Strategies of Character Attack

Fabrizio Macagno

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Abstract   Why are personal attacks so powerful? In political debates, speeches, discussions and campaigns, negative character judgments, aggressive charges and charged epithets are used for different purposes. They can block the dialogue, trigger value judgments and influence decisions; they can force the interlocutor to withdraw a viewpoint or undermine his arguments. Personal attacks are not only multifaceted dialogical moves, but also complex argumentative strategies. They can be considered as premises for further arguments based on signs, generalizations or consequences. They involve tactics for arousing emotions such as fear, hate or contempt, or for ridiculing the interlocutor. The twofold level of investigation presented in this paper is aimed at distinguishing the different roles that ad hominem have in a dialogue and bringing to light their hidden dimensions. The reasoning structure of each type of attack will be distinguished from the tactics used to increase its effectiveness and conceal its weaknesses.

Keywords   Fallacies · Ad hominem · Character attack · Emotive words · Emotions · Fear · Pity · Undercutter · Argument from consequences · Values · Political discourse

Ad hominem attacks are commonly regarded as potentially fallacious arguments (Walton 1998a). Their purpose is to attack the person who put forward a viewpoint or an argument, instead of countering what he actually advanced (Van Eemeren et al. 2000: 419). Such moves can be reasonable when they are used to denounce the failure of some crucial dialogical requirements, such as (depending on the dialogical and institutional setting) the speaker's impartiality or his social role or authority

F. Macagno (✉)
ArgLab, Instituto de Filosofia da Linguagem (IFL), Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Edifício I&D, 4 andar, Avenida de Berna 26, 1069-061 Lisbon, Portugal
e-mail: fabrizio.macagno@fcsh.unl.pt; fabriziomacagno@hotmail.com

needed for performing specific speech acts. However, they are often ungrounded or even irrelevant for the subject matter of the discussion, even though they can be extremely expedient for achieving other dialogical goals. The speaker can be claimed to be biased or ignorant, to have a bad character or to have committed bad actions in order to end the dialogue, trigger a negative value judgment or simply avoid providing a reply to the argument or viewpoint proposed.

Even when they are irrelevant or unreasonable from an argumentative perspective, personal attacks can be extremely effective from a dialogical point of view. Why and how can weak (or even unreasonable) moves be powerful in a discussion? How is it possible to assess the relevance and reasonableness of an ad hominem attack? The goal of this paper is to address the two questions mentioned above by regarding personal attacks (also referred to as ad hominem, regardless of their fallaciousness or reasonableness) not simply as arguments, but as dialogical moves, a generic term indicating a speech act aimed at achieving different types of dialogical effects. Ad hominem will be investigated from a twofold perspective: (1) their possible dialogical targets and their reasoning structure aimed at achieving such a purpose; and (2) the characteristics that can turn a weak move (namely a potentially fallacious move, whose probative weight is inadequate for the claim it is supposed to support) into an effective one, namely successful in reaching the dialogical goal pursued, such as persuading the audience or preventing the speaker from losing a discussion.

Personal attacks usually pursue four different types of goals, which depend on the different dialogical dimensions of the victim of the attack in an argumentative dialogue (see Rigotti 2006; Rigotti and Cigada 2004; Rocci 2005). The target of an ad hominem can be regarded as a participant in a dialogue who needs to comply with specific rules, and can be *excluded from the discussion* based on his inappropriate dialogical behavior. He can be considered a as the holder of specific commitments that influence or determine the acceptance or retraction of a viewpoint (Walton and Krabbe 1995), and for this reason he can be *forced to accept or withdraw it* based (for instance) on inconsistency. He can be seen as the subject matter of an argument and in particular the subject of a value judgment, and accordingly he can be *negatively characterized* based on reasons. Finally, he can be thought of as a source of authority constituting the ground of a claim, or as the basis of an argument grounded on emotions. For this reason, he can become the victim of an attack aimed at *undercutting* his explicit or implicit argument. Each type of attack will be analyzed by taking into consideration its conditions of reasonableness, namely the requirements that need to be met in order for the move, grounded on reasons, to reasonably achieve its purpose. Moreover, the different goals of the personal attacks will be shown to characterize or affect the strategies used to increase their effectiveness.

In order to address the problem of the effectiveness of ad hominem, it is necessary to broaden the picture and take into account the different tactics that can be used to affect the dialogical setting between the interlocutors, including the possibility and the burden of countering a viewpoint or an argument. Ad hominem moves will not be analyzed from the point of view of an ideal discussion, founded on the best possible dialogical rules and dialectical relevance. They will be regarded

not as simple arguments, but as strategies, namely complex moves consisting in the combination of an explicit attack with implicit arguments or tactics pursuing specific and disparate goals. Their effectiveness (for instance, in reaching a rhetorical goal such as persuading the audience) depends on two different grounds: the reasonableness of the attack and the efficaciousness of the tactics that can be used to prevent possible counterattacks or questioning. On this perspective, also a fallacious personal attack can become powerful in a discussion not because of its fallacious nature, but because it consists of more than *one* simple argument.

1 Types of Ad Hominem Attacks

The concept of an ad hominem argument is controversial in contemporary studies on reasoning and fallacies in several respects. An ad hominem can be broadly defined as an attack, directly or indirectly, on the proponent of an argument instead of on his viewpoint or argument (Walton 1998a). However, the characteristics of such an attack, the possible different variants, and the reasonableness and acceptability of this kind of move have been discussed by several authors and dealt with from diverse approaches and theories (Van Eemeren et al. 2000: 419; Hitchcock 2007). In particular, Walton regards ad hominem attacks as arguments that can be reasonable in some specific contexts of dialogue.

Walton (1998a) distinguishes ad hominem arguments according to the types of grounds provided to support the negative judgment on the conclusion advocated by the speaker. The first variant is the *generic* ad hominem: the attacker supports the claim that the interlocutor's argument should not be accepted by providing a judgment on different dimensions of his or her character, such as logical reasoning, perception, veracity, cognitive skills (Walton 1998a: 198; 199; 217; 2002: 51). Depending on the nature of the interlocutor's claim and the scope of the attack, the move can be reasonable or fallacious (see also Battaly 2010). The second variant is the circumstantial ad hominem, namely attacks based on evidence of an inconsistency in the other party's position. For instance, past actions, previous positions (tu quoque sub-variant) or association with groups holding a specific view (*guilt by association* sub-variant) can be used as reasons for not accepting the interlocutor's viewpoint or argument. This argument can be used also to support a stronger conclusion, claiming that any viewpoint or argument advanced by the interlocutor shall not be taken into consideration (*poisoning the well* sub-variant) (Walton 1998a: 220–257). The attacks on the person's character are separated from the ones against his dialogical attitude, which belong to the third variant, the bias ad hominem (see also van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1995). In this case, the speaker points out that the interlocutor cannot be considered as fair, as his or her goal is different from establishing the most persuasive or reasonable viewpoint. While in the first two variants the quality of the source is the ground of the argument, in the latter the attacker grounds his move on the person's failure to be a good interlocutor, since he does not (or may not) take into consideration contrary arguments or manipulates (or may manipulate) the evidence.

The analysis of the reasonableness conditions in the aforementioned accounts is focused on the *grounds* on which the potentially fallacious arguments are based. In order to account for the context dependency of the reasonableness of ad hominem, it can be useful to consider a broader picture and examine personal attacks as *moves* in a dialogue characterized by distinct purposes and targets, and governed by different types of requirements. For this purpose, the ad hominem arguments investigated in the aforementioned literature can be described by analyzing their possible dialogical targets, which correspond to the different respects in which the victim can be attacked. The attacks can be directed against four different dialogical roles or relations of a person in a dialogue, established according to the different components of an argumentative dialogue (Rigotti 2006; Rocci 2005): the context, defined by (1) dialogical rules and (2) social (institutional) conventions (Rigotti and Rocci 2006; see also van Eemeren 2010: 138–141); (3) the participants, characterized by their common knowledge, their social roles and their commitments (Rigotti and Rocci 2006; Walton and Krabbe 1995); and (4) their arguments. A victim can be regarded in different respects in a discussion: (1) as an agent within a specific institutional context (i.e. as a teacher before his students; as a judge before the parties…); (2) the proponent of a specific viewpoint in a dialogue, and therefore subject to specific dialogical rules (such as retracting an inconsistent commitment, etc.); (3) as an individual that can be the subject matter of a decision or judgment (for instance, Bob shall be appointed CEO; Bob is a bad person); or (4) as a component of an argument, i.e. the authoritative source on which an argument is based, or the subject of one of the premises of an argument. These four different targets correspond also to four different purposes of the ad hominem move:

1. In the first case, which will be called ad hominem 1, personal attacks are aimed at *interrupting the dialogue by excluding the interlocutor from it*. The critic alleges that due to some flaw or action by the other side, one of the necessary conditions for having a dialogue of a specific kind (for instance, persuasion dialogue) is no longer met. Such dialogue conditions can include its institutional requirements or the roles of the participants (for instance, the speaker can stress that the interlocutor's social role does not allow him to advance a specific claim). This type of move is used for example in political interviews to block a potentially dangerous dialogue.

2. In the second case (ad hominem 2), the speaker can use a personal attack to "*force persuasion*", that is, to lead the interlocutor to withdraw his viewpoint based on his alleged non-compliance with dialogue rules (in particular the ones concerning the commitment store). Instead of providing reasons supporting a specific viewpoint or a counterargument, the speaker attacks the interlocutor, advancing a reason to influence his decision to continue to defend his position. For instance, by facing the other party with his past commitments conflicting with his current position, the speaker can lead him to withdraw it.

3. In the third case (ad hominem 3), ad hominem moves are used as *arguments supporting a specific viewpoint* or countering the conflicting one before a third party. For example, the interlocutor can be attacked in order to influence the audience's evaluation and/or decisions. A candidate can be reminded of his

negative actions, or his character can be depicted negatively, in order to trigger the audience's negative judgment on his fitness to rule the country.

4. Finally (ad hominem 4), personal attacks can be reasons against the connection between premises and conclusion (usually referred to as *undercutters*). They can be aimed at depriving the interlocutor's arguments of their implicit requirements or preconditions. For instance, by showing that an authority or a source in position to know cannot be credible or cannot be considered as having privileged or superior knowledge (Battaly 2010), the argument itself collapses (Pollock 1974). Similarly, by defeating the preconditions of an emotion such as pity (for instance, showing that the individual deserves the sufferance) the appeal to such an emotion has no effect.

This classification of ad hominem according to its different targets and purposes can be represented as follows (for the components of the argumentative dialogue, see Rigotti and Cigada 2004; Rigotti 2006) (Fig. 1).

The different numbered arrows represent the different targets of the attacks. We can notice that such attacks are placed at different levels of the dialogue. The first and the second types of ad hominem are meta-dialogical, as they are not about the subject matter of the dialogue, but the dialogue itself (Krabbe 2003) and in particular the relationship between the interlocutor and the rules of the interaction. The first attack is aimed at interrupting the communication between speaker and interlocutor based on an alleged breach of its conventions or rules. The purpose of the second one is to underscore the breach of a commonly accepted dialogical rule (participants are not expected to maintain inconsistent commitments) in order force a dialogical decision (you should retract your inconsistent commitment, unless you
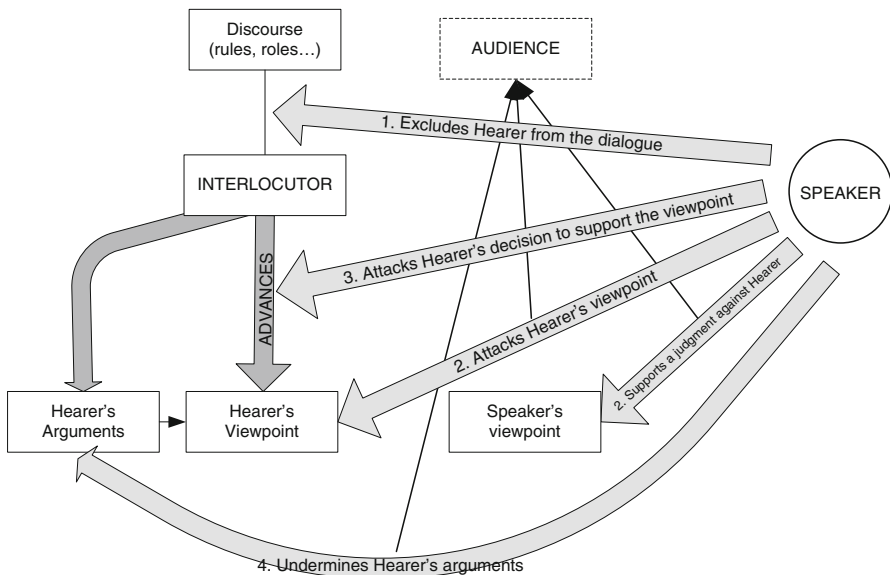

Fig. 1 Targets of ad hominem attacks

do not want to be judged negatively). The third move is dialogical, as a specific viewpoint is supported by the attack (the interlocutor's viewpoint/argument should not be accepted). The last type of attack is not an argument aimed at providing grounds for a specific position or claim, but rather an undercutting defeater, which needs to be analyzed according to its target. The thin black arrows represent the rhetorical purposes that can accompany an attack. In some cases the ad hominem move is not aimed at directly convincing the interlocutor or winning him. Instead, its purpose can be rather rhetorical, namely it can be directed to persuading a third party external to the discussion, such as in case of a political debate before an audience that can be influenced by negative judgments on the interlocutors.

In the following sections ad hominem *moves* (or *attacks*) will be analyzed in two respects: from the perspective of their reasonableness as *arguments* and from the point of view of their effectiveness as *strategies*. Their reasonableness will be accounted for by presenting the structure of the different types of personal attacks, showing their goals, their grounds, and the abstract pattern of reasoning on which their conclusions are based. Their effectiveness will be investigated by describing the strategies of personal attacks, showing the various tactics that can be associated with an ad hominem to pursue specific ancillary goals.

2 Ad Hominem 1. Refusing the Dialogue

The first type of personal attack that will be analyzed is meta-dialogical, namely a move which turns on whether the necessary requirements of the dialogue or dialogue type are met. In this case, the speaker does not simply want to lead the hearer to change his or her position by advancing a reason (such as a threat of a negative judgment). Instead, the goal of ending the dialogue is pursued on the grounds of the *conditions* thereof. The speaker claims that some requirements have not been complied with or have been breached. In ordinary persuasion dialogues the interlocutors need to be able to understand the argument and be open to accepting other conflicting opinions. The speaker cannot persuade the interlocutor if the latter cannot understand the arguments advanced, or if he or she is not willing to change their mind or admit a different point of view. For this reason Aristotle in his *Topics* suggested not discussing with interlocutors that are not willing to accept the other's position or that are ready to shift from a discussion to a quarrel (Aristotle *Topics* 164b 9–13):

> Do not argue with every one, nor practise upon the man in the street: for there are some people with whom any argument is bound to degenerate. For against any one who is ready to try all means in order to seem not to be beaten, it is indeed fair to try all means of bringing about one's conclusion: but it is not good form.

The interlocutor's failure to meet the conditions of a persuasion dialogue can be advanced as a reason for interrupting it or not engaging in it. The scope of this meta-dialogical ad hominem can be narrower, in the sense that the dialogue can be ended by attacking a specific move of the interlocutor. Speech acts require certain preparatory conditions to be fulfilled, and some of them concern directly the roles

and the dialogical position of the interlocutor. For instance, orders presuppose (in the sense of precondition of success of the illocutionary act, Vanderveken 1990: 115) the speaker's position of power over the hearer (Holdgraves 2008: 13). Other dialogue acts, such as condemning, require specific social roles. Ad hominem moves can therefore interrupt the dialogue at a global level, based on defects of judgment or dialogical behavior (such as bias or prejudice), or at the level of a dialogical move, based on breaches of social or dialogical roles. The structure of this attack can be represented using the following argumentation scheme (from Walton 1998a: 249, modified version):

Argumentation scheme 1: Generic ad hominem—argument for excluding the interlocutor

Premise 1	a is a person that is unfit for the dialogue (because of his social role, his dialogical behavior, etc.)/for performing speech act S (he is not in a position of authority…)
Premise 2	If x is unfit for the dialogue (for performing speech act S) he ought not to engage in the dialogue (perform speech act S)
Conclusion	a should be excluded from the dialogue (the dialogue needs to be interrupted)

Personal attacks can be reasonably used to block dialogical moves whose conditions are not fulfilled. They can be directed against the interlocutor's inability to understand and assess the argument, his bias or his dialogical or social role. This ad hominem move can be reasonable when it is used to end an abusive dialogue, or a dialogue perceived as such. However, sometimes attacks are also used when the dialogue is not, or does not appear to be, abusive. In such cases the move can be considered as a mistake or as ridiculous or weak. However, when this weak attack is aimed at avoiding a difficult discussion or evading the burden of proof in non-abusive dialogues, it becomes fallacious. In this case the attacker needs to conciliate two different dimensions of the move. On the one hand, the ad hominem allows him to interrupt the dialogue and avoid providing an answer or advancing arguments. On the other hand, the attack is not supported by evidence and is at best ridiculous. For this reason, the abusive (and weak) nature of his move is frequently concealed by means of other moves and arguments, such as the use of authority, threats or tactics for ridiculing the interlocutor.

2.1 The Grounds of Ad Hominem 1: Interrupting a Dialogue When its Conditions are Breached

The ground of the first subtype of attack is the *hearer's unfitness* for dialogue, as he or she is claimed to lack adequate reasoning and education for understanding and assessing the argument. For instance we can consider the following dialogue, in which Charles, a child, has been arrested and is being interrogated by Saint Just (a representative of the people during the French revolution).[1] Charles tries to justify his willingness to lie in order to save the life of a general. Saint Just does not

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[1] Saint Just is the representative of the people during the French revolution (Robespierre granted him large powers, see Dumas 2001: 55–56). He is interrogating Charles, a child that has been arrested because was occupying the room of an alleged traitor.

advance any counterargument, but simply attacks the hearer's capacity to understand, thus justifying the futility of any discussion on such an issue. In this fashion, the speaker rejects a position by not allowing any argument contrary to his view (Dumas 2001: 61):

Attack 1

Charles   There are cases where a lie is permitted.
Saint Just   You are still a child - and consequently I won't discuss with you this great moral question that you've broached with all the ignorance of your age.

This attack contains a reason in favor of the claim that Saint Just can abort the dialogue on this topic with Charles. Saint Just attacks Charles' ability to understand difficult issues in order to prevent misunderstanding and bias (the child would not have understood the issue and would not have accepted Saint Just's position). Saint Just uses his authority coming from his older age ("you are still a child") and social role as an argument itself, which is communicated to Charles by attacking his position (he is claimed to be ignorant and immature). In this case the dialogue is blocked and the issue is not further discussed.

The second subtype of attack is based on the alleged *hearer's unwillingness to accept the speaker's view*, making the advancement of any argument pointless. A biased person is not willing to consider arguments contrary to the position he advocates, and for this reason his purpose is only to win at all costs. Obviously, this is one of the most difficult claims to make, as advocacy and interests do not exclude considering the other's position. By alleging bias, however, the speaker can play the role of the victim who has engaged in a useless debate with an unfair interlocutor. We can consider a famous case, where the former Italian Prime Minister, Berlusconi, ended the conversation with a journalist who was asking questions on the Mills case, involving the alleged bribing of a witness carried out by Berlusconi himself. The journalist asked Berlusconi whether, given his alleged innocence, it would not be better to be tried, renouncing to immunity granted to people holding high political positions. Berlusconi replied to the implicit criticism (innocent people do not fear to be tried; therefore, since you do not want to be tried, it is possible to suspect that you are not innocent) as follows[2]:

Attack 2

It is indisputable. There has not been any payment of any sum of money to Mr. Mills. During the trial it has been established who paid the money, where the money went through, what Mills did with this money, and the British Tax authorities had Mills pay the taxes on this money, as they considered it as a fee for his professional services. […] If this is not enough for you … I get angry on this point because if I can swear it on my sons. I won't answer to you anymore because you are biased. It is useless for me to waste my time. I won't waste my time in answering you!

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[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMCigfbndZI&feature=related, at 0:41–1:37 (author's translation). Last accessed on 15 June 2012.

In this reply, Berlusconi achieves two strategic results. He fails to answer the question asked, and at the same time he plays the role of the victim showing that the interlocutor has prejudices against him. With this ad hominem attack he interrupts the dialogue and poisons the well of any other journalist that wants to ask similar questions. Moreover, he justifies a dialogical attitude otherwise unacceptable, and undermines the journalists' arguments and covert attacks with an allegation that he never proved.

Ad hominem attacks can be aimed at showing the *infelicity of the interlocutor's move* by underscoring his inferior dialogical and social role, which does not allow him to perform such a dialogical act, presupposing a different position. The speaker can attack the hearer's *ethos* in order to underscore his superior social status and point out the gravity of the hearer's attempt to upset the social roles. In political discourse such an address would be extremely incorrect and appear not only offensive, but also abusive. In order to show clearly how it can be used in discussions, we need to go back in time. An example of this strategy can be found in the following dialogue taken from one of the most famous Italian novels, *The Betrothed*, depicting the story of a groom and a bride in the Seventieth century. Father Cristoforo, a friar, is trying to convince the local lord to cease his attempts to oppress a young lady however the lord, Don Rodrigo, acting from his superior role, ignores all the entreaties. He plays the role of a political body, neglecting the fact that he is actually the oppressor and not the authority that should protect the weak. Father Cristoforo at this point refuses this social and political role and verbally attacks Don Rodrigo in his castle. Don Rodrigo uses a personal attack to block the dialogical attempt by Father Cristoforo to violate the formality of the dialogue (which was previously a persuasion dialogue) and upset the roles of the interlocutors (Manzoni 2007: 85–86, emphasis added):

Attack 3

'Your protection!' exclaimed he, retiring a step or two, and fiercely resting on his right foot, his right hand placed on his hip, his left held up, pointing with his fore-finger towards Don Rodrigo, and two fiery-glancing eyes piercingly fixed upon him: 'your protection! Woe be to you that have thus spoken, that you have made me such a proposal. You have filled up the measure of your iniquity, and I no longer fear you.'

How are you speaking to me, **friar**?

[…] The heart of Pharaoh was hardened, like yours, but God knew how to break it. Lucia is safe from you; I do not hesitate to say so, though a poor friar: and as to you, listen what I predict to you. A day will come.

[…] '**Vile upstart!**' continued Don Rodrigo; '**you treat me like an equal**: but thank the cassock that covers your cowardly shoulders for saving you from the caresses that such scoundrels as you should receive, to teach them how to talk to a gentleman. Depart with sound limbs for this once, or we shall see.'

Father Cristoforo breached a dialogical and social convention. Instead of acting as a socially inferior person (he is a simple friar before a powerful lord), he starts a quarrel by defying the lord and treating him as an equal. Don Rodrigo first attacks him indirectly, using a vocative (friar) to highlight one of the preconditions of the

move he performed, in this case the inferior role of the interlocutor (Vanderveken 1990: 116). However, his move is unsuccessful and he has to resort to a personal attack to stop the dialogue and reestablish the conventional social standing of each participant. The attack, combined with explicit threats, depicts the friar's inferiority combining his social position with moral judgments.

The reasonableness of such metadialogical attacks can be established by considering the rules and the roles of the specific contexts of dialogue in which the dialogue is set and, in case of attacks against a specific dialogue move, the requirements thereof. For this purpose it is necessary to consider the type of dialogue and its institutional context. According to the first criterion, some attacks are excluded because of the nature and purpose of the interaction. For instance, accusations of bias are reasonable in persuasion dialogue, while ridiculous in other types of dialogue such as negotiation (where the parties are presupposed to be pursuing their own interests) (Walton 1998b). The activity types (Levinson 1992; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005), which include broader institutional contexts such as a courtroom discussion concerning a criminal case and narrower ones, such as the dialogue defined by the roles of an authority and a layman, establish the roles and the requirements that the participants need to fulfill.

2.2 Complex Strategies for Interrupting a Dangerous Discussion Without Posing a Danger to the Attacker

All of the above mentioned attacks can be considered as reasons supporting a judgment that the interlocutor is unsuitable for participation in the dialogue. Sometimes such attacks can be unsupported by reasons. These ungrounded attacks risk being not only ineffective (often resulting in an escalation of verbal attacks) but also dangerous for the speaker's reputation, especially if the debate is public. For this reason, these personal attacks are often combined with other implicit arguments or moves aimed at hiding the unreasonableness of the judgment or preventing negative consequences (such as replies or counterattacks). These combined strategies, in which the unreasonableness of the attack is covered or protected by another move, can involve arguments from authority or threat and more complex tactics based on humor and irony. The first strategy consists in implicitly grounding the unsupported and apparently unreasonable attack on the speaker's socially superior position. Another powerful instrument is threat. The speaker can choose to combine a personal attack with an implicit threat, presenting the otherwise unacceptable dialogical inferiority of the interlocutor as a premise for a further argument. A third tactic associated with personal attacks involves the use of humor. The speaker depicts the interlocutor in a funny and at the same time discredited fashion, so that he can arouse in the audience feelings of superiority and lead them to identify with the speaker (Meyer 2000: 314; Smith and Voth 2002).

An ad hominem attack can implicitly or explicitly appeal to the speaker's role as a source of authority. In this fashion, a weak or ungrounded negative value judgment on the interlocutor appears to be justified by such a superior role. This effect can be achieved effectively by depicting the interlocutor as intellectually or educationally inferior. For instance, in the following case taken from the

aforementioned novel *The Betrothed*, Renzo, the speaker, shows his case to a famous lawyer, Mr. Azzeccagarbugli. At first, the lawyer thinks that Renzo is a criminal at the service of the powerful lord Don Rodrigo, and encourages him to present the facts that can be twisted to escape the law. However, his benevolent attitude changes after realizing that Renzo is on the other side, the legal one, and blocks the dialogue (Manzoni 2007: 47):

Attack 4

> […] This tyrant of a Don Rodrigo …
> 'Get you gone!' quickly interrupted the Doctor, raising his eyebrows, wrinkling his red nose, and distorting his mouth; 'get you gone! Why do you come here to rack my brain with these lies? Talk in this way to your companions, who don't know the meaning of words, and don't come and utter them to a gentleman who knows well what they are worth. Go away, go away; you don't know what you are talking about; I don't meddle with boys; I don't want to hear talk of this sort: talk in the air.'

The accusation of being ignorant, in addition to being a liar, is extremely powerful because it comes from a source of authority. Not only does the lawyer defend the lord, but he blocks any contrary argument by refusing to listen to a person not having adequate education. In this case, the difference in education between the interlocutors is a fundamental requirement of this consultation (information seeking) dialogue, where a layman seeks information from the source (a lawyer). For this reason, this attack upsets the implicit rules of the dialogue and becomes irrelevant and unreasonable. The lawyer cannot know nor assess Renzo's knowledge of the facts, but he classifies his assertions as "these lies". Moreover, Azzeccagarbugli uses his authority to set new dialogical rules. Instead of evaluating the facts narrated and the opinion advanced, he avoids the burden of replying by advancing an irrelevant attack to Renzo's ability to express his ideas.

This strategy based on the speaker's superior role, authority or knowledge is extremely powerful in political debates before a third party or an audience when such superiority is commonly accepted by the public. For instance, we can consider the following case, involving one of the most famous Italian intellectuals, the university lecturer, art historian and politician Vittorio Sgarbi, and a young journalist who is attacking the Italian foreign politics and in particular the relationship between Italy and Libya before the war[3]:

Attack 5

Journalist   Should Gadhafi come to Italy and be investigated and condemned by the International Criminal Court, he could not be arrested by the Italian authorities, because Italy has not enforced the treaty through its legal system. Now any dictator condemned by the International Criminal Court can come to Italy, because the Parliament had priorities different from …

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[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdlVNM6cSfU at 5:50-6:30 (author's translation). Last accessed on 15 June 2012.

Sgarbi	What are you saying? What is this nonsense?
J	Sgarbi, please inform yourself, sorry, before attacking without…
S	I am extremely well informed! The treaty has been voided by a UN resolution. Ignoramus!
J	I was talking about the International Criminal Court
S	Goat! Go and study! Do not talk nonsense!
J	Sorry but…
S	Go and study!

Here Sgarbi is not advancing arguments to support his position. Instead of corroborating his statement, he is attacking directly the interlocutor, whose argument is undermined and rebutted without any need of providing contrary evidence. Moreover, the speaker prevents the journalist from introducing further grounds to make her position stronger. In another debate, the same speaker, Sgarbi, confronted a young interlocutor who was claiming that the Italian ministry of education was not a "puppet", as claimed by Sgarbi in a previous interview. After advancing arguments supporting the minister's unfitness for the position she was holding, Sgarbi attacked his interlocutor directly, in order to close the discussion and undermine the reasonableness of his position[4]:

Attack 6

Sgarbi	You cannot talk about what you do not know. I know her better than you do. I do not think that she is fit for the role of ministry of education. […] She is a good ministry of Public Administration.
Interlocutor	Ok, we disagree.
S	I want Gelminello Alvi. Do you know who Gelminelli Alvi is? Do you know him or not?
I	May I disagree? May I disagree with you or not?
S	Do you want to answer? Do you know who Gelminelli Alvi is? Do you know who he is? DO YOU KNOW WHO HE IS?
I	There is no need to shout. I do not know him.
S	Ignoramus! Gout! Go back home! Read! Study! Do not go on television!

In both cases, the ad hominem could be judged as ridiculous or offensive. An explicit attack of this kind can turn against the speaker, as this bad behavior can be interpreted as a sign of bad character. However, Sgarbi's arrogance and irascibility are not only excused, but also so widely appreciated by the public to become a television personality described as a "polemicist".[5] In these cases the attacks do not come from an ordinary discussant, but from one of the most well-educated and cultivated politicians. He can be considered as an authority, and his judgment on

cultural issues is highly regarded. For this reason, he is using a strategy combining the personal attack with an implicit argument from authority (Sgarbi has the expertise to tell who is fit and who is not). This connection between the two moves results in an undercutter of any possible arguments or statements that the interlocutor can advance (you are an ignorant; therefore what you say is worthless). Such a strategy results in (unreasonably) upsetting the implicit dialogical situation. Instead of engaging in a discussion between laymen and politicians, Sgarbi acts as an authority pointing out the need of being an expert (or having some specific cultural background) in order to have a dialogue between peers.

Another tactic that can be associated with personal attacks to increase their effectiveness is stressing on the speaker's social superiority. The speaker attacks unreasonably the interlocutor, and at the same time suggests that the hearer, as an inferior, should pay respect or even fear possible negative consequences. For instance we can consider the following case[6]:

Attack 7

> I know that it is difficult enough as a police officer to get a lawful order given by a uniform to be accepted and acted upon, especially in stressful situations. You tend to find that different types of people will accept it, and others will say, 'Who do you think you are?' and, 'Don't you know who I am?' - [*Official Report, Police Reform and Social Responsibility Public Bill Committee,* 20 January 2011; c. 114, Q219.]

Here the attacker (a person stopped by police officers) presupposes that the social importance of the person corresponds to his institutional role. The speaker advances a power struggle. He depicts the interlocutor as an inferior *tout court* and refuses to accept the dialogue game proposed where the socially inferior acts in a position of superiority. This move can be considered as ridiculous in itself, but as a part of a complex strategy it can hide implicit moves. The hearer may take into consideration the attack and start another dialogue where he needs to appeal to his authority or to force in order to re-establish the normal institutional dialogical situation. In some cases the aforementioned attack can even suggest an implicit *ad baculum* (if the speaker is important or powerful, he can use his power against the hearer).

The last strategy consists in hiding the attack using humor or irony. Ad hominem meta-dialogical attacks are used in politics to provide a reason not to reply to difficult questions, or questions taking for granted propositions that the speaker cannot or does not want to accept. An answer to such question would acknowledge such facts or allegations. For this reason, the most strategic way out is the personal attack. The speaker, however, needs to avoid the risk of being criticized for escaping a question, which could amount to admitting that the allegations are true and cannot be rebutted. For this reason, in politics such attacks are often subtle and mixed with other arguments or complex tactics based on emotions, humor or irony. Such complex strategies are aimed at discrediting the reputation or the intelligence of the interlocutor, so that the speaker is justified in neglecting his questions, while, at the

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[6] http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmtoday/cmstand/output/pbc116/pb110215a-07.htm. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

same time, he can avoid discussions regarding the potentially harmful propositions or the continuation of the dialogue. One example of such strategy is Berlusconi's reply to a journalist who asked him the reason why he did not apologize to Obama for offending him (Berlusconi called Obama "tanned"). The previous day Berlusconi had defined the journalists who attacked his way of dealing with the diplomatic relations with the USA "imbeciles" willing only to discredit his position abusively. When faced with another question pointing out his embarrassing behavior (and suggesting that he behaved in an incorrect way), he replied as follows[7]:

Attack 8

Journalist	Your comment on Obama is offensive in the United States. Why don't you apologize?
Berlusconi	Look, you put yourself in the list of the ones that I have defined yesterday < list of the imbeciles > ? Well, we have a new entry!

The strategy of attack is based on an ad hominem hidden by a tactic based on irony (triggered also by his acting). Berlusconi played the comic role (Smith and Voth 2002) creating a category of intellectually inferior people, not even good at discrediting him. By deprecating the interlocutor and implicitly categorizing the rest of the audience as the superior group, he awakens feelings of superiority (LaFave et al. 1976; Meyer 2000: 314). In this fashion, he used the comical to create an identification between him and the audience, enhancing his credibility and thus preventing criticisms against his unreasonable attack (Meyer 2000: 318).

Comic effects in personal attacks can be much more complex and hide implicit arguments (see for instance the use of irony, Grice 1975: 53). One famous example is Sarkozy's reply to Joffrin, a journalist that asked him whether the concentration of powers in his hands amounted to an elective monarchy. Sarkozy replied as follows[8]:

Attack 9

> monarchy means hereditary […] do you think then that I am the illegitimate son of Jacques Chirac who put me on a throne […] a man well educated as you, talking such nonsense […] Mr. Joffrin, words have a meaning […].

In this case, the attack to the journalist's implicit argument (Sarkozy is holding too much power, therefore he is acting against the principles of democracy) is implicit in his tone and the words he uses. Sarkozy acts as a professor teaching the lesson to an ignorant pupil, almost reproaching him. His implicit attack amounts to accusing the journalist of being an ignorant person who is talking nonsense, so that he does not need to reply to, or defend himself from, such a statement. The weaknesses of his move, aimed at defining "monarchy", but not "elective monarchy", is hidden by

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[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hekruRq14JU at 0:28–0:36 (author's translation). Last accessed on 15 June 2012.

[8] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x40ln3_2008-sarkozy-mr-joffrin-monarchie_news 1:17–1:35 (author's translation). Last accessed on 15 June 2012.

the comic acting, which leads the audience to place the discussion in a different, less serious setting (Meyer 2000).

3 Ad Hominem 2. Forcing Persuasion

The second type of ad hominem, also metadialogical in nature, is aimed at forcing the interlocutor's acceptance (or retraction) of a viewpoint. Instead of blocking the dialogue based on institutional elements governing the interaction, as ad hominem 1 does, ad hominem 2 faces the interlocutor with a dialogical rule (people ought not to hold inconsistent commitments) and uses it as a reason for leading him to retracting a move or accepting a position. This attack can be compared with the tu quoque (Walton 2001). As Hitchcock (Hitchcock 2007) noticed, Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* pointed out that a specific argument can be used not to support a conclusion conclusively, but to lead a specific interlocutor (*hominem*) to accept it based on his or her past commitments (Whately 1975: 142–143; Johnstone 1996). For instance, quoting Whately's example, we can consider the following argument (Matthew 12: 10–12):

Attack 10

> And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" – so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath".

In this case, two cases are compared: Jesus' healing of the man on Saturday, and the Pharisee's rescuing of a sheep on the same day. From the point of view of reasoning, an analogy is advanced between two cases. The principle abstracted from two similar situations or things is not only a semantic or logical relation (see Macagno and Walton 2009), but a dark-side commitment of the interlocutor (Walton and Krabbe 1995). In the case above, the moral rule inferred is not a general principle ("the law can be disobeyed"), but a particular implicit commitment of the hearer drawn from his behavior ("for you the law can be disobeyed").

3.1 The Structure of the Explicit Tu Quoque

This argument hides a complex reasoning grounded on an inconsistency and leading to the implicit negative consequence of a moral judgment. Jesus grounds his argument on the presumption that men ought to be consistent in their choices, and, above all, on the shared negative value judgment associated with inconsistent men. The evaluative counterpart of the moral and dialogical principle constitutes a threat that the interlocutor can avoid by modifying his position. The implicit reasoning used can be represented in the following scheme, built upon the "circumstantial ad hominem" argumentation scheme (see Walton et al. 2008: 147–150):

Argumentation scheme 2: Tu quoque *attack*

Reasoning from inconsistency to a negative judgment

Premise 1. Past commitment	*Hearer H* is committed to proposition *p* (generally, or in virtue of what she said in the past)
Premise 2. Standpoint	*H* is committed to proposition *p,* which is the conclusion of the argument *A* That *H* presently advocates
Premise 3. Inconsistency	*p* and *p* are inconsistent commitments
Major premise (Principle of classification/action)	*People ought to be consistent in their commitments/Inconsistent people are usually negatively judged*
Conclusion 1. Negative judgment	Therefore, *H* ought not to be inconsistent/*H* is unreliable if he maintains *p* (negative judgment)
Practical reasoning	
Major premise (possible actions)	The best way of not being inconsistent is to retract *p* (or solve otherwise the inconsistency)
Conclusion 2. Possible actions	Therefore, *H* should retract *p* (or solve otherwise the inconsistency)

The force of this reasoning derives from an implicit argument from practical reasoning. By stating a previous or clear commitment of the interlocutor, inconsistent with the position he has adopted in the dialogue, the speaker faces him with the consequences of his dialogical position. The interlocutor can keep his position, but then he can be judged negatively. Or he can retract the weaker commitment, which can be the one that is not confirmed by previous actions, or show that the past one is not in conflict with the presently advocated one. The crucial difference between the tu quoque attack and the circumstantial ad hominem upon which it is based is the nature of the conclusion and the relationship between judgment and choice. In this structure of attack the purpose of the attack is not the interlocutor's argument (Speaker's argument is not plausible) but his decision to uphold a viewpoint. This argument is not simply limited to underlying an inconsistency in commitments, but it is aimed at a value judgment that is grounded on such an inconsistency and leads to a dialogical decision.

The use of this reasoning in politics is extremely effective, especially when the other party is left with no possibility of retracting any of his commitments. For instance, if we look at the 2012 US Presidential Election debates, we can notice that the accusation of inconsistency is frequently used to undermine the interlocutor's credibility. For instance, one of the most famous cases is Romney's reply to Newt Gingrich's attack on his program of healthcare coverage. Gingrich, who attacks Romney for supporting an alternative (and allegedly similar) position to Obama's individual mandate (called "Romneycare"),[9] is confronted with his past position as follows[10]:

Attack 11

Gingrich and Romney engaged in a brief but heated spat during the Oct. 18 GOP debate after the former speaker criticized Massachusetts's health-care

[9] http://www.theawl.com/2011/11/mitt-v-newt-tonights-debate-could-be-the-heritage-foundations-nightmare. Last accessed on 19 September 2012.

[10] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/newt-gingrichs-changing-stance-on-health-care-mandates-fact-checker-biography/2011/12/09/gIQAVl0lkO_blog.html. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

reform program as a big-government, high-cost solution for covering the uninsured. Here's how the exchange unfolded:

Romney   Actually, Newt, we got the idea of an individual mandate from you.
Gingrich That's not true. You got it from the Heritage Foundation.
Romney   Yes, we got it from you, and you got it from the Heritage Foundation and from you.
Gingrich Wait a second. What you just said is not true. You did not get that from me. You got it from the Heritage Foundation.
Romney   And you never supported them?
Gingrich I agree with them, but I'm just saying, what you said to this audience just now plain wasn't true.
Romney   OK. Let me ask, have you supported in the past an individual mandate?
Gingrich I absolutely did with the Heritage Foundation against Hillarycare.

Here Gingrich is simply confronted with his past position on the issue, which Romney claims to be inconsistent with his present remark. In particular, Gingrich claims to be against Obama's (and Romney's) health care policies, but in 2009 he allegedly was one of the Republicans that supported the idea that everybody should have health insurance. Romney points out the contradiction between the interlocutor's explicit commitments and his past ones. Gingrich is left with no option but to admit his previous commitments and try to qualify them or justify the reasons underlying them. The structure of the argument can be represented as follows:

Reasoning from inconsistency to a negative judgment	
Premise 1. Past commitment	In 2009 Gingrich was one of the Republicans that supported the idea that everybody should have health insurance (p)
Premise 2. Standpoint	Gingrich claims to be against Obama's (and Romney's) health care policies (p)
Premise 3. Inconsistency	p and p are inconsistent commitments
Major premise (Principle of classification/action)	*People ought to be consistent in their commitments/Inconsistent people are usually negatively judged*
Conclusion 1. Negative judgment	Therefore, Gingrich ought to solve his inconsistency/Gingrich is bad (unreliable) if he claims that p (negative judgment)
Practical reasoning	
Major premise (possible actions)	The best way of not being considered as unreliable is to solve the inconsistency or retract p
Conclusion 2. Possible actions	Therefore, Gingrich should show that his commitment to p is not in conflict with p (he had stronger reasons for committing himself to p) or retract it

3.2 The Grounds of the Implicit Tu Quoque

Attacks 10 and 11 are based on explicitly stated commitments (the standpoint and the previous commitments). Inconsistency attacks can be based on the comparison between the commitments resulting from a past action with the position advanced by the

interlocutor. In this case, the inconsistency alleged by the attacker is grounded on a further presumptive reasoning, based on the principle that "People intend (are committed to) the consequences of their acts" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1951). In other words, this presumption leads to the following conclusion: if a person has brought about a certain action (for instance funding the weapons industry), he was committed to its consequences (supporting the weapon market and, indirectly, militarization, wars, etc.). For this reason, the past commitment is in its turn the conclusion of a defeasible reasoning based on the relationship between acts and intentions. This type of attack (circumstantially based on an inconsistency) can be more subject to criticisms, as it involves an additional fallible argument. The weakness (or fallibility) of the relationship between acts and commitments weakens the strength of the attack.

In order to illustrate this pattern of reasoning, we can take into account one of the several implicit attacks published by newspapers and columnists (the *New York Times* in the passage quoted below) against the candidate Newt Gingrich and concerning the aforementioned issue of health insurance. Gingrich, in outlining his political program, claimed that "any effort to impose a federal mandate on anyone […] is fundamentally wrong and I believe unconstitutional". However, this position was shown to conflict with his past actions and with interests that he previously defended. Gingrich was found to have actively promoted the program and actually hugely benefited from it (many of the clients and founding members of his consultancy firm, the Center for Health Transformation, were directly involved in the program as service or drug providers)[11]:

Attack 12

> But interviews and a review of records show how active Mr. Gingrich has been in promoting a series of recent programs that have given the government a bigger hand in the delivery of health care, and at the same time benefited his clients.

This move shows a contradiction between present commitments and the ones that can be drawn from his previous actions. However, this attack is much more powerful than the one made by Romney in attack 11 quoted above. The reader can draw the conclusion that Gingrich is inconsistent, but also that he is driven by personal interest (he is willing to disregard his commitments to achieve personal gain). On this perspective, even though indirect attacks are in principle exposed to more possibilities of counterclaim, they can trigger more serious negative judgments. The audience is faced with the inconsistency between actions and commitments, and the negative evaluation of the agent can be based on the inconsistency, the nature of the action (Gingrich benefited from a program extremely expensive for the country) and the explanation of the inconsistent behavior (Gingrich pursued his interest against his principles, or first benefited from a position and the supporters thereof and then turned his back to them).

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[11] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/us/politics/gingrichs-health-care-policy-history-at-odds-with-gop.html?pagewanted=all. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

3.3 Tu Quoque as a Complex Strategy

The crucial ground on which tu quoque is based is the conflict of commitments. The interlocutor needs to be still committed to a previous position, which is incompatible with the present one. The first criterion to determine the reasonableness is the *actual incompatibility* between the commitments. The second criterion is the *nature* of past commitments and how they are *related* to present ones. We cannot be held accountable for our positions defended in our childhood, but many other situations can be more controversial. Reproaches based on old and irrelevant commitments are extremely weak, when not simply without any strength.

However, in some cases a fallacious and weak attack can be extremely effective. The speaker can hide the weakness of the ad hominem using tactics aimed at making it more difficult for the interlocutor to rebut the attack (Kauffeld 1998). The speaker can advance other (weak) implicit reasons supporting the alleged judgment, so that the interlocutor needs to address more than one argument, or he can make explicit his bias or intention to appeal to his authority or superior position to win the discussion. An example can be found in the following excerpt from Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. Father Cristoforo, once a gentleman who became a friar after killing a man in self-defense, is invited by a powerful lord, Don Rodrigo, to judge a controversy between two guests on violence against messengers. Father Cristoforo justifies his refusal, but his interlocutor attacks him as follows (Manzoni 2007: 75, emphasis added):

Attack 13

'With your leave, gentlemen,' interrupted Don Rodrigo, who was afraid of the question being carried too far, 'we will refer it to Father Cristoforo, and abide by his sentence.' […]
'But, from what I have heard,' said the Father, 'these are matters I know nothing of.'
'As usual, the modest excuses of the Fathers,' said Don Rodrigo; 'but you shall not get off so easily. Come, now, **we know well enough** you did not come into the world with a cowl on your head, and **that you are no stranger to its ways**. See here; this is the question…'

Father Cristoforo refuses to engage in the discussion based on his present commitments as a friar, which conflict with the ones of the mundane and violent society of his time. However, Don Rodrigo reminds Father Cristoforo of his past commitments he held when he was a violent gentleman, which he takes for granted to be still valid for the friar. In this case, the move is unreasonable, but extremely effective. The Father is faced not with the negative consequence of his inconsistency, but with the cost of disputing the inexistence of his past commitments. His interlocutor takes for granted that his choice of leaving the "ways of the real world" was made on the basis of sheer convenience, presenting his allegation as shared knowledge (and therefore accepted by everyone). Moreover, Don Rodrigo treats the Father disrespectfully, showing all his superiority. The dichotomy between the possible dialectical options (refusing the present

commitment vs. negative judgment) is altered by providing a different type of negative consequence, the cost of disputing the attack.

4 Ad Hominem 3. Supporting Negative Judgments or Consequences

If we read or listen to political debates one of the most controversial and discussed moves is the personal attack. The speaker publicly attacks the interlocutor's character, classifying him or her as incoherent, untrustworthy or unethical. In other cases, he simply provides evidence of his past actions that are used as evidence for a negative classification of his character. Both types of reasoning are aimed at influencing the audience's decision, leading them not to choose the competing candidate (therefore, via exclusion, to vote for the speaker). However, the passage from a negative judgment or negative actions to a decision is rather complex and involves various reasoning steps. For this reason, such attacks can be considered as clusters of arguments, or rather complex arguments consisting of the combination of several different patterns of reasoning leading from an action or a generalization to an implicit value judgment, and from such a judgment to a prediction on future choices. For this reason, in order to assess whether such direct or indirect ad hominem attacks are reasonable, it is necessary to analyze the reasonableness of the various reasoning steps of which they are composed.

4.1 Structures and Grounds of Ad Hominem 3

Personal attacks can be based on previous actions of the attacked individual. The speaker points out the interlocutor's previous misdeeds or decisions that are usually considered as negative, and uses them to suggest a negative judgment on his or her character. This type of reasoning is grounded on a fundamental presumption, namely the "stability" of the person (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1951: 254). On this perspective, persons are characterized by a pattern of behavior that allows one to judge and somehow predict his actions. The choices made in the past become a pattern that will likely be repeated in the future. Therefore, the classification of a person's character as good or bad is essential for (defeasibly) predicting his possible future acts. The pattern of inference can be represented as a combination of an argument from sign, leading from one or more acts to a judgment on the agent's character (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1951: 256), and an argument from cause to effect, leading from a character's disposition to possible actions. The first type of presumptive reasoning can be represented as follows (Walton 2002: 42):

Argumentation scheme 3: Argument from sign

Major Premise	Generally, if this type of indicator is found in a given case, it means that such-and-such a type of event has occurred, or that the presence of such-and-such a property may be inferred
Minor Premise	This type of indicator has been found in this case
Conclusion	Such-and-such a type of event has occurred, or that the presence of such-and-such a property may be inferred, in this case

An action can be regarded as an indication of a certain habit (negative in this case), which in its turn can be used as a reason for predicting future actions. This presumptive relationship between character and past and future actions was analyzed by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1368b 13–15, 1369a 1–2) and later endorsed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1951):

> For the wrongs a man does to others will correspond to the bad quality or qualities that he himself possesses. […] All actions that are due to a man himself and caused by himself are due either to habit or to rational or irrational craving.

On this perspective, bad character qualities can be considered as a cause of future negative actions. Building on the generic ad hominem scheme (Walton 1998a: 249) we can represent the complex structure of this reasoning as follows:

Argumentation scheme 4: Ad hominem argument

1 Acts	*Agent a* committed the negative actions *A, B, C*
2 Classification presumption	*A, B, C* are a sign that an agent *x* has an unchangeable negative characteristic *P*
3 Classification of the agent	*Agent a* is *P*
4 Prediction presumption	*P* is a cause (reason) of *Agent a's* future negative actions
5 Predictive conclusion	*Agent a* will presumably commit negative future actions

The negative judgment, represented by premise 1 and 2, supporting conclusion 3, is therefore a reason to believe in *a*'s future negative behavior (premises 3 and 4 supporting conclusion 5). By facing the audience with presumable negative consequences, namely the possible future actions by an agent, the speaker triggers a reasoning proceeding from consequences. This reasoning can be represented as follows (from Walton 1995: 155–156):

Argumentation scheme 5: Argument from consequences

Premise	If action *Q* is brought about, good (bad) consequences will plausibly occur
Evaluation	Good (bad) consequences are (not) desirable (should (not) occur)
Conclusion	Therefore *Q* should (not) be brought about

This complex process of reasoning leading to a decision on a course of action can be better explained with a recent example of personal attack based on previous actions of the interlocutor. In the following excerpt, the republican candidate for 2012 presidential elections, Mitt Romney, attacked his contender, Newt Gingrich, as follows[12]:

Attack 14

Romney   Mr. Speaker, your trouble in Florida is not because the audience is too quiet or too loud, or because you have opponents that are tough, your

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[12] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/29/mitt-romney-newt-gingrich-freddie-mac_n_1240203.html; http://articles.philly.com/2012-01-27/news/30670814_1_florida-polls-freddie-mac-debate. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

	problem in Florida is that you worked for Freddie Mac at a time that Freddie Mac was not doing the right thing for the American people. […] You were selling influence in Washington at a time when we needed people to stand up for the truth in Washington.
Gingrich	Maybe Gov. Romney in the spirit of openness should tell us how much money he's made off of how many households that have been foreclosed by his investments.

Romney points out Gingrich's previous actions, in this case working for a loan corporation accused of fraud, and used them to trigger a negative judgment on him. By implicitly accusing him of being unfair to American people, he aims at influencing the audience's decision. This type of attack is largely implicit and depends on how the past negative actions are perceived by the hearers and traced back to a negative character. In this case, we can notice that Gingrich replies with another ad hominem of the same kind. He points out how Romney made a lot of money out of the electors' disgraces caused by him (foreclosures caused by his investments). We can represent the first argument as follows:

1 Acts	Gingrich worked for Freddie Mac, which is accused of fraud perpetrated on the American people
2 Classification presumption	If x cooperates with a company accused of defrauding the American is a sign that x is dishonest (unfair)
3 Classification of the agent	Gingrich is dishonest (unfair)
4 Prediction presumption	If Gingrich is dishonest (unfair), it is possible that he will act dishonestly (unfairly) in the future
5 Predictive conclusion	It is possible that Gingrich will act dishonestly (unfairly) in the future

This type of ad hominem is aimed at triggering the aforementioned implicit argument from consequences, providing a reason not to vote for the victim of the attack.

4.2 Strategies Hiding the Weakness of the Attack

Sometimes the negative quality is irrelevant for the prediction of the possible future actions of the victim. Moreover, sometimes the aforementioned reasoning based on the signs of a negative characteristic is omitted, and the speaker provides only a negative quality without putting forth the reasons supporting it (see Walton's direct ad hominem, Walton 1998a: 249). In the first case the attack is clearly weak, if not ridiculous, while in the second case it can be subject to criticism and doubts. In order to hide the actual or potential weakness of the argument, the speaker can use the tactic of labeling the victim with inflammatory (Cantrell 2003), or rather emotive, words. The hearer is described in a negative fashion by identifying him with a category of bad habits or bad behaviors. The person attacked is not shown as having simply behaved badly in the past, but as a bad individual, namely a person that behaves badly. This generalization is strictly bound to the audience's criteria for

the decision-making, or rather what they consider to be desirable and objectionable (Macagno and Walton 2010a, b). Emotive language does not simply correspond to a classification. It arouses emotions that affect the assessment of the situation and the grounds supporting their predication (Blanchette and Richards 2004). Without mentioning facts that can be assessed, they simply provide an image of the interlocutor that can evoke associations with negative past experiences (Doerksen and Shimamura 2001) and trigger immediate responses to the perceived negative consequences. We can describe this type of attack with the following example[13]:

Attack 15

Blitzer	Speaker Gingrich, you had an ad, but you pulled it this week, in which you described Governor Romney as the most anti-immigrant candidate. Why did you do that?
Gingrich	Why did we describe him that way? Because, in the original conversations about deportation, the position I took, which he attacked pretty ferociously, was that grandmothers and grandfathers aren't going to be successfully deported. […]
Blitzer	I just want to make sure I understand. Is he still the most anti-immigrant candidate?
Gingrich	I think, of the four of us, yes.

The steps of reasoning underlying the use of an emotive word can be represented in Fig. 2 below.

Without considering the actual claims made by Romney justifying his characterization as anti-immigrant, Gingrich generalized a specific position and transformed it into a quality describing his rival (lower boxes in Fig. 2 supporting the conclusion in the colored box). On this perspective, Romney becomes a person who acts against the immigrants. The argument can be reconstructed in two ways. The attack can trigger directly an argument from consequences, based on the presumption that he will presumably take measures against immigrants (represented by the argument on the right-hand side of Fig. 2). Otherwise, the classification can lead to the implicit conclusion that he is bad as a candidate, and, consequently, that he should not be voted (argument from values, on the left-hand side of Fig. 2). The classificatory claim was made without providing sufficient grounds, solely relying on the emotional impact of a word connected with discriminatory ideas and policies. Romney was simply labeled as an anti-immigrant person, but the judgment was based only on an interpretation of his previous statements (Romney actually claimed that illegal immigrants should not get work permit and jobs, so that they will eventually self-deport). However, Gingrich's attempt to use the generalization against Romney turned out to pose a danger for Gingrich himself. Romney replied to the emotive characterization by identifying himself with his audience of immigrants. Romney cited his family as the clearest example of the falsity of the remark. Romney reminded the interlocutor and the audience that his father was

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[13] http://24ahead.com/gop-debate-january-26-2012-cnn-romney-gingrich-santorum-ron. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.
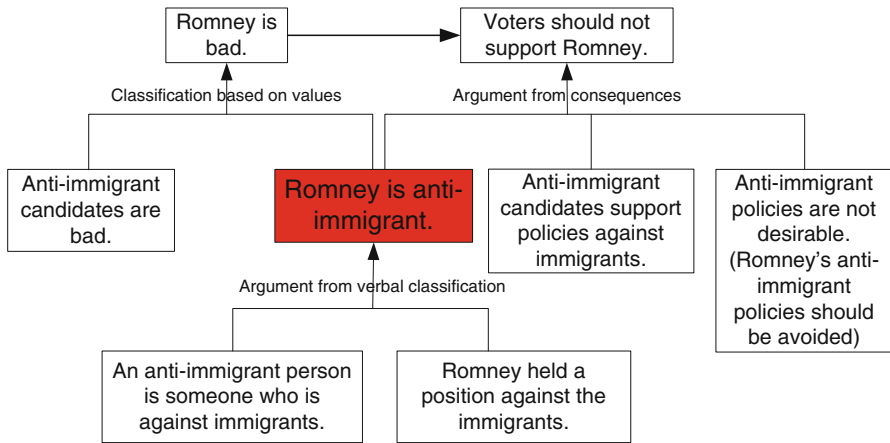
Fig. 2 Ad hominem argument structure

Mexican and his wife of Welsh descent. After showing the audience his similarity with them, he aroused indignation. Romney first attacked the move, qualifying it as "inexcusable and inflammatory and inappropriate" and "repulsive", and then Gingrich, reproaching him on his use of language and rhetoric and implicitly suggesting his poor oratorical ability.

5 Ad Hominem 4. Undercutting the Interlocutor's Arguments

Ad hominem arguments can be used as undercutters, namely as arguments against the fundamental (and often hidden) conditions of an argument. Arguments can have specific preconditions. The opinion of an expert is reliable, or rather more reliable than other opinions, because the source knows the subject matter better than a layman and is supposed to be unbiased in his claims (see Vanderveken 1990). Similarly, we trust the information provided by a witness because he was in a position to know and he can be considered to be trustworthy and reliable. Emotional appeals also have crucial requirements. An appeal to pity can be successful only when there are the preconditions of the emotion of pity, that is, when someone suffers from substantial misfortune (Ben-Ze'ev 2000: 327). Expertise, position to know or pity require that the source of information or the cause of sympathetic sorrow fulfill certain preconditions. The person acting as the source of expertise or information or as the individual needing help has to meet specific characteristics: a witness cannot be a liar nor have memory dysfunctions, an expert cannot be an impostor or incompetent; a man in need for help cannot be in a happier situation than the one to whom he is begging. In such cases, character attacks undercut the arguments, attacking not their conclusion but the preconditions of the reasoning. In the sections below the different strategies of the fourth type of ad hominem will be analyzed, considering the attacks directed against two types of argument: source-based argument (based on the speaker's expertise or privileged knowledge) and appeals to pity.

5.1 Structure of Source-Based Argument Undercutters

The first famous example of an undercutting ad hominem can be found in Cicero's (1977) speech *Pro Flacco*. In this court case Cicero faced witnesses that had been allegedly paid for by the prosecution. Cicero pointed out that when the words cannot be attacked, the only possible option is to attack the person (*in hominem*).[14] Instead of assessing the facts told by the witnesses Cicero advanced the problem of evaluating whether witnesses "in partnership […] with the prosecutor" should "still be considered witnesses". Cicero pointed out a crucial purpose that ad hominem arguments can have, namely to exclude a "biased witness" from a dialogue.

In law personal attacks are frequently used to undermine a witness's credibility, without which his or her testimony would carry little or no weight. According to the U.S. Federal Rules of Evidence, only circumstantial evidence supporting a witness's character, truthfulness or untruthfulness can be introduced, and evidence of truthful character can be introduced only for rehabilitation purposes after a character attack (*Federal Rules of Evidence* 609a). In cross-examination character attacks (carried out by introducing evidence of past crimes or bad behavior) are used to call into question a witness's truthfulness, which is an implicit premise in any argument from testimony. For this reason, in cross-examination, character evidence concerning the witness' dishonest character can be introduced; such evidence triggers a pattern of reasoning that follows the pattern of an ad hominem argument as represented in argumentation scheme 3. In the following scheme (ad hominem undercutter) the type of action that is predicted based on the negative judgment (and previous actions) is more specific and refers to the quality of the testimony.

Argumentation scheme 6: Ad hominem undercutter—argument from sources

Argument from testimony			Ad hominem undercutter	
Explicit argument	*Implicit requirement*			
Witness *W* is in position to know whether *A* is true or not.			*W* has committed actions *A, B, C* in the past.	Acts
W states that A is true (false).			Who commits actions *A, B, C* is an unreliable person.	*Classification presumption*
	W is telling the truth (as *W* knows it).	Undercutter	*W* is an unreliable person.	**Classification of the Agent**
			Unreliable people are more likely to provide false testimony.	*Prediction presumption*
A may be plausibly taken to be true (false).			*W*'s testimony is more likely to be false.	**Predictive conclusion**

In this figure the target of the ad hominem undercutter is indicated by the two red arrows. The first arrow shows how the classificatory conclusion "*W* is an unreliable person" counters the implicit requirement on which the argument from testimony is

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[14] "And why should I, the counsel for the defense, ask him questions, since the course to be taken with respect to witnesses is either to invalidate their testimony or to impeach their characters? But by what discussion can I refute the evidence of men who say, "We gave," and no more? Am I then to make a speech against the man, when my speech can find no room for argument? What can I say against an utter stranger?" (Ciceronis *Pro Flacco* X, 23).

based. Such a conclusion supports the further conclusion that *W*'s testimony cannot be trusted (second arrow). This structure shows a crucial implicit premise of other types of arguments based on the source's position to know. Just like testimony, arguments from expertise or proceeding from privileged knowledge depend on the credibility of the speaker (Walton 2002: 46; 49–50). If the source is shown or presumed not to tell the truth, the acceptability of his claims will be greatly weakened. However, the move needs to fulfill two criteria to be acceptable. First, it needs to be directed against a quality that is a precondition for the attacked argument. Second, the presumptive reasoning from classification needs to actually support the classificatory conclusion.

The structure of the undercutter of an argument from testimony, or more generally of arguments relying on knowledge and reliability of the source, can be applied to the attack on the interlocutor's credibility in political campaigns. For instance, let's consider the following statement made by Gingrich in a 2012 presidential campaign advertisement[15]:

Attack 16

> If we can't trust what Mitt Romney says about his own record, how can we trust him on anything?

Gingrich undermines the possible statements that Romney made and will make concerning his political promises and plans by showing his alleged dishonesty in private financial matters (he is referring to Romney's investments—not disclosed to the public—in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, both connected with the housing crisis and mortgages). Voters usually accept or trust the candidates' statements based not only on the speaker's knowledge of American politics and the economy, but also on their reliability. Gingrich undercuts the persuasiveness of possible arguments, claims and promises made by Romney by showing that he is unreliable and cannot be trusted. In this case, from one incorrect (misleading, false) statement Gingrich draws an unqualified generalization concerning *all* possible statements of the interlocutor, going far beyond what the actual facts may support. Even though a person may hold inconsistent positions or commit inconsistent actions in his personal life, he can still be consistent regarding political issues.

The attack on the conditions of the source-based arguments can be directed against another crucial requirement: expertise, or at least knowledge. In politics, a candidate's program and promises are presumed to be aimed at facing or solving crucial problems concerning the country. Therefore, the candidate needs to be presumed to be an expert in dealing with such problems, or at least to know them in depth. This strict relationship between the effectiveness of a promise or a claim and the speaker's expertise or position to know can be attacked and the persuasiveness of a political program undermined. In this excerpt from the 2012 presidential campaign, Romney and Gingrich are attacking each other's lack of expertise in

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[15] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/27/newt-gingrich-mitt-romney_n_1237321.html?ref=elections-2012. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

order to undercut the credibility of the other party. Gingrich in particular points out Romney's lack of political and legal expertise[16]:

Attack 17

"Governor Romney may be running for CEO," Gingrich said on CBS' "Face the Nation" program. "I'm running for president." […] "The president of the United States has to understand the government of the United States," Gingrich said on CBS. "President Obama clearly didn't, and frankly I doubt if Governor Romney would."

Romney replies by attacking Gingrich's expertise in economic issues, which is claimed to be the most important for a future president in a time of crisis[17]:

Attack 18

Rubbing his point home, Romney said, "Speaker Gingrich is a good man, he and I have very different backgrounds. He spent his last 30 or 40 years in Washington. I spent my career in the private sector, and I think that's what the country needs right now." […]
You have to have the credibility of understanding how the economy works," Romney said. "And I do, and that's one reason I'm in this race.

The effectiveness of the attacks undermining the credibility on which the candidates' position is based can be greatly amplified by resorting to complex strategies.

5.2 Strategies of Undermining Appeals to Source

The attack on the source's reliability can be combined with other attacks. For instance, we can consider Romney's reply to Gingrich's statement quoted in Attack 16 above:

Attack 19

Romney's campaign released a statement condemning the ad, saying "Gingrich's desperate smears have already been called 'inflammatory' by Marco Rubio and 'ridiculous' by Jeb Bush."
"It is laughable to see lectures on honesty coming from a paid influence peddler who suffered an unprecedented ethics reprimand, was forced to pay a $300,000 penalty, and resigned in disgrace at the hands of his own party," the statement said. "Speaker Gingrich is desperate to distract from his record of failed and unreliable leadership in an attempt to try and prop up his sinking campaign".

Gingrich draws a generic negative judgment based on some Romney's past declarations on his own record; Romney attacks Gingrich's argument by

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[16] http://www.newsmax.com/InsideCover/Gingrich-romney-florida-primary/2012/01/22/id/425084. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

[17] http://www.newsmax.com/Headline/romney-gingrich-begin-attack/2011/11/30/id/419541. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

undercutting his credibility. He shows that the rival's argument is extremely weak because the person who advances it cannot be trusted. As a consequence, the grounds of his arguments and the claims made cannot be taken into account. Romney undermines Gingrich's trustworthiness by attacking his *ethos* in different respects, both concerning credibility directly (he suffered an ethical reprimand) and more generically ("paid influence peddler"; "his record of failed and unreliable leadership"). He provides reasons to believe that he is both untrustworthy and ethically bad in general, suggesting in the latter case, a fortiori, that he is also unreliable. Moreover, this attack is combined with an argument leading to a negative judgment on his leadership and political abilities (he failed several times; therefore, he is just bad at it).

Emotive words greatly amplify the impact of these attacks (Blanchette and Richards 2004). For instance, during the Obama-McCain campaign, Obama broadcasted the following advertisement[18]:

Attack 20

"Our financial system in turmoil," an announcer says in Obama's new ad. "And John McCain? Erratic in a crisis. Out of touch on the economy."

The words "erratic" and "in a crisis" depict McCain as a confused man that cannot be trusted, without a clear perception of the real problems affecting the country. By attacking McCain's capacity for understanding and solving the real problems, Obama deprives his rival of the authority on which the credibility of his program and his promises depend.

5.3 Strategies for Undercutting Appeals to Pity

Personal attacks can also be used as instruments for undercutting an appeal to pity. This type of argument can be represented as below (Walton 1997: 105):

Argumentation scheme 7: Appeal to pity

Premise 1	Individual x is in distress (is suffering)
Premise 2	If y brings about A, it will relieve or help to relieve this distress
Conclusion	Therefore, y ought to bring about A

However, this argument is based on two crucial implicit preconditions: first, the individual needs to suffer from misfortune; second, we need to be emotionally involved with him (Ben-Ze'ev 2000: 328). The first precondition is essential for the feeling of pity. We do not feel pity for people who deserve punishments. The second element is essential for the passage from the second premise to the conclusion, namely from the fact that an action performed by y can help the suffering person to the conclusion that y should perform such an action (Ben-Ze'ev 2000: 328).

Ad hominem attacks aimed at undercutting potential or actual appeals to pity can proceed from a negative judgment on the suffering individual or from facts

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[18] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/10/05/ap-palins-ayers-attack-ra_n_132008.html. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

implicitly or explicitly supporting that negative judgment. The difference between the two strategies lies in the dialectical consequences. Whereas in non-explicit attacks facts supporting a negative evaluation are simply put forth, leaving it up to the interlocutor to draw an evaluative conclusion, explicit attacks can be criticized if not adequately based on evidence. In both cases in order to undermine an emotion such as pity, the speaker combines the attack with other tactics aimed at arousing contrary emotions. The use of emotive words becomes crucial for triggering contempt or hate against the allegedly pretended sufferer, so that the positive emotion is annulled (see Groarke 2011).

The first strategy can be illustrated with the following speech delivered by President Bush after the execution of Saddam Hussein. Bush had to face criticism aroused by the crude images of the hanging of the Iraqi dictator and justify his decision, namely counter the claim that the killing was cruel or even inhuman. He defused the emotion of pity by simply reminding the audience of Saddam's deeds[19]:

Attack 21

> "My personal reaction is that Saddam Hussein was given a trial that he was unwilling to give the thousands of people he killed," Bush said. "He was given a fair trial – something he was unwilling to give thousands of Iraqi citizens who he brutalized."
> "I wish, obviously, that the proceedings had gone on in a more dignified way," Bush said. "But, nevertheless, he was given justice. The thousands of people he killed were not."

Bush suggests a negative judgment, providing the interlocutors with all the grounds for judging Saddam as a reckless killer.

The second strategy consists in simply negatively labeling the alleged victims of an injustice. A clear example comes from a discourse delivered in 2008 by the Italian Minister of Public Administration, Mr. Brunetta, against the positions of the Trade Unions on the measures he introduced against civil servants' absenteeism. The Trade Unions claimed that his reforms attacked the inviolable rights of all workers.[20] Brunetta replied as follows[21]:

Attack 22

> I refuse to believe the trade unions of today's Italy still want to defend [a] million layabouts against the 60 m members of the public who want to see merit rewarded and skivers punished.

The trade unions attacked the measures appealing to the rights of the less protected workers. By labeling civil servants as idlers, Brunetta depicted the whole category as made up of people deserving just punishment for their unacceptable conduct. By

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[19] http://www.redorbit.com/news/general/789291/bush_talks_about_iraq_saddam_execution/. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

[20] http://www.flcgil.it/attualita/sindacato/con-la-scusa-dei-fannulloni-il-ministro-brunetta-attacca-i-diritti-di-tutti-i-lavoratori.flc. Last accessed on 19 September 2012.

[21] http://www.economist.com/node/12009720. Last accessed on 15 June 2012.

generalizing the negative judgment to a whole category of workers, Brunetta aroused the criticisms of trade unions and public opinion.

A more skillful move was made by Reagan in his 1983 State of the Union Address. Reagan had to justify a policy aimed at cutting food stamps, which would have affected the poorest classes. Obviously such measures triggered appeals to pity and criticisms. Reagan managed to control the emotions of the audience by redefining the category of people affected by the cuts and attacking them. He conveyed the feeling of pity towards an ideal group, the truly needy, which he claimed to safeguard and protect, while arousing indignation against the other abstract category, the non-truly needy, which included all the ones that will be deprived of the food stamps (Zarefsky et al. 1984)[22]:

Attack 23

> Our standard here will be fairness, ensuring that the taxpayers' hard-earned dollars go only to the truly needy; that none of them are turned away, but that fraud and waste are stamped out. And I'm sorry to say, there's a lot of it out there. In the food stamp program alone, last year, we identified almost [$]1.1 billion in overpayments. The taxpayers aren't the only victims of this kind of abuse. The truly needy suffer as funds intended for them are taken not by the needy, but by the greedy. For everyone's sake, we must put an end to such waste and corruption.

The attack on the "non-truly needy" (or rather, false needy) justifies the food stamp cuttings by redefining the issue. Reagan claimed that the cuttings would be directed against the dishonest and the greedy, which cannot be pitied. However, the category of "truly needy" was left undefined, like all the possible criteria that could be used to classify a poor person as a truly needy one.

6 Conclusion

Ad hominem moves are attacks against the person consisting in negative judgments. Such judgments can be drawn from signs, but they are often unsupported or insufficiently supported by evidence. They can be used for different purposes, to support different conclusions. However, frequently the attack does not even bear out the conclusion they are aimed at. Sometimes, even when the negative judgment on a witness or the interlocutor is defensible, it does not show that the testimony is not to be trusted, or a dialogue with the interlocutor is pointless. From this perspective, such moves are at best extremely weak, if not unreasonable or dangerous for the speaker. Why then are personal attacks so powerful? A possible answer can be drawn from the strategic structures of ad hominem attacks. A personal attack can be powerful not because it is fallacious, but because it is not the only argument that is advanced. Using Quintilian's words, such attacks have force not on the ground of strength, but in virtue of their number (*Institutio Oratoria* V, 12, 5):

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[22] http://reagan2020.us/speeches/state_of_the_union_1983.asp. Last accessed on 14 June 2012.

> […] the allegations, considered separately, have little weight and nothing peculiar, but, brought forward in a body, they produce a damaging effect, if not with the force of a thunderbolt, at least with that of a shower of hail.

The claim of this paper is that ad hominem moves should be considered as multifaceted and complex strategies, involving not a simple argument, but several combined tactics. Ad hominem moves should be regarded as multifaceted, as they have different scopes and disparate purposes. They should be considered as potentially complex, as the attack is often combined with implicit arguments or tactics (such as comic acting or emphasizing on the interlocutor's inferiority) aimed at triggering emotions or ridiculing the other party. The distinct types of ad hominem have been classified according to their target in four different types of moves. The complexity of such moves has been examined considering two dimensions: the structure and the grounds of the attack, and its effectiveness. According to the first criterion, attacks can be considered as implicit arguments based on generalizations or evidence presented as a sign of an inherent quality of the attacked person. In this fashion, the person is reduced to only one character feature, suggesting the need to be wary about dealing with him or relying on what he says or does. According to the criterion of effectiveness, ad hominem moves have been described as strategies that can be constituted of implicit arguments from negative consequences or threats, or vivid representations that can arouse indignation, fear or contempt.

Personal attacks are basically reasons advanced to support a viewpoint, which can be a meta-dialogical or a dialogical conclusion. In meta-dialogical moves, the speaker can attack the interlocutor to re-establish the dialogical roles or avoid a potentially or allegedly abusive or inconclusive dialogue (ad hominem 1), or force the interlocutor's acceptance (or retraction) of a viewpoint (ad hominem 2). The dialogical moves can be divided in two categories: arguments aimed at supporting a viewpoint (ad hominem 3) and undercutters (ad hominem 4). Each type of ad hominem has specific conditions of reasonableness or acceptability, which, when not complied with, lead to a fallacious or extremely weak move. However, the strength or fallaciousness of the attack needs to be distinguished from its effectiveness. Even though unreasonable, ad hominem attacks can be extremely powerful because they may not simply consist of one argument. They can be complex moves, or rather complex strategies, involving implicit arguments and, more importantly, tactics to arouse emotions. On this perspective, ad hominem can be thought of as a cluster of arguments and tactics of which the attack is only the most evident one.

The hidden part of the move, concealed below the personal attack, consists in the control of emotions and implicit arguments. In ad hominem 1, the speaker can attack the interlocutor based on his superiority, implicit in his social role, which is used as an implicit form of authority or as an unexpressed threat. He can arouse indignation, fear and feelings of superiority. The effect of such "corollary" tactics consist in diverting the interlocutor's attention from the rational structure of the argument and the evaluation of its strength (Blanchette 2006; Blanchette and Richards 2004). The ad hominem 2 can be so effective only because of the implicit

negative judgment attributed to inconsistent speakers. Ad hominem 3 is grounded on an appeal to implicit consequences, which in their turn can sprinkle fears or negative emotions. Ad hominem 4 can destroy the trustworthiness and reliability of the interlocutor by depicting a vivid negative representation of his negative qualities, or rebut the feeling of pity by destroying its presuppositions by fomenting fear, contempt or hate.

Ad hominem attacks can be extremely effective *even when* they are fallacious or unreasonable. However, the reasons of their persuasive force cannot be simply analyzed by taking into account a normative assessment of their reasonableness or strength. An ad hominem move can be like hail: it can be a combination of emotive words, tacit arguments, and vivid representations—it can be much more than what we usually consider as *an* ad hominem *argument*.

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