Reason and Violence: arguments from force

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1

It is natural to feel that there is a fundamental antithesis between reason and violence. Philosophers such as Karl Popper have articulated this thought in our own time.[1] It also has respectably antique origins in Aristotle's remark that in dialectical dealings we need sometimes to use persuasion and sometimes to use force.[2] But there are conceptual issues here that need rather more exploration than they tend to receive.

If we want to get someone who is not already there to agree to adopt a certain position, we might try to brainwash that person or torture or pharmacologically manipulate him. Alternatively we could try to convert him by engaging him in rational persuasion. The first method is a way of non-rational violence; and note that the violence need not be physical—it might be psychological or moral. The second method uses reason rather than violence to achieve its end.

It appears that there may be two comparable and alternative routes to the same desired goal. Moreover once the routes are seen in this way, the rationalist's one seems intrinsically more desirable than the alternative. The appeal of rationality is sometimes expressed in moral terms. Rational persuasion is a more honourable way to try to convert an opponent than is the use of force. We show greater moral respect, sympathy and kindness if we proceed in that way. But the more basic point is conceptual and aesthetic. The entertaining of judgements and the expression of opinions are essentially intellectual operations. There is something deeply inappropriate about the use of non-intellectual means to secure such results. It is not just bad: it is mad!

However the case can also be argued on the other side. It is not hard to see ways of accommodating violence to reason. For one

[1] See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), vol. 2, p. 234.

[2] Aristotle *Metaphysics* Γ5, 1009a18.

doi:10.1017/S0031819105000276 ©2005 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819105000276 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thing the adoption of violent means of enforcing one's views might seem to be justified—that is, rationally justified—either by the importance of what is at stake or by the intransigence of the opposition. One could in such circumstances reason that violence offered the best prospect of effecting a desirable result. Or, in another kind of case, a prior commitment to violence might serve to supply the premises for a piece of reasoning; such an agent will work out that some violent ambition can best be achieved by certain prior means, be those means themselves violent or non-violent. Finally we may note that there is a ready tendency in the language of logicians to speak of the compulsion and force which is exerted by an obviously sound argument; that language is also found in Aristotle.

So we form the suspicion that there is, at the very least, a certain kind of 'mixed' case, in which reason and violence do not stand in irreconcilable antithesis but rather can combine to generate a particular conclusion. Some philosophers have gone and do go further in rejecting the opposition altogether.[3] However I do not think that we should be so ready to jettison our original intuition that the two are fundamentally opposed; and I want to make a modest contribution to this case by considering the alleged fallacy of *argumentum ad baculum*.

2

This kind of argument belongs with a group which are first explicitly presented by John Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* IV. xvii.19–22), but the inspiration for this category seems to derive at least from the *Port-Royal Logic* (Part III, ch.20) thirty years earlier.[4] These *argumenta ad* do not form any part of logic as it is classically conceived. Still the characterisation of such fallacies as bad arguments can be traced back to adventitious remarks in Aristotle.[5] They have classical pedigree, even though they are not part of classical logic.

[3] This is done by Roy Edgley, 'Reason and Violence', in Stephan Körner (ed.), *Practical Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 113–35. The other side of the case is presented by some of his respondents in the same volume; see especially J. W. N. Watkins and R. M. Hare (*ibid*.) pp. 156–8 and 167–9.

[4] For this earlier history, see Hans Hansen & Robert Pinto (eds.), *Fallacies* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 10–13. Arguments *ad baculum* are discussed in the essay by John Woods, 'Appeal to Force', pp. 240–50 in the same volume.

[5] Aristotle, *De Sophisticis Elenchis* 177b33–4, 183a21–6.

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The general idea in the arguments *ad* is this: we are recommended to accept some proposition P on grounds that bear not so much on the truth or otherwise of P as on the nature and status of those who are inclined to accept P—or perhaps not to accept it. The distinction is between the content of the proposition and the status, including intellectual status, of one who entertains it. Thus the *argumentum ad verecundiam* urges the truth of P on the grounds that P is supported by people of intellectual authority, and the *argumentum ad hominem* concludes to P because the person who defends the contrary position is deemed to lack the authority which is needed for his stance. The general idea is that the credibility of the argument is—or, at least, may be—significantly affected by the credit of those who are associated with it.

In this company (even though it is not put there by Locke or the Port-Royal authors) an *argumentum ad baculum* provides support for some proposition P by indicating the sticks which will beat those who reject it. It indicates who will wield these sticks, and reminds us that in the Sicilian euphemism they are *uomini di honore*, people who merit respect.

The original purpose in diagnosing these arguments as *argumenta ad* was to pillory them as fallacies. But there has been recently been much debate about whether in fact they are fallacious, and more generally what (if anything) is wrong with them.[6] It might seem that they contain neither fallacy nor fault. For example, the argument *ad verecundiam* proposes as a ground for P that it is endorsed by an expert—e.g. that Stephen Hawking's support for a particular theory of the initial cosmic singularity entails that this theory is true. But where is the failure of rationality here? Surely Hawking's support is a good and rational ground for accepting the thesis. Appeal to the endorsement of experts provides good and solid argument for accepting the conclusions in question.

In the same vein we might analyse the simplest and most transparent form of *ad baculum* argument as follows. We shall consider an argument for the existence of God. Take as the premise ***If God does not exist, I shall smash your face***; from this we try to derive the conclusion ***God exists***. The premise is equivalent to ***God exists or I shall smash your face***; and since we are prepared to take evasive action to prevent the truth of the second disjunct, it follows that the first disjunct is true. That is to say, as a consequence of pragmatic means which lie within our power we can ensure that the second disjunction is false; and so the truth-status of the premise must reduce to that of the first disjunct—***God exists***.

[6] C. L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 42.

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Before moving on, let me linger a bit with this example. We need to get a very clear focus on the nature of the reasoning here—on what is and what is not involved in it. The form of reasoning that I have just rehearsed with my argument—***If God does not exist, I shall smash your face***—, could be replicated as follows:

If God does not exist, two plus two equals five.

That is equivalent to ***God exists or two plus two equals five.*** Since we know that the second disjunct is false (and know it more certainly than anything that bears on the existence of God), we have exactly the same reason to assert the first disjunct. Moreover, as to logical form, the same lesson holds with ***If God does not exist, the workings of the universe are unintelligible***. Here too it may be claimed that the obvious unacceptability of the second disjunct, is sufficient to require us to conclude to the existence of God.

Now the last of these is much closer to a conventional argument for the existence of God; and I shall revert to arguments of this style later. I mention it now simply to highlight the particular nature of the argument that interests me. There is no obvious connection of sense between the two disjuncts—God existing, and my smashing your face—, any more than there is between the two disjuncts—God existing, and two plus two equalling five. But that does not of itself invalidate either argument. That is why I present the *ad baculum* argument in the present version, rather than as ***If you do not believe that God exists, I shall smash your face***. In the latter form there is clearly a psychological connection between your unwillingness to suffer physical pain and your readiness to try to modify your beliefs—and mine also to try to change them.

So it appears that we have here a valid argument for its desired conclusion—that God exists. If you acknowledge the truth of the premise, you are rationally committed to accepting the truth of the conclusion. But it may still strike us a bad argument because of the implausibility of its premise. Precisely because there is no clear connection between antecedent and consequent—nothing to link theological issues with my sadistic practices—, we see no good reason to assert either of the disjuncts—or the whole disjunction. The argument may indeed be valid; but we have no reason to accept the premise and none, therefore, to accept the conclusion either.

However this reflection suggests that with suitable contextual amendment it will be possible to produce a version of the premise that carries greater conviction. Suppose that it is advanced by someone of great power in a theocratic society who links the claim about

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God's existence with the threat of violence. Now we have a connection between this person's theological commitments and his powers of action. If just anyone started an argument with the premise ***Grass is green or diamonds are brown***, in order to prove a conclusion about the colour of such a substance, we would have no inclination to accept the premise. This person apparently is not well informed about colours, botany or mineralogy!

That is also the case with most occasions in which we might encounter the premise ***God exists or I shall smash your face***. But our recent line of speculation indicates a context in which that premise would receive acceptance, thus enabling the whole argument to go through. It will be objected that this justification of the premise is pragmatic. It depends excessively on context (in the same way as the proposition 'nothing is written' could be rendered necessarily false only by the context in which that proposition is itself written). To meet that objection, consider the version of the premise in which the context does more to ensure that the antecedent links, by virtue of its own meaning, with the consequent. We now suppose that the premise is advanced by someone who is himself a prophet of God—indeed, of a vengeful God who punishes those who disbelieve in him. In this scenario the activity which is indicated in the consequent is precisely what the Being specified in the antecedent is expected to engage in. The justification of the link between antecedent and consequent is still contextual; it depends on the identity of the person who advances the premise. But now we do have a link of personal identity between the utterer and a being that is logically capable of wielding the relevant stick; and this link provides support for the truth of the conditional expressed in the premise.

This way of first trying to establish a connection between the antecedent and consequent in the premise of the *ad baculum* argument, and then construing the connection in such a way as to make it plausible that the antecedent is false, should remind us of Pascal's Wager.[7] The French philosopher tried to justify belief in the existence of God by comparing the benefits and disbenefits of both belief and non-belief in God, both on the assumption that he exists and also if he does not. If God does exist and you do not believe in him you will suffer infinite torment, whereas if you do believe, you will secure infinite bliss. On the other hand, if God does not exist, you will suffer some waste of time and loss of amenity from

[7] Blaise Pascal, *Infini-Rien*, in Leon Brunschvig (ed.), *Pensées* (Paris: Hachette, 1968), fr.233. The relevance of Pascal's idea to the topos of *argumentum ad baculum* is suggested by Woods (op. cit.).

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adopting the practices of religious belief, and you will escape these disbenefits if you avoid religion and do not believe in God. You will also in the latter case reap the gain, which the rationalist would value, of having beliefs that are in tune with reality. However these gains and losses pale into insignificance beside the massively greater consequences both of belief and of disbelief should it turn out that God does exist. Since the existence of God is a matter of uncertainty, however much we may feel that the strength of the case inclines one way or the other, it is rational to balance the pluses and minuses of both sets of outcomes. Then the infinite weight of consequences if theism is true, must constrain us in all rationality to believe in the existence of God.

Even if the existence of God, while not impossible, had minimal credibility, this argument would still hold good; that is because Pascal (or if you like, God and his human mouthpieces) has stipulated an infinite tariff in one section of the pay-offs. In practice even a strongly convinced atheist might well hold the chances of God's existing as somewhat higher than that. Such an adjustment in the arithmetic would only serve to augment the rational persuasiveness of this kind of argument for the existence of God.

The general upshot is this. We have an argument for the existence of God which is based on the nature of the goods and harms which will result from the various logical possibilities surrounding the situation. (We may note, in parenthesis, that with suitable adjustments a similar argument could be mounted for God's non-existence). An additional special feature of the argument is that the pay-offs are set by the representatives of God: even if he does not exist, they certainly do. I maintain that these are violent, *ad baculum* grounds for accepting a conclusion which follows validly from a premise with high plausibility for being true.

3

The situation of Pascal's Wager can be reproduced for other cases if we are careful about the nature of the stick, who wields it and what it is wielded for. As Bernard Williams has pointed out, there is a similarity between the arguments of Pascal and John Rawls.[8] The latter urges us to choose a particular, libertarian system of social justice, on the following grounds. Suppose that we know that we are

[8] Bernard Williams, 'Rawls and Pascal's Wager', reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 94–100.

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about to find ourselves situated in a social context but we do not know what kind of society it will be. In the terms which particularly interest Rawls, it may be that the society will be one which respects individual autonomy—in a word, a liberal system; or it will be illiberal and will countenance great variation in individual autonomy. Which should we prefer to become members of?

Rawls presents the issue by highlighting the uncertainty of outcome insofar as it may affect the individual's decision. If we opt for an illiberal society, we may end up in positions that range from the tyrant to the slave; there are great advantages available, but also the risk of massive disadvantage. In the liberal society there are also differences of outcome, depending on whether we are successful or unsuccessful; but these differences are relatively slight compared with the immense consequences of different outcomes in the illiberal society. When matters are stipulated in this way, with the scenarios thus defined, Rawls maintains that the rational person must reason as follows. The scope for harm on the downside in an illiberal society is very great; and it vastly outweighs the limitations of scope for benefit on the upside in a liberal society. Meanwhile the upside in an illiberal society is not so great; and in particular it does not bring corresponding advantages that are commensurable with the fate of a loser in a liberal society. So the rational self-interested person, who does not know which society he will be in and, in either case, whether he will be up or down, would opt in all circumstances for the liberal outcome. Thus we get a rational basis for preferring a liberal morality to an illiberal one—or, as one might put it more tendentiously, morality to immorality.[9]

As critics have observed, this argument makes very questionable assumptions in two areas. It elevates freedom to a supreme good, and it exaggerates the difference between the upside quality of the best outcome and the downside quality of the worst outcome. To be more specific on the latter point, why is it so much worse to be a slave, in a society where you might have been a freeman, than it would be good to be a tyrant when you might have been a middle-class burgher? Do the gains in disbenefit in the former case really exceed the increased benefit in the latter case? Rawls' intuitions on such matters do not seem compelling.

However they may gain some support from a Pascalian *ad baculum* argument. Suppose that a Rawlsian invokes the following argument ***If freedom is not the highest value, you will suffer***. As we have seen, that is in general a poor argument, mainly because the

[9] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 136–83.

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premise lacks plausibility. There is no adequate conceptual connection between the facts of freedom and your suffering. But, of course, there may be pragmatic connections, if the author of the argument both favours freedom and is in a position to enforce his attitudes on those who disagree. Let us suppose that the argument is advanced by the philosophically inclined Big Brother. This Orwellian figure has almost absolute power of many kinds; and they include psychological control. Big Brother's intuitions about the high value to be placed on freedom are in accord with those of Rawls; and unlike Rawls he is in a position to enforce them. Specifically he does so by a process of mental manipulation that is designed to enhance the attractions of freedom at the expense of other possible goals.

This agent enunciates a certain thesis about value and has the power to bring it about that the thesis is verified. Valuing is something which people do in a social context. The existence and application of values depends on the mutual recognition of moral status which can only occur in a social context extending beyond a single individual person. Now the author of the argument in the case under consideration is a major determinant of the nature of this social context. So we have here a case which appears to replicate Pascal's argument for the existence of God. We have devised a context in which a Rawlsian argument for the value of freedom could survive the obvious objection against the plausibility of its premise. In both cases one element of the disjunction makes an assertion of objective fact, while the other expresses the will of the arguer; and the connection between these two elements resides in the ability of the author of the argument, through the exercise of his will and appropriate action, to bring about the objectively specified state of affairs. We have indeed secured a tightening of the semantic connection between the diverse elements in the premise of our argument. But this result is achieved, at its heart, by an appeal to the use of force. The argument reveals the essence of the ***argumentum ad baculum***.

To summarize, an effective connection can be established between the premise-elements 'I shall smash your face' and, respectively, 'God exists' and 'Freedom is the highest value', provided that the author of the argument, who also is either the agent acknowledged in the second disjunct or is appropriately connected with him, is in a position to affect the truth of the proposition contained in the first disjunct. This situation obtains more frequently than the examples which I have so far considered may suggest. In contexts of political and social activity it obviously

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can and does occur, particularly where an argument which is apparently about an objective matter of fact or value, is conducted by participants which include those possessing or connected to sources of power to affect the outcome. Even in intellectual and academic circles the phenomenon presents itself in a subtle and oblique way, but no less really for that. In a review of a recent account of the life and work of Noam Chomsky,[10] Peter Brooks tries to explain why his subject's political views have not gained the academic respectability that has been won for his theories in linguistics. Contrasting this case with that of certain French intellectuals, he says: 'It is not necessarily an endorsement of French attitudes to point out that Chomsky is less effective than he might be because "honesty" and "moral courage", however admirable, are not enough to change the world. Chomsky is not a public intellectual because he does not deploy the full force of his exceptional intellect in his public engagements'. What is suggested here is that typically the power of argument needs to be supplemented by some further intellectual force, and that it is intrinsic to the enterprise of effective rationality that this should happen. *Ad baculum* argumentation seems to be not merely permitted but demanded!

Wherever a particular fact has a social or institutional dimension —and some theorists maintain that this class of facts is very wide in scope—there will be an appropriate person or group whose decision to endorse the fact has some tendency to bring it about that the world is so. Thus if some group is strongly opposed to the political change that would, say, legalise some form of euthanasia, they might argue 'If euthanasia occurs, I shall smash your face'. Since their views and actions have an influence on the facts, the premise succeeds in marking a real connection between its two elements. In such circumstances the charge of poor argumentation must, it seems, be dropped.

4

I have tried to set out the logical and dialectical character of *ad baculum* arguments, and to make the best case for their acceptability—under carefully controlled conditions—into the community of respectable arguments. Such arguments are not invalid. They typically advance from a disjunctive premise, via the rejection of one of the disjuncts, to the conclusion of the other one.

[10] Peter Brooks, review of Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky*, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (August 1, 1997), pp. 10–11.

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A more likely charge against them is that the disjunctive premise fails to have greater plausibility than does the conclusion—and this for the reason that there is no clear semantic link between the disjuncts and no reason, therefore, to suppose that one or of other of them (at least) must be accepted.

However we have just considered some arguments where, it can be said, this very defect is addressed and remedied in the most effective way possible. Of course, the general means of the remedy is to base the argument on a premise where the disjunctive elements are linked not semantically—by their meaning—but pragmatically, by the contextual application of force. In these cases the possession and exercise of power provide a context where elements which are unrelated in meaning can become connected. Of course, premises of this form may still be rejected. The disjunctions are not exhaustive; and we may neither assent to the proposition (e.g. **God exists**) in the first part nor bow to the violence (**God will punish you**) forecast in the second part. Still the source and perhaps also the nature of the violence which I certainly seek to avoid form part of the same subject-matter as the factual claim expressed in the other part of the disjunction; and by 'forming part of the same subject-matter' I mean that they belong within the same focus for rational reflection. That is what distinguishes arguments with such a premise from those which combine two wholly unrelated elements.

But I now conclude by arguing that the case fails: such arguments are rogues, and the community of rational disputants needs to be well alert to their viral character. If I am right in this final part of my argument, the case for a fundamental divorce between reason and violence is strengthened. For *ad baculum* arguments offered the best hope of a harmonious marriage between the two. I think that *ad baculum* argumentation plays a more significant and pervasive role in our culture than political philosophy or logical theory recognise. Explosure of their true status is an important task; and an essential part of that work lies in seeing how close they come to being respectable, while still falling short of that status.

When I developed the case for seeing a logical connection between the expression of a determination to use force and some particular assertion of fact, I argued that such connections were at their most convincing when the fact in question is a social or institutional one. This is because the sanction of violence rests not just with an arbitrary individual but with a set of practices built around the subject-matter of the judgement in question—for example, the organisation of the church in the case of religious topics, or the practices of the publishing industry in the case of decisions about

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what is or is not desirable reading material. However now we must insist that even such facts have an objective nature and are logically independent of the desires and ambitions of those who take an attitude towards them.

Someone may want to bring about a change in the world or indeed a change in attitudes towards the world. There is a rational approach to the management of such changes; that consists in seeking premises from which the desired conclusion can be derived. However there is a quite different means of effecting such change, and that is through the application of non-rational but causally efficacious manipulation upon the mind of the target person. Note that in either case we are able to supply an account which explains why the person comes to have a certain belief; but still the two processes are so different that only a category confusion could lead someone to conflate the two. That is why I insisted that the conclusion of an *ad baculum* argument is **God exists**, as opposed to something like **You had better believe that God exists**. Of course, if God exists and I can present a convincing rational argument for such a conclusion, and you assent to its soundness, then certainly you had better believe that God exists. But what you believe is the fact, not the belief about the fact. By contrast, belief about the fact—rather than the fact itself—is the best that *ad baculum* argument can induce; but the latter, rather than the former is the argument's professed goal. The *reason why* a victim of violent arguments holds a belief, does not give *reason for* holding that belief.

I conclude that Popper's apologia expresses a deep truth: '... I am today no less hopeful than I have ever been that violence can be defeated. It is our only hope....—that violence *can* be reduced, and brought under the control of reason. This is perhaps why I, like many others, believe in reason; why I call myself a rationalist. I am a rationalist because I see in the attitude of reasonableness the only alternative to violence'.[11]

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[11] Karl Popper, 'Utopia and Violence', reprinted in *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 355.

My thanks to audiences in Dublin, Fribourg and Cappadocia for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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