level (yes, *but is that present level unfair and will you lower it?).*

I will again digress into motivational inquiry. Is Secor right to view Kennedy here as sincerely trying to answer a question which is "complex and loaded"? Of course she is not. First of all, the question, while being compound, was not at all loaded, since its presuppositions—that the allowance existed and was twenty-seven and a half percent—were true. Second, it is clear that Kennedy was deliberately evasive because it was politically expedient to do so: if he said he would lower the allowance, he would win support among many taxpayers but lose support in the oil-producing states; if he said he would not lower the allowance, he would lose taxpayer support (and lose the issue of unfair taxation with which he was tarring Nixon and the Republicans) although he would gain support in the oil-producing states. He chose the easy way out, and did "the old *ignoratio* shuffle." But whether Secor or I am right about Kennedy's motivations, clearly he ignored the issue.

I won't rehash the other examples I cited. Time and again, the politicians did not address the given issue squarely by either conceding ignorance, showing the question to have a false presupposition, or answering it directly and specifically. Instead, either they rose irrelevant issues, talked in generalities, or deferred/dismissed the question.

I turn next to the fallacies of false cause. I cited a number of cases in which a politician attempted to show that his opponent was responsible for some bad situation that occurred while his opponent was in office merely on the basis that it occurred while that opponent was in office.

Secor doesn't even try to show my examples fail to fit the traditional *post hoc ergo propter hoc* mold. Instead, she replies

But once again, we might ask "false" or "inadequate" from what point of view? We all know that military strategists, economists, and historians make very elaborate causal arguments, constructing intricate models that take whole books to explain, work out, and verify. But the voter's perspective is not the same as the scholar's.

It is reasonable to expect that there be some difference between arguing for causes in the forums of scholarly disciplines, where one's causal model must be very precise and anticipate the efforts of other scholars to refute it, and arguing for causes in the public forums of presidential debate, where notions of responsibility are much more diffuse. As Aristotle says, we can only ask of a subject the degree of precision that is appropriate to it. Politicians are not economists, and voters act on causal assumptions different from those of scholars. Thus fallacies of false cause may be obvious from the vantage of the academic critic, whose standard of evidence for causality may be very high, but such analysis tells us very little about the way voters make or even should make decisions. Perhaps that is just another way of saying that the rhetorical context of political discourse differs from that of scholarly discourse. (pp. 46-7)

Her reply is very weak, for several reasons. First, it is simply not true that even the politicians involved accept *post hoc* reasoning as logical even in "the rhetorical context of political discourse," much less that the hapless voters do. This is obvious from the fact that the politicians do *not* accept responsibility for every bad thing which occurs when *they* are in office. And certainly the voters do not accept responsibility for every bad thing which happens in the country while *they* reside in it! As C.S. Peirce noted, the ethics of belief requires that any argument form I apply to others I should equally be willing to accept applied to me. No principle of charity should stop us from calling a spade a spade: if a politician applies a form of argument to his opponent but rejects it for himself, then it is clear that *even he* does not think it a logically strong argument technique.

Second, there *are* ways a politician can establish a better logical case for social, political, or economic causal claims. One obvious way is to cite from scholarly works that truly establish such claims—something that politicians often do, please note. (Remember, my point is that politicians *often* commit false cause fallacies, not that they *always* or even *typically* commit them.) Another way is to sketch out the premises of a full argument for a causal claim, and tell the audience how they may obtain a position paper in which the full details are spelled out. Again, politicians often do this.

The upshot is that to demand that our would-be leaders do more to establish their causal claims than merely cite temporal connections (especially in a highly selective and self-serving way!) is not to impose impractical elitist standards, but rather to request something which politicians can and often do provide. We just need to see more of it.

Secor's third point is not clear to me. I had pointed out that the politicians in the debates engaged in a number of *ad populum* and *ad hominem* appeals. I charitably added that in some cases *ad populum* appeals could be condoned, though not so with *ad hominem* appeals. Secor seems to think that this undercuts my view that those appeals are fallacies:

…If we condone rather than condemn the use of such tactics, what is the use of talking about the *ad populum* as a fallacy? If fallacies are not the product of deceitful intent, as we saw earlier, and if they are used by quite decent politicians, and if we can condone their usage in the context of debate, there seems to be little reason to consider them errors. They are errors only if we hold political discourse to a purely rational ideal according to which candidates are asked perfectly straight-forward questions which they are expected to answer without any tint of emotion or bias toward their own candidacy. (p. 47)

But her line of argument here is muddled.

To condone is to forgive, not approve. We can condone an act of petty jealousy without approving petty jealousy as a general lifestyle. My point is a simple one: a fallacy is a logically bad argument. A person may commit a fallacy (i.e., put forward a logically bad argument) out of sincere ignorance, or deliberate and unpardonable deceit, or even deliberate yet pardonable deceit, but a fallacy is still committed. Whether we condemn the person is quite a different question from whether we condemn the argument form. One is a question of motivational *(not* interpretive) charity, the other of logic.

Let me conclude with a note on the question whether those of us who teach logic with the belief that we can at least to a small degree improve the level of intellectual taste if not the reasoning ability of our students are merely elitists with an "unrealistically superior and judgmental attitude toward ordinary discourse." Really, the amount of illogic which pervades our public and private lives is considerable. This would not be so bad, I suppose, if all public and private decisions concerning our lives were made by governmental or other institutions, and the leaders of those institutions reasoned well—i.e., if we were totally ruled by philosopher-kings. But true philosopher-kings are not as plentiful as blackberries, and, in any case, the global trend seems to be toward increasing democratization. It seems imperative, then, that all students need their reasoning skills improved. We teachers cannot improve those skills unless we point to rigorous standards of argumentation, and demand that our students adhere to those standards, and create in our students an expectation that those who seek to govern also adhere to these standards.

**Gary James Jason**

**Department of Philosophy**

**San Diego State University**

1. See my “Are Fallacies Common? A Look at Two Debates," *Informal Logic,* vol. 8 (1986), pp. 81-92; and Marie J. Secor “How Common are Fallacies?" *Informal Logic,* vol. 9, (1987) pp. 41-48. All page references in the present reply are to Secor's paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)