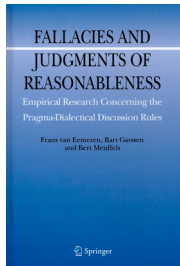# Book Reviews

Fallacies and judgments of reasonableness: Empirical research concerning the pragma-dialectical discussion rules
Frans van Eemeren, Bart Garssen and Bert Meuffels
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One of the core concepts in argumentation theory are fallacies, often considered to be arguments that *seem* valid but that *are* invalid. Argumentation scholars and philosophers, such as Aristotle, Locke and Hamblin, have approached fallacies from a theoretical and non-empirical perspective. Such an approach has enabled the field of argumentation theory to intensively reflect on the concept of fallacies. A disadvantage of such an approach, however, is that it is naturally limited to the views and knowledge of argumentation theorists themselves. How would ordinary language users respond to fallacies? Would these laymen also consider fallacies to be unreasonable? Frans van Eemeren, Bart Garssen and Bert Meuffels have addressed this question by conducting an impressive set of experiments in the course of 10 years, involving more than 1900 participants. In *Fallacies and judgments of reasonableness*, they introduce these studies, present their results, and conclude that laymen's conceptions of reasonableness are very similar to the theoretical conceptions of reasonableness in their own pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation.

Since its development in the 80s, the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation has been very influential in the field of argumentation studies. Pragma-dialectics views argumentation as reasonable discourse

aimed at resolving a difference of opinion. In order to discuss reasonably, a set of rules for critical discussion is proposed. These rules are divided over the four stages of the resolution process: the confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding stage. The confrontation stage consists of a confrontation between a protagonist's opinion and the non-acceptance of the antagonist. In the opening stage, the two parties and their premises are identified. In the argumentation stage, the protagonist defends his or her standpoint against the criticisms of the antagonist. In the concluding stage, the two parties decide as to whom won the discussion. The rules that are associated with these four stages are essential for the concept of fallacies. In fact, a fallacy is defined as "a speech act that counts as a violation of one or more of the rules for a critical discussion" (p. 20).

In Chapter 1, Van Eemeren and his colleagues make it clear what empirical goal they have in this book. The goal is not to examine whether the different rules in the pragma-dialectical approach are viewed by laymen as important rules in the pragma-dialectical theory (problem validity). Rather, the goal is to examine whether these rules are reasonable to laymen. This is called conventional validity. Not every rule was studied in the research program and, consequently, only a selection of

fallacies were examined. At the end of Chapter 1, a table gives an overview of the different fallacies presented in the book.

Only scarce empirical attention has been devoted to fallacies. Chapter 2 discusses the few studies that were conducted in this domain – not to compare the theoretical backgrounds of the approaches, but to start a discussion about the methodological challenges to examining fallacies empirically. One such challenge is the way in which the conventional validity of fallacies should be measured. If the material provided to participants plainly presents some moves as fallacious, participants are aware of the research goal, and may answer in such a way as to please the researcher. Also, if the topics are loaded (e.g. controversial issues that participants have a strong opinion on), participants' responses may be more influenced by their acceptance or refusal of the standpoints than by the reasonableness of the move.

With these challenges in mind, the authors outline their empirical approach in Chapter 3. In virtually all experiments, the participants were 15- or 16-year old high school students from the Netherlands who had not previously been exposed to training in argumentation. The students always received different kinds of fallacies (unreasonable moves), together with a few reasonable moves so as to mask the goal of the study. The experiments had a multiple message design; in most cases, participants received four instantiations of each fallacy in the material. The material in the pencil-and-paper experiments consisted of controlled fragments, often for three domains: the scientific, political, and domestic domain. Generally, standpoint A was given, followed by response B and by the question as to how reasonable participants considered the response of B. For example, the *ad hominem* fallacy, presented in Chapter 3, is a wrong move because it does not respect the freedom rule in the confrontation stage ("Discussants may not

prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question"). Two of the variants of this fallacy are the abusive variant (direct attack) and the *tuquoque* variant ('you too'). Here is an example of the abusive variant (1) and a reasonable move (2):

(1) abusive *ad hominem* fallacy
A: I think a Ford simply drives better; it zooms along the road.
B: You can't judge anything about this; you don't have any understanding of cars.

(2) reasonable move
A: I feel that you can certainly trust me with the car; I am a great driver.
B: I don't believe that at all; I have lent you my vehicle twice, and both times you damaged it.

The abusive and the *tuquoque* variants were used in more than 25 experiments reported in the book. This is a thoughtful decision: it allowed the researchers to replicate earlier findings (showing robustness of findings), and to compare other fallacies with these two baselines. In some cases (e.g. Chapter 3), the authors present follow-up studies to examine alternative explanations, such as politeness in the case of the *ad hominem* fallacy. Also, they sometimes had participants write down their own motivations for their judgments of reasonableness.

Chapters 4 to 8 each present the results for fallacies associated with different rules: the freedom rule (Chapter 4; e.g. *argumentum ad baculum*), the obligation-to-defend rule (Chapters 5 and 6; e.g. evading the burden of proof), the argumentation scheme rule (Chapter 7; e.g. *argumentum ad consequentiam*), and the concluding rule (Chapter 8; *argumentum ad ignorantiam*). Each chapter has the same structure: the fallacies are introduced from the framework of pragma-dialectics, the material is presented, and the findings are reported. What the experiments generally find is that laymen consider fallacies to be more unreasonable than sound counterparts.

In the final chapter, an overview of the results from the set of experiments is provided. The results clearly show that laymen generally consider sound moves much more reasonable than fallacies. On a 7-point scale, the unweighted average of the reasonableness scores across the different fallacies can be calculated as being 3.06 for the fallacies, and 5.25 for the reasonable moves. As the authors themselves observe, one of the limitations of the current approach is the abstract, short material that was used. In a final study, therefore, the authors replicate an experiment on *ad hominem* fallacies with real fragments taken from newspapers and magazines. The results are in line with earlier findings.

This book is an excellent contribution to the study of pragma-dialectics. Although this enterprise cannot indicate whether the rules are instrumental or whether the set of rules is accurate or exhaustive, it conclusively demonstrates the conventional validity of the theory's

rules. In the broader field of argumentation theory, the present book is an extremely good example of how experimental studies can be designed on the basis of normative theories of argumentation. The authors have succeeded in developing a large set of well thought out experiments, and in reporting clearly about the results. It would be unreasonable (!) to point too long to some minor issues, such as the lack of information about cross-cultural equivalence in a follow-up study conducted in different countries (Chapter 3), the fact that not all rules have been examined, or the decision to measure reason-ableness with just one single item.

Text writers may learn from this book that read-ers can be sensitive to fallacious moves when it comes to reasonableness judgments. Writers will often also be interested in the persuasiveness of their texts. Future research inspired by this book may examine how persua-sive fallacious moves in discussions or texts can be.