

Case Study of the Use of a Circumstantial *Ad Hominem* in Political Argumentation

Douglas Walton

In the 1860s, Northern newspapers attacked Lincoln's policies by attacking his character, using the terms *drunk*, *baboon*, *too slow*, *foolish*, and *dishonest*. Steadily on the increase in political argumentation since then, the *argumentum ad hominem* has been carefully refined as an instrument of "oppo tactics" and "going negative" by the public relations experts who now craft political campaigns at the national level. It has been so prominently used in the major political campaigns, debates, and advertisements of the past few years that there has even been a reaction against it—a feeling that we have gone too far in this direction and that some kind of restraint is needed.¹ But there has been no evidence of such restraint in the argumentation used in recent campaigns. Perhaps what might be helpful is a better understanding on the part of voters and campaigners of how to evaluate *ad hominem* arguments critically.

How does the *ad hominem* argument really work as a way of molding public opinion, why is it so often so effective, and how can it be defended against? How can it be evaluated as a clearly identifiable type of argument, by some kind of objective standards, in a way that can be applied to particular cases? These appear to be tough questions, but recent research has made some not inconsiderable progress toward answering them.

The purpose of this article is to present a new case study of a type of argument commonly used in political discourse, a case study that makes use of the dialectical normative framework for identifying and evaluating personal attack (*ad hominem*) arguments that is developed in a series of works by Henry W. Johnstone Jr. (1952); Alan Brinton (1985, 1995); Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1984, 1995); Erik C. W. Krabbe and Douglas N. Walton (1993), Walton (1989, chap. 6; 1998); and van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Francisca Snoeck Henkemans et al. (1996). This particular case, although typical of so many *ad hominem* arguments cur-

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rently in use in political discourse, has some special features that turn out to be quite interesting not only in showing how the dialectical framework applies to cases, but also in advancing our knowledge of how the *ad hominem* type of argument works in political argumentation in a democratic system for which the media reportage of events is a big factor in influencing voting.

1. Framework for analysis and evaluation

Although the *argumentum ad hominem*, or personal attack argument, has been traditionally treated as a fallacy in logic, recent research in argumentation (as cited above) shows that, in many cases, -including cases in political argumentation-*ad hominem* arguments, as used in conversational arguments, are not fallacious. Research has shown that, while some personal attack arguments can definitely be judged fallacious, many others are quite reasonable (when evaluated in the appropriate context), while still others should be evaluated as weak (insufficiently supported) but not fallacious. As shown in this case study, the real function of an *ad hominem* argument (when properly used) is to attack an arguer's credibility in order to criticize the argument she advocates.

Before going any further, it is necessary to define some terminology brought to use in the research cited above. An *ad hominem* argument is the use of personal attack in a dialogue exchange between two parties, where the one party attacks the character of the other party as bad, in some respect, and then uses this attack as a basis for criticizing the other party's argument. An argument is fallacious if it is a special baptizable (Johnson 1987) type of argument that is used by one party in a dialogue exchange in such a way that it blocks or interferes with the collaborative realization of the goal of the type of dialogue in which the two participants are supposed to be engaged (Walton 1995). Thus, there is a difference between a weak argument, one open to critical questioning, and a fallacious argument. The general point is that a fallacious argument has to be worse than just weak, or unsuccessful in fulfilling a burden of proof. A fallacious argument is a tricky, deceptive, sophisticated tactic, used to try to get the best of a speech partner in a way that is inappropriate as a collaborative contribution to the dialogue exchange.² The use of maxims of politeness for contributions to a collaborative conversation to evaluate suggested implications (implicatures) of moves in the conversation is due to H. Paul Grice (1975). The goals of

the different types of conversations of special importance for applied logic, and the evaluation of commonly used arguments, are specified by Walton and Krabbe (1995). These two methods put into place a normative framework that can be used to evaluate arguments commonly associated with fallacies.

Ad hominem arguments have become a special subject of concern in the media reportage of political discourse in the second half of the twentieth century. Personal attack arguments have often proved to be so effective, for example, in election campaigns, that, even while condemning them, politicians have not been able to stop using them. *Ad hominem* arguments tend to be kept in reserve, as heavy artillery to be used if a candidate begins to feel that she is so far behind in the polls that this is the only resort she has left to offer a chance of last-minute victory. A revealing case study of an election campaign in which the *ad hominem* was the decisive instrument of victory for an "underdog" candidate has been provided by John F. Cragan and Craig W. Cutbirth (1984). Since that time, however, the *ad hominem* has been used even more effectively and commonly by politicians, raising much concern about "negative campaigning" and "attack ads." Although *ad hominem* arguments have been around for a long time, the problem of how to deal with them in a critically balanced way is, now more than ever, a matter of concern for public discourse in a democracy. What is needed is a method or normative framework that a consumer of political rhetoric can use to evaluate *ad hominem* arguments critically.

In the case described and analyzed by Cragan and Cutbirth (1984), during an election campaign for the governorship of Illinois, Adlai E. Stevenson, the son of presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson, was criticized on the grounds that he belonged to an all-male Chicago club. Stevenson overreacted to the criticism by complaining that he had been treated as "some kind of a wimp"; once this comment appeared in print, his opponent, who at that point was behind in the race, made much use of the so-called "wimp factor" and portrayed Stevenson as a kind of fussy patriot who had claimed he belonged to the club only because he could not find any other decent place to eat lunch. Stevenson lost, and the perception was, according to Cragan and Cutbirth, that the *ad hominem* "wimp factor" argument was the instrument of his defeat.

The historical origin of the *ad hominem* has been something of a mystery, and its beginning as a clearly identified type of argument has generally been attributed to John Locke or Galileo Galilei (Finocchiaro 1980). However, recent historical research (Nuchelmans 1993) has traced the roots of it back through the treatises of the Middle Ages to Aristotle. One root

passage (Nuchelmans 1993, 37) is the reference to *peirastikoi logoi*, or arguments designed to test out or probe a respondent's knowledge, by examining views held by that respondent (*On Sophistical Refutations* 165a37). Another root of the historical development of the "argument against the person" is the more often cited passage in *On Sophistical Refutations* (178b17) in which Aristotle contrasts directing a refutation at an argument with directing a refutation against the person who has put forward that argument. Because there are two roots, however, textbook treatments of the *ad hominem* have been ambiguous and confusing.

The type of *ad hominem* argument that is the concern of this case study is the personal attack type, defined above. The other type is the Lockean type, portrayed by Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in a neglected passage fully quoted by Charles L. Hamblin (1970, 160). Locke describes this type of argument as pressing "a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions." This type of argumentation I have elsewhere called "argument from commitment" (Walton 1998). E. M. Barth and J. L. Martens (1977) see the *ad hominem* fallacy as best analyzed on this Lockean model, as being basically the same as argument from commitment. But I have argued (Walton 1998) that these are two distinct types of arguments, and, although argument from commitment is a subpart of the personal attack type of *ad hominem* argument, it is not the whole argument. In any case, the reader should be aware that terminological confusion about the *ad hominem* is, and continues to be, a serious problem.

To really understand the *ad hominem* as a clearly defined type of argument with a distinctive structure, one must begin with analysis of character as a moral concept that has a role to play in the dialogue structure of argumentation, where one party makes a personal attack on the moral character of the other party in order to criticize the other party's argument. The best analysis we have of the role that character plays in reasoning goes back to the account of Aristotle, through the concept of practical reasoning or practical wisdom (*phronesis*), as shown in *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Garver 1994). So, in more ways than one, the genesis of the *ad hominem* is to be found in Aristotle.

The subtypes of *ad hominem* arguments classified in the research cited above are the abusive (direct) *ad hominem*, the circumstantial *ad hominem*, the bias *ad hominem*, the poisoning-the-well subtype, and the *to quoque* subtype. Each subtype has a well-defined form as a recognizable type of argument (Walton 1998). The method for identifying and evaluating *ad hominem* arguments worked out in *Ad Hominem Arguments* (Walton 1998) uses a set of argumentation schemes (forms of argument) for each distinc-

tive subtype of *ad hominem* argument recognized, as well as a set of appropriate critical questions that match each scheme. The following is the argumentation scheme for the direct, or so-called abusive, form of the *ad hominem* argument—called the ethotic type of *ad hominem* argument by Brinton (1985) and myself (Walton 1998). The variable *a* stands for an arguer, and the variable *A* stands for an argument:

ETHOTIC AH

a is a person of bad character.

Therefore, *a*'s argument *A* should not be accepted.

The argumentation scheme for the circumstantial *ad hominem* argument, or "You don't practice what you preach" argument, is the following:

CIRCUMSTANTIAL AH

1. *a* advocates argument *A*.

2. *a* has carried out an action, or set of actions, that imply that *a* is personally committed to the opposite of *A*.

3. Therefore *a* is a bad person.

4. Therefore *a*'s argument *A* should not be accepted.

An *ad hominem* argument in a particular case is evaluated, in the first place, in relation to whether or not it meets the requirements for the scheme and, in the second place, in relation to how critical questions are managed. The fallacious cases are the ones where critical questioning in a further dialogue exchange is suppressed. However, in principle, both types of *ad hominem* arguments can be reasonable, as used in some cases.

The *ad hominem* argument can be a reasonable way of questioning an arguer's credibility by throwing doubt on his character (for veracity, in particular) and using that allegation to throw doubt on whether his argument has much weight in supporting its conclusion. But this type of argument can be used wrongly if the claim is that the arguer's conclusion is absolutely wrong (or indefensible), as opposed to the weaker claim that the arguer's argument for his conclusion is open to critical questioning. In other words, the *ad hominem* argument is a relative one, about an arguer's argument, but runs into difficulty as soon as it becomes an absolute claim that the proposition advocated by the arguer is false. In evaluating cases, the critical thinker must watch out for words such as *certainly* and *must*, words that absolutely rule out the possibility that a claim is false.

When initially approaching any particular case study, what is important to notice right away is that the circumstantial type is different from, but

also related to, the direct, or so-called "abusive," type. The circumstantial type essentially involves an allegation that the party being attacked has committed a practical inconsistency, of a kind that can be characterized by the expression "You do not practice what you preach." Then, the allegation of inconsistency is used as the basis for launching a direct, or personal, *ad hominem* type of attack to the effect that the person attacked has a bad character and that, therefore, her argument is bad, or - should not be taken seriously. So the distinction is that the direct *ad hominem* does not require an allegation of circumstantial inconsistency of the kind that the circumstantial type does.

2. Presentation of the case

The case I will study comes from *Time* magazine's "Election Notebook" of 18 November 1996, a page on which *Time* gave out "Campaign '96 Awards" to "recognize outstanding achievements by politicians, their relatives and their hecklers." Two of the awards are directly quoted below:

THE SLIGHT-INCONSISTENCY MEDAL: To Al Gore, who left not a dry eye in the house at the Democratic Convention as he described his sister's death from smoking-induced lung cancer. Gore failed to mention that for some years following her death, his family continued to grow tobacco and that he continued to accept campaign money from tobacco interests.

THE MOST NAUSEATING SPIN: Gore explained the above by saying, "I felt the numbness that prevented me from integrating into all aspects of my life the implications of what that tragedy really meant."

No author of the "Election Notebook" is identified. The page simply appears as an editorial column, with accompanying pictures (including one of Gore, in a speech-making pose).

To classify the type of dialogue to which the argument of this case belongs, one would have to say that it is an editorial page of a sort, as opposed to a news story. The intent of the entries on the page could be described as ironic and satirical in nature, but each of the entries definitely has a political content, in the sense that it is an argument expressing a particular viewpoint. Each entry is an editorial comment with a particular "spin" or opinion expressed. So the function of the discourse can be classified as one of political commentary, which is partisan in nature, as op-

posed to an information-seeking or news-reporting type of dialogue. The case above, for example, presents a point of view, expressed in an argument for one side of an issue. It is different in type from a newspaper report on politics, where there would be an expectation that both sides should be presented, or at any rate, that the reporting should not be exclusively one-sided.

The argument used in this case is an instance of the argumentation scheme *CIRCUMSTANTIAL AH*, as can be shown by examining its components and how they are put together to support the conclusion. First, Gore's speech about the death of his sister from lung cancer is cited as showing that he has advocated the proposition that smoking is a very bad thing-something he is strongly against, in a way that expresses his emotional stand against it in the strongest possible terms. Then, the argument goes on to say that Gore "failed to mention" two key facts. One is that his family continued to grow tobacco after the death of his sister. The other is that Gore continued to accept money from "tobacco interests." The actions cited in these two statements form a clash with what Gore is reported to have said in his speech. This clash takes the form of a pragmatic inconsistency, from which the reader draws the conclusion by implicature that Gore could not have sincerely meant what he (so tearfully) said in his speech. The conclusion suggested is that Gore must be a hypocrite, in the sense that he does not really mean what he says. In other words, he passionately pours out his personal emotions against something, but, in his actions (which he "failed to mention" in his speech), he actually supports and contributes to the making of this very thing he condemned so strongly.

Could there be an explanation for such a contradiction? The editorial actually gives one, but it makes Gore sound even more insincere. So the third part of the argumentation scheme for the circumstantial *ad hominem* is set into place. The reader draws the conclusion that Gore must be a "bad person"-that is, in this case, a hypocrite who recommends values and policies in his political speeches that are the direct opposite of his personal policies, as revealed by his own actions. This kind of inconsistency can be explained in many cases. However, in this case, the argument seems to be air tight. And to seal it up even further, Gore's (presumed) reply offers even further evidence of his insincerity. The ultimate conclusion, the fourth stage of the argumentation scheme for *CIRCUMSTANTIAL AH* can then be drawn by the reader of the editorial. What is suggested is that Gore's tearful speech was a mere rhetorical flourish and that, since he is such an insincere man, you cannot really trust or accept anything he says in politics.

3. Analysis of the case

To analyze the argument in this case, the first step is to confirm the classification, above, of the argument in the case as an instance of the circumstantial type of *ad hominem*. The allegation made in the case is that Gore's actions and his arguments are pragmatically inconsistent in that the two things clash—one being the opposite of the other. The further implication suggested by Gricean implicature from this inconsistency, as noted above, is that Gore's arguments against the use of tobacco products are not sincerely meant. The idea is that he says one thing, but does another, so "actions speak louder than words." The personal attack element of the argument is the suggestion that Gore is hypocritical—that his argument is only political posturing and is not expressing a conclusion he really accepts personally. In this sense, the circumstantial *ad hominem* leads into, and is built on, a personal attack of the ethotic type.

But exactly how is the personal attack drawn by Gricean implicature from the circumstantial contradiction that is posed by the argument? The alleged practical inconsistency arises from the clash between the following two propositions:

1. Gore, in a speech, tearfully described his sister's death from smoking-induced lung cancer.
2. For some years following his sister's death, Gore's family continued to grow tobacco and he continued to accept money from tobacco interests.

From proposition 1, the implication is drawn that Gore is strongly against smoking. The fact that his tearful description of his sister's death was part of a political speech implies that this description was relevant politically. In other words, presumably Gore included it in such a public speech because he was advocating the message to the American public that smoking is a bad habit, that he is against smoking, and that the public generally ought to be against smoking. However, from proposition 2, we know that, after his sister died of smoking-induced lung cancer (and the timing is very important to the *ad hominem* argument), Gore personally accepted money from tobacco interests and his family profited from growing tobacco. But how exactly does this connection imply a contradiction that reveals hypocrisy?

Of course, there is a well-known connection between the growing of tobacco and the habit of smoking. Growing tobacco is a necessary means for smoking: we all know that cigarettes are produced from tobacco and

that the normal way of manufacturing cigarettes has the growing of tobacco as one of its most important parts. So if anyone is sincerely against smoking, it would be highly questionable for that same person not to be against the growing of tobacco. The close connection between smoking and tobacco makes the advocating of both propositions 1 and 2 by the same person highly questionable. It cries out for an explanation. And in the absence of one, the conclusion implied (by implicature) is that this person is the worst sort of hypocrite, one who has even gone so far as to exploit the death of his sister to move an audience for political gain. The implications of the inconsistency make Gore out to be not simply the worst sort of scoundrel, but ridiculous as well. So as an *ad hominem* attack, the argument is a powerful one indeed.

The picture presented of Gore, where he appears in a rhetorical pose with a visibly caring and passionate look on his face, adds to the ridicule expressed by the argument. The idea of a speaker looking this sincere and acting in such a hypocritical way, suggesting a scurrilous opportunism and absurdly insincere posturing, is an irony that is funny just in the way that the ironies ridiculed by Voltaire and Molière were funny. The idea of a rogue who can sell things to gullible and unsuspecting buyers of his products or ideas by saying all sorts of ridiculous things that he does not at all believe, but that he says with the greatest sincerity, to a buyer who pays rapt attention to his absurd performance, is somehow very ironic and funny to people. Whatever is at the bottom of it, the humor in the *ad hominem* attack is a powerful part of its effectiveness.

4. Evaluation of the case

Having now given an analysis of the *ad hominem* argument used in this case, and having revealed why and how the argument is persuasive, the next step is to evaluate the argument as weak or strong from a critical point of view. The weakest part of the argument relates to one aspect of proposition 2. This proposition is a conjunction of two propositions. One of them is the allegation that Gore's family continued to grow tobacco for some years following his sister's death. What has to be questioned here is why Gore is being held responsible for things done by his family. For example, it could be possible that Gore didn't like other people in his family growing tobacco, or that he protested about it, or even that he didn't know about it, and so forth. Personal control over what persons in one's family do may

be very minimal, or even nonexistent. Who were these family members, and how were they related to Gore? What economic stake did Gore have in the family tobacco-growing enterprise? Until these questions are asked and answered, we don't know what sort of connection Gore had with tobacco growing, or whether such connections in any way can be taken to indicate that he somehow supported or advocated tobacco growing.

So this particular subpart of the *ad hominem* is very weak, at best, and, as it stands, it could be misleading and fallacious. Allied to the other part of the conjunction in proposition 2, that Gore accepted campaign funds from tobacco interests, the allegation about Gore's family does give the *ad hominem* argument an additional push because it cites another connection between Gore and tobacco. On close examination, however, it is a weak part of the argument that should be scrutinized and critically questioned carefully.

What about the other part of the proposition, the allegation that Gore accepted campaign funds from tobacco interests? Here the connection is firmer because these days we expect politicians to at least make reasonable efforts to know if their campaign funds are coming from special interests. The big question is whether Gore knew that these funds came from tobacco interests. If he did, then it does seem questionable that he accepted the funds, without any further comment on their source, in light of his passionate speech on the evils of smoking. The presumption posed by this apparent conflict is that Gore did not really mean what he said in the speech. And the implicature suggested by this presumption is that Gore is a "phony" or hypocrite who exploited his family tragedy to add pathos to a political speech, no doubt with great effect. So the circumstantial *ad hominem* argument is the vehicle used to pose a direct (abusive) *ad hominem* argument, by implication, to the effect that Gore is not a sincere person who can be trusted to "speak from the heart" and tell us what he truly believes in his political speeches. As is characteristically the case with the circumstantial attack, the allegation of pragmatic inconsistency leads to the implication that the arguer attacked is a person of bad character. By this means, the person's argument is attacked through an attack on the arguer's credibility.

One other question that needs to be raised in this case is whether the argument really is an *ad hominem* at all, or is just a slur against Gore's character. For a requirement of an argument's being an *ad hominem* argument is that it be a personal attack used to detract from the argument of the party that is attacked (Walton 1998). Calling someone an "airhead" or a "creep," for example, is not necessarily an *ad hominem* argument. An *ad hominem* is not just any slur on someone's character. It must be such a slur

used to try to refute or attack that person's argument (by attacking the credibility of the arguer for that purpose). It is not a matter of the actual intention of the attacker, but a question of how the argument is being used in a given case.

In this case, then, we need to ask what argument of Gore's the attack on his character (by way of the alleged circumstantial conflict) was being used to refute. Presumably, it was Gore's passionate speech, which, if relevant to politics at all, was a message to people against smoking. Was the *Time* segment (as quoted above), then, meant to be attacking the argument against smoking? Could you say it was a kind of pro-smoking message? Presumably not. That does not seem to be what the editorial is about. If so, the question is whether the editorial really contains an *ad hominem* argument at all.

I believe there is something more in this question than many commentators might initially be inclined to think. In a way, the editorial is, I believe, a kind of pseudo *ad hominem* argument that is being played as much for its entertainment value as for its serious political content as an argument. Nonetheless, there is enough of an element of counterargument to serve as a basis for justifying the classification of the editorial as containing a circumstantial *ad hominem* argument. The basis for this classification is that Gore's speech as a whole is being attacked by the argument in the editorial, even though no details of the speech are given in the editorial itself. But the speech is recent news, and readers of the editorial are presumably aware of the contents of the speech. And, therefore, there is some basis for classifying the *Time* segment quoted above as an *ad hominem* argument. But that basis only allows such a classification as conditional and partial. A subtler analysis of the argument is that it is used to attack Gore's personal *ethos* in a way that makes amusing material for an editorial comment, while posing as an *ad hominem* argument, and thereby makes the editorial seem more legitimate as a political argument. So the interesting point is that the argument is a borderline *ad hominem* that has all the elements of this type of argument except (arguably) one.

A circumstantial *ad hominem* argument works in a dialogue by shifting a weight of presumption onto the respondent to reply to the attack, by denying the allegation, or by otherwise appropriately replying to the argument. In the absence of such a reply, or in the absence of critical questions raised about the *ad hominem* argument, it has a sticking power in virtue of the weight of presumption in favor of it. However, if an inadequate, failed, or implausible reply is given, that will make the *ad hominem* argument much stronger.

One interesting feature of this case is that the *Time* editorial actually prints a reply attributed to Gore, described in the editorial as a "most nauseating spin." But the reply, expressed in a kind of political psychobabble that is all too familiar to readers, and widely felt to be ridiculous, is a kind of clincher that has the effect of giving more weight to the *ad hominem* argument, rather than disarming it. The effect of the reply is to give more support to the original *ad hominem* allegations that Gore is carried away by his own emotional rhetoric and that he is not only dishonest, but also deeply confused, and that he cannot be trusted to give a straight answer. Instead of replying to the *ad hominem* argument by questioning it, the quote seals the argument in place, making any possible further reply to it much more difficult, and much less plausible. The trendiness of the phrasing of the speech makes it seem insincere. And this evidence of insincerity gives just that much more support to the original *ad hominem* argument.

5. Conclusions

This case looks like a pretty typical example of the circumstantial *ad hominem* argument as used in political discourse. And, in certain respects, it is. The allegation of pragmatic inconsistency is there, and use is made of it to mount a personal attack on the character of a politician. But some factors of the context of dialogue in which the argument was used need to be observed. It is not the more typical kind of case of one politician attacking the policy or argument of another politician in a political debate, for example, with a "negative ad" in an election campaign, of the kind studied by Michael Pfau and Michael Burgoon (1989). Instead, the argument in this case is an ironic commentary on an editorial page of a major national news magazine by an anonymous author. The purpose is somewhat unclear. It may be more of an attempt to stir up controversy, or to amuse readers who are cynical about politicians, than it is an attempt to attack Gore's political position, or some specific argument he has advanced. But it very definitely has a strong *ad hominem* component. On balance, it has been argued above that this case should be classified as an instance of a circumstantial *ad hominem* argument.

Another especially interesting aspect of this particular case is its compactness. Very little is said in the given text of discourse, but a lot is implied. Repeated use of Gricean implicature to suggest propositions is a clever aspect of the argument, showing how easy it can be to mount an *ad hominem* argument on the basis of very little evidence, and yet how the attack can have a terrific "smearing" effect. Thus, it is extremely difficult to de-

fend against this type of argument. If the victim attacks the argument too vigorously, he appears guilty. But if no reply at all is made, or only a weak one, damage can be just as bad or worse. The usual strategy of challenging the support of the premise seems to be of limited use in such a case.

The tricky, and therefore especially interesting, tactic exhibited by this case is the conjunction of the two propositions used as a dual basis for supporting the one side of the alleged pragmatic inconsistency. The conjunction is composed of the following two propositions:

- (P1) For some years following his sister's death,
Gore's family continued to grow tobacco.
- (P2) Gore continued to accept money from tobacco interests.

As shown above, the allegation made in (P1) is quite a weak and questionable basis for an *ad hominem* argument. We do not blame people for things that members of their families (e.g., their parents) do. So unless there is some further link to be established here, (P1) is not much of a basis for a strong *ad hominem* argument that shows that Gore is a bad person. The real basis of the *ad hominem* argument is (P2). While a lot of other politicians probably also accepted money from "tobacco interests" at the time Gore was alleged to have done so, still, his having done this does clash with his speech about his sister in a way that strongly supports the *ad hominem* argument used against him.

So the trick in this case is to combine a weak but persuasive basis for an *ad hominem* argument with a stronger basis. The stronger basis, by itself, does not seem all that impressive (probably because all politicians were engaging in pretty much the same practice at the time). However, when combined with the weaker one (which somehow looks more impressive, especially when combined with the stronger one), the effect is considerable. The argument, as a whole, succeeds in making Gore look quite ridiculous. Even though this *ad hominem* argument is revealed to be quite weak, from a critical point of view, once it is analyzed, it is highly persuasive when first encountered and given little thought. At least, it certainly would be persuasive to those who are cynical about politicians to begin with, or to those who already suspect that Gore is selling a kind of superficial rhetoric to support his own interests and those of his allies. To the extent that a reader has these cynical attitudes, she is likely to find the *ad hominem* argument used in this case easy to accept.

Department of Philosophy
University of Winnipeg

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Notes

1. A range of cases, from ancient times to the present, is studied in *Ad Hominem Arguments* (Walton 1998).
2. Requirements for the use of nonsexist language are met by following the convention of generally referring to the proponent in a dialogue as *she* and the respondent as *he*.

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