

## Chapter 6: Name Calling

### “Domination”

*Wounds cannot be cured without searching.*

—Francis Bacon

This chapter examines how subtle verbal attacks on people can be used to discredit the substance of their arguments. It discusses both the ad hominem argument and the use of delegitimizing descriptions.

Many people would not directly insult those who disagree with them. Such people often pride themselves on their “civility,” or “objectivity.” Nonetheless, they often subtly insult their opponents by focussing not on the quality of the debate, but by attacking their opponents’ character. The first such stratagem we examine will be the ad hominem (against the person) argument, recognized as logically irrelevant since ancient times.

#### Ad Hominem

There are two common mistakes in examining a controversy. The first is to accept a bad argument because it comes from a person we like. The second is to reject a good argument because it comes from a person we despise. Often, people confuse the value of an argument with the reputation of the person making it. This may be done deliberately as a way of attacking a good argument because its presenter has some qualities that are less than esteemed. We can find examples similar to the following in almost any news medium:

- 1) “It is a typical Liberal ploy to argue that ...”
- 2) “Conservative ill-wishers will no doubt say that ...”
- 3) “Mr. Smith, a long-time defender of Mafia clientele, insisted that...”

In each of the examples above, it is important that the source of the argument be identified for a presumably hostile audience so that the argument itself might be brought under suspicion. What is implied by each of these introductory phrases is

- a. Arguments from Liberals cannot be trusted.
- b. What Conservatives have to say is wrong and mean-spirited.
- c. Lawyers who defend suspected Mafia members cannot be trusted to know what is true.

But the arguments of Liberals, Conservatives and Mafia lawyers can be evaluated independently of their sources. In a dispute, the source of an argument is important not in determining the argument’s validity or soundness, but in understanding the strategy of a party to the dispute. It is wisdom, not logic, that requires us look to the source to understand a bigger picture than just a single argument. But this is, at best, a second step. The argument comes first.

## Delegitimization: presenting value judgments as facts

In any dispute it is useful to distinguish if it is an argument about *fact* or an argument about *value*. We should not suppose that the distinction between fact and value is set in stone (see Chapter 15, *Fact versus Value*). In the very process of “describing” something, we may evaluate it. For example, if we technically evaluate a side of beef to be “prime,” rather than “choice” we communicate to those skilled at such evaluation a certain fat content and marbling. What might be for the layman a value dispute, “Is this the best beef?” can be a question of fact for those who share certain skills of judgment.

But sometimes such “description” dismisses important concerns. For example, if we describe someone as *lazy*, we negatively evaluate his or her industriousness. Perhaps the characterization “not motivated” is equally appropriate. “Lazy,” in effect, blocks inquiry into the reasons that a person might have for not working. It robs those concerns of their legitimacy, “delegitimizes” them, we will say.

-What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

--- Shakespeare

It is critical to realize how easily we can describe the “facts” in such a way as to delegitimize or obscure interests we disagree with. Consider a situation where someone, let us call him Sam, has not done any work after we have offered to pay him ten dollars per hour to cut grass. We might say of him,

1) Sam is lazy.

Alternatively, we could say

2) Sam isn’t motivated to work.

What is the difference? It is that 2) explains whereas 1) explains *and* evaluates. We may well recognize that Sam doesn’t yet want to work, nonetheless, insist that he *should*.

What we are doing in asserting that Sam is lazy is delegitimizing those competing interests that enter into his decision not to work. Of course, we may be right in doing so. He may have *promised* us to cut the grass for ten dollars per hour, for instance; but then decides he would rather drink beer and nap. We recall his promise and express our unhappiness with him by calling him lazy, rejecting whatever explanation he might offer. After all, he did promise.

On the other hand, if we failed in advance to mention to Sam certain special conditions he later discovers, such as poison ivy, or several wasp nests hidden in the turf, our characterization of him as lazy is, on our part, not quite honest.

In effect, to call people *lazy*, is to describe them as *not motivated to work when they should be*. But whether they really should be, given their concerns and values, is something we may not want to discuss. So we foreclose on such considerations by using the delegitimizing term, *lazy*.

Consider the following chart:

Recognizing Interest X	Delegitimizing Interest (overly) X, when he shouldn't (be)
insistent, committed	pig-headed
cautious	gutless
single-minded	fanatic
insufficiently motivated	lazy
spontaneous	infantile
assertive	insolent
having reasons different from mine	irrational
considerate, deferent	submissive

Notice for any term, **X**, in the left column used to describe Sam, we can understand each term in the right column as meaning **(overly) X, when he shouldn't (be)**. For instance, we describe Sam as *submissive*, when we think he is *overly considerate of someone, when he shouldn't be*. Again, we may be right; our judgment may be better than Sam's. Whether it is or not, however, we foreclose on discussion of the matter by using a delegitimizing term.

## Is Linguistic Bullying and Domination Involved?

Delegitimizing interests can be a form of bullying and domination. If I offer you a pittance for laboring under the hot sun and call you "lazy" if you refuse, you may well challenge my insinuation that you should be grateful for the opportunity.

Delegitimizing interests is a common maneuver of intimidation. For instance, we see it all the time in racial or gender based domination. Consider how women have been described by often influential men as excessively vain, emotional, docile, delicate, sentimental, cunning, weak or shallow. None of these designations considers the interests of women so characterized.

In evaluating competing sides of a controversial issue look for terms that delegitimize interest. *Whose* interests they invalidate can be quite revealing. Let us consider a procedure for dealing with name-calling in both its forms, *ad hominem* and delegitimization.

### Step 1) Determine whether *ad hominem* is the stratagem at hand. If not, go to step 2.

- If *ad hominem* is the stratagem, distinguish the argument from its proponent. Evaluate the argument for validity and soundness.
- Specify the moral qualities (positive and negative values) attributed to the proponent of the argument.
- Consider how these moral qualities may or may not affect the broader import of the argument.

**Step 2) If delegitimization of interest is at issue, do the following:**

- a. Replace the delegitimizing term with a more value neutral one, e.g. change Sam is uncooperative to Sam is unwilling to follow Jack's instructions.
- b. Consider what reasons a person might have for acting in this (more dispassionately characterized) manner; e.g. why might Sam be unwilling to follow Jack's instructions?
- c. Determine what reasons a person using the delegitimizing characterization might have for trying to obscure Jack's concerns.

**Step 3) Determine if domination is at issue.**

- a. A delegitimizing term says, in effect, that a person is not some way that they should be. Determine, if you can, whether the person so judged would agree that they should be that way.
- b. Determine to what extent the people judged are participants in the judging process. Is that process open and above board?

**Step 4) If domination is the issue, consider whether it is justifiable.**

Domination is not necessarily bad. Criminality, for example, is not merely another kind of lifestyle, but one which we have a general interest in dominating and identifying as illegitimate. Determine to what extent the issues of the dispute touch on fundamental concerns about legitimate ways of living.

## **Chapter Highlights**

There are two widely used stratagems for bringing a person's arguments and intentions into disrepute. One is the ad hominem; the other, the use of delegitimizing terms.

- Ad hominems confuse an argument with the source of the argument. These should be independently evaluated.
- Delegitimizing terms condemn in such a way as to obscure the grounds for the condemnation.
- Delegitimizing terms are commonly used as a support to domination. Yet, domination may be desirable, as with criminality or other socially dangerous behavior.

## Other Related Chapters in This Text

Chapter 11, Facts and Feelings

Chapter 14, Inquiry Blockers

Chapter 15, Facts and Values

## Keywords for Further Data Base Search

rhetoric	soundness	hegemony
verbal abuse	validity	ascription
transactional analysis	domination	character

## Test Yourself

- A. Sort out the following terms into 1) a list which rejects interest and 2) a list which recognizes interest.

immature, spontaneous, playful, ingenuous, naive, cold-blooded, focussed, calm, bored, self-controlled, aggressive, assertive, ambitious, over-striving, persistent, pesky, tactful, reticent, sneaky, clever, circumspect, incoherent, unstructured, free-spirited, wild, unmannered.

For example, from the above set of words we would put “immature” in list 1 because it rejects interest. Spontaneous would go into list 2.

- B. See if you can match them as focussing on similar qualities in the person but from a rejecting versus an accepting attitude. Relate them by the pattern:

**Sam is** (List 1 term). **He is** (List 2 term) **when he shouldn’t be.**

For example, we can match “immature” in list 1 with “spontaneous” in list 2 because they fit reasonably into the above formula yielding “Sam is immature. He is spontaneous when he shouldn’t be.”

## Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

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2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

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3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

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4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

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5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

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6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.

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