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Résumé de l'article

Donald Trump a été une aubaine pour ceux d'entre nous qui enseignent la pensée critique. Car il est une source de rhétorique manipulatrice, de sophismes flagrants, de théories du complot, de fausses nouvelles et de conneries. Dans cet article, je me base sur ma propre expérience d'enseignement afin de discuter à la fois de l'utilité et des limites de l'utilisation des exemples de Trump dans la formation de la pensée critique. Dans la première partie, je donne le cadre du cours ; dans la deuxième section, j'indique la pertinence de Trump dans l'enseignement de nombreux concepts importants du cours; et dans la troisième section, je soutiens que les instructeurs de la pensée critique devraient se retenir de trop se fier aux exemples de Trump.

Donald Trump as a Critical-Thinking Teaching Assistant

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Abstract: Donald Trump has been a godsend for those of us who teach critical thinking. For he is a fount of manipulative rhetoric, glaring fallacies, conspiracy theories, fake news, and bullshit. In this paper I draw on my own recent teaching experience in order to discuss both the usefulness and the limits of using Trump-examples in teaching critical thinking. In Section One I give the framework of the course; in Section Two I indicate Trump's relevance to many important concepts in the course; and in Section Three I argue that critical-thinking instructors should restrain themselves from overreliance on Trump-examples.

Résumé: Donald Trump a été une aubaine pour ceux d'entre nous qui enseignent la pensée critique. Car il est une source de rhétorique manipulatrice, de sophismes flagrants, de théories du complot, de fausses nouvelles et de conneries. Dans cet article, je me base sur ma propre expérience d'enseignement afin de discuter à la fois de l'utilité et des limites de l'utilisation des exemples de Trump dans la formation de la pensée critique. Dans la première partie, je donne le cadre du cours ; dans la deuxième section, j'indique la pertinence de Trump dans l'enseignement de nombreux concepts importants du cours; et dans la troisième section, je soutiens que les instructeurs de la pensée critique devraient se retenir de trop se fier aux exemples de Trump

1. Introduction

There is already a growing concern among progressives and thoughtful conservatives that Donald Trump is mentally unfit to

serve as president of the United States. But it is hard to deny that Trump's campaign and presidency have been a godsend for those of us who teach critical thinking. He is a fount, for example, of manipulative rhetoric, glaring fallacies, conspiracy theories, fake news, and bullshit—just the sorts of abuses of language and cognitive blunders that we want our students to recognize and avoid. I have indeed made significant use of Trump's rhetoric and shoddy thinking in teaching a Beginning Logic course in spring 2017, the content of which was about four-fifth critical thinking. There are pedagogical limits, however, to the use of Trump-examples in critical-thinking courses. For instance, it would surely be inappropriate (which is not to say difficult or untempting) to design an entire course around such examples. In this paper I propose to draw on my own recent teaching experience in order to discuss both the usefulness and the limits of using Trump in teaching critical thinking.

In Section 2 I will lay out the framework of the critical-thinking course (minus its categorical-logic component) that I have taught. In Section 3 I will indicate Trump's relevance to many important concepts in the course. Finally, in Section Three I will argue that, for several different reasons, critical-thinking instructors should restrain themselves from overreliance on Trump-examples.

2. A critical thinking course framework

My most recent critical-thinking course used the eleventh edition of Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker's popular *Critical Thinking* text (Moore and Parker 2015). This book includes no Trump-examples, predating as it does the 2016-2017 presidential campaign; but as will be seen, at least one portion seems almost to have been written with Trump in mind. I supplemented the text with many online readings, mostly news articles and opinion pieces related in timely ways to the topics and issues we covered.

Unit I of the course ("Critical Thinking and Rhetoric") generally concerns the evidence-based nature of critical thinking, the relevance of definitions, vagueness, and ambiguity to clarity of thought, and the use of rhetorical devices in efforts at non-rational

persuasion. I offer the following rough characterization of critical thinking (partly indebted to Moore and Parker 2015, Ch. 1):

> it is reflection, directed at truth and guided by evidence, that is linked to a willingness to consider diverse perspectives, to question one's own beliefs as well as those of others, and thereby to be open-minded. The rhetorical devices we examine are euphemisms and dysphemism, weaselers and downplayers, innuendo, stereotypes, loaded questions, hyperbole, demagogic rhetoric, repetition, and proof surrogates.

Unit II ("Critical Thinking and Credibility") focuses on judgments of credibility for claims and especially for sources. We explore the implications of a common-sense principle of claim-credibility that emphasizes personal observations and background information; conspiracy theories provide one important class of examples. We do likewise for a common-sense principle of source-credibility based on the distinction between interested and disinterested parties, applying it especially to news media, talk radio, advocacy TV, and the internet. In the process we discuss the phenomenon of fake news and the important role of non-partisan factcheckers. We also consider four criteria of expertise and examine the relevance of both expertise and the party principle to the climate-change debate.

Unit III ("Critical Thinking and Informal Logic") covers a variety of informal fallacies, including straw man, appeals to emotion (such as outrage, scare tactics, wishful thinking, and nationalist groupthink), *ad hominem*, false dilemma, begging the question, misplaced burden of proof, self-refutation, and argument to moderation. Inspired in part by the suspicion that informal fallacies are closely related to bullshitting, I add an additional section on bullshit that has proven quite popular in every version of the course in which it has been present. Especially well-received is the class contest for best example of B.S. (as judged collectively by the students themselves).

3. Trump's relevance

In this section I will demonstrate Trump's relevance to the teaching of important concepts in the three critical-thinking units of my Beginning Logic course. I will not try to cover all the topics mentioned above, but will settle for picking out several from each unit.

3.1 Unit I: Critical thinking and rhetoric

Is Donald Trump a critical thinker? There are, of course, many reasons for answering this question with a resounding "No" (or something less polite). But even if we focus only on the first part of the characterization I provided earlier of critical thinking, the same answer is well-founded. Does he regularly engage—especially in his capacity as president—in "reflection that is directed at truth and guided by evidence"? Well, as Dana Milbank has noted, one of the most striking features of Trump's performance is his apparent willingness to dispense with evidence altogether in making public pronouncements about current events. Milbank gives several different examples, starting with the president's accusation that his predecessor eavesdropped on him electronically (Milbank 2017). Paul Krugman makes a related point about Trump: "This administration operates under the doctrine of Trumpal infallibility: Nothing the president says is wrong, whether it's his false claim that he won the popular vote or his assertion that the historically low murder rate is at a record high. No error is ever admitted" (Krugman 2017). The rest of this section provides additional support for the denial that the president is a critical thinker.

The topic of definition also lends itself to an appeal to Trump's rhetoric. The epidemic of falsehoods that is associated with the Trump administration has been well documented—for example, by the *New York Times* (Leonhardt and Thompson 2017) and the *Washington Post* (Kessler, Kelly, and Lewish 2018). To the surprise of many commentators, the *Times* has abandoned its past practice concerning falsehoods by politicians and has called many of Trump's misstatements outright lies. By contrast, the *Post* factcheckers prefer to call them "false or misleading claims"

(while noting that many of the almost 2000 claims they count in less than one year have been made repeatedly by Trump). This raises the interesting question of whether the president really is *lying* when he utters blatantly false or groundless statements (especially ones that he repeats even after being corrected by factcheckers). This in turn raises the *definitional* question of what it *means* to call something a lie. There is a useful article by Kevin Drum in which he defends the *Times*'s use of 'lie' (Drum 2017). In class I called attention to this article and used it to generate a lively discussion (in which I remained resolutely neutral) of whether Trump has indeed been guilty of blatant lying to the American people.

Ambiguity is another topic for which Trump's rhetoric provides helpful examples. In class I distinguish between claims that are semantically ambiguous and those that are syntactically ambiguous. The ambiguity of the former is due to their including a term that has at least two meanings, while the ambiguity of the latter is due to sentence structure or word order.

I have two examples of the latter kind to share now. Consider the following June 2017 statement by the president concerning a Congressional hearing on the inquiry into possible election collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government: "Yesterday showed no collusion, no obstruction." This could mean that the hearing showed that there was no collusion or obstruction, or that it failed to show that there was collusion or obstruction. On the first (more natural) reading, the statement is false; on the second one, it is true. Presumably the first reading is the one intended by Trump, but quite possibly he did not notice the ambiguity (or hoped that his audience would not). A second, better known example from a July 2017 presidential tweet is the following approving statement: "Republican senators are working hard to get their *failed ObamaCare replacement* approved" (emphasis added). The italicized noun phrase is of course ambiguous between 're-placement of failed ObamaCare' and 'failed replacement of ObamaCare'; Trump clearly intended the former, but the latter makes more sense in this context, as many fellow tweeters have pointed out with amusement.

A "weaseler" is a statement intended to be so vague or hedged that the speaker is insulated from criticism concerning its truth or reasonableness. Normally this is accomplished by the use of qualifiers such as "it is quite possible", "may well", etc. Astrological predictions are often qualified in this way. But a special kind of indirect discourse may also be used, as linguist Deborah Tannen notes in connection with something that the president said to then-FBI director James Comey concerning the FBI investigation of national security advisor James Flynn. "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go" is not explicitly an order, as Trump's defenders emphasized. But as Tannen observes (and Comey clearly recognized), "when a person in authority meets privately with a subordinate and expresses a hope", an order has indeed been given—although the wording is designed to allow the speaker to deny this (Tannen 2017).

When Moore and Parker discuss the category of "extreme demagogic rhetoric", they almost seem to be channeling our current president, though their actual examples involve Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels and Alabama segregationist George Wallace. Trump's bigoted comments about Mexicans and Muslims especially come to mind, playing as they do on American fears of illegal-immigrant crime and jihadist terrorism. At this point in the course I have assigned a factchecking analysis by Michelke Ye He Lee (Lee 2015). I could just as well have assigned an article or two about global or American surveys of Muslim attitudes on terrorism, as I have done when teaching the subject of religious diversity in my Philosophy of Religion course.

Repetition is another rhetorical device that is well-illustrated by Trump-examples. Of course, it is standard procedure for political candidates and activists to make regular use of the same talking points. But the president seems especially prone to this way of talking. The fact-checkers' bane, he repeats the same misinformation on different occasions, even after correction, perhaps mindful of the famous statement attributed to Vladimir Lenin: "A lie told often enough becomes the truth." (Goebbels reportedly said much the same thing. See Moore and Parker 2015, p. 151.) Moreover, Trump often repeats the same points within the same

public statement. Asked by a reporter after the recent Charlottesville, Virginia violence why he delayed in denouncing the neo-Nazis, he replied: "I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long" (Full text 2017).

3.2 Unit II: Critical thinking and credibility

The topic of conspiracy theories is an important one in connection with both claim-credibility and source-credibility. Why does the president so often offer (or hint at) public support for wildly implausible theories of this kind? One answer may be that given the narrowness of his education, his disinterest in serious reading, and his disinclination to think critically, his background information fails to provide him with grounds for skeptical assessments of conspiracy theories—especially ones that conform to what he wishes to believe. The answer on which we focus in class is his frequent reliance on dubious sources, such as talk-radio host Alex Jones. One helpful article on this reliance is Brian Tashman's "Donald Trump Keeps Pushing Alex Jones' Conspiracy Theories", which covers five different conspiracy theories (Tashman 2016); another is Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman's "A Conspiracy Theory's Journey from Talk Radio to Trump's Twitter" (Baker and Haberman 2017), which focuses on the charge that President Obama wiretapped his successor. In my course I have called attention to both articles. The topic of conspiracy theories also relates to the credibility of talk radio, another issue I cover in the unit. In the next version of the course I would be tempted to discuss Trump's frequent reliance on Fox News, especially "Fox and Friends", a show that is consistently and uncritically supportive of his presidency. This would dovetail with the Unit II issue of the reliability of advocacy TV.

Nowadays no serious discussion of media and internet credibility is complete without some mention of "fake news." In the course I define it roughly as public disinformation, that is, false news conveyed with the intent to deceive the audience. (It may or may not be appropriate to add that the news is fabricated by its purveyor or source.) Our current president's relevance to this topic

is threefold. First, and most obviously, he regularly accuses all but rightwing media of promulgating fake news (CNN being his favorite target). Second, as indicated in effect in the preceding paragraph, he has himself been frequently duped by fake news from such sources as Alex Jones and Fox. A useful article in this connection is Shane Goldmacher's "How Trump Gets His Fake News" (Goldmacher 2017). Third, there appears to be good evidence that Trump supporters are especially prone to believe fake news, as documented, for example, by Olga Khazan in "Why Fake News Targeted Trump Supporters" (Khazan 2017).

3.3 Unit III: Critical thinking and informal logic

The focus of this unit is fallacies (roughly ten of them) and bullshit. Probably all of the discussed fallacies could be illustrated with Trump-examples, but I will concentrate on only a few of them. Bullshit, of course, deserves special consideration.

I should note at the outset that Moore and Parker, in the eleventh edition of their text, treat "red herring" as a name for all fallacies of relevance rather than for a specific fallacy that aims to distract the audience from one issue or argument to another (Moore and Parker 2015, Ch. 6). I hope their next edition reverts to the latter usage, which is illustrated in a distinctive way by Trump's common practice of attempting to evade criticism by changing the subject to the alleged misconduct of Hillary Clinton, among others. This practice now has a name of its own: 'whataboutism'. Its relevance to Trump's rhetoric is explained clearly by Dan Zak in "Whataboutism: The Cold War Tactic, Thawed by Putin, is Brandished by Donald Trump" (Zak 2017).

Those who commit the straw-man fallacy willfully misrepresent the position of their opponent so as to make it easier to refute. Once again, the current president (like George W. Bush, who was arguably a straw-man master) provides useful examples. Here is one, pointed out by E.J. Dionne: Trump has accused those criticizing his plan to build a wall along the entire Mexican border of supporting open borders and opposing enforcement of American laws (Dionne 2017). In fact, virtually no one in the immigration

debate supports completely open borders, and opponents of Trump's infamous wall reject only certain kinds of enforcement of our laws. I should note that Dionne's article (as its title suggests, "Trump still wants you to be very, very afraid") also bears on the "scare-tactics" fallacy.

The fallacy that the president is perhaps best known for is the *ad hominem*. His personal attacks on his rival and critics are legion and often vicious; even serious media sources have begun to keep track of them (see, e.g., Lee and Quealy 2017). Of course, such attacks are not in themselves fallacies unless they are part of an (explicit or implicit) argument. Trump's attacks seem often to be merely instances of spleen-venting rather than fallacious reasoning. But sometimes the argument is painfully clear. Of his Republican rival Carly Fiorina he notoriously said, "Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?" An early, thoughtful discussion of this aspect of Trump's rhetoric is Kate Hardiman's "Ad Hominem Politics" (Hardiman 2015). The attack on Fiorina and other women, especially on their physical appearance, has led some observers, such as Alyssa Rosenberg, to stress the misogynistic aspect of Trump's *ad hominems* (Rosenberg 2017).

Let me mention one last fallacy, the "argument to moderation": the mistake of supposing that the correct position is generally to found between the two opposing positions in a debate. Of course, sometimes truth does lie as a mean between extremes (perhaps especially concerning controversial issues), but often it does not. What has arguably already become a classic example of this fallacy is one of the president's responses to questions about the August 2107 violence in Charlottesville. Here is one reasonably dispassionate, informed account of what happened there based on highly respected newspaper sources:

> The protest in Charlottesville against the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee was dominated by thousands of white nationalists and neo-Nazis but may well have included some non-extremist conservatives. The counter-protest was mostly peaceful but included members of Antifa, a far-left group known for its willingness to use aggressive violence (though

not guns) against others it regards as white nationalists or fascists. The event exploded into violence between extremists on both sides (though peaceful counter-protesters may also have had to defend themselves and were protected at times by Antifa members). One rightwing extremist deliberately drove his motor vehicle into a crowd of peaceful protesters, injuring several and killing one; another fired his gun at a counter-protester from a distance that ruled out self-defense. No protesters against the removal of the Lee statue were killed, attacked with a motor vehicle, or shot at.

The president's first public comment on the violence was essentially that both sides were equally to blame. His second was a strong condemnation of racism and neo-Nazism. His third was a reaffirmation of the first two comments, with the addition of the claim that there were "fine people" on both sides of the confrontation. (A close reading of the Politico transcript, cited earlier, of his third public reaction suggests that—contrary to many reports of what he said— he was talking about peaceful protesters on both sides.) But the equal-blameworthiness claim is very difficult to reconcile with the information provided in the final two sentences of the preceding paragraph (information readily available to the president). And the claim about "fine people" on both sides is undermined to some extent by the fact that rightwing extremists were by far the largest element of the Lee-statue protest while Antifa was apparently a smaller part of the counter-protest. The president should have resisted the temptation to seek an intermediate position between opposing assessments of blame for the violence in Charlottesville. Certainly, other Republican leaders who spoke up did so, such as Paul Ryan, Mike Huckabee, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions (Thrush and Haberman 2017).

And finally, we turn to bullshit. Harry Frankfurt is probably our leading philosopher on this topic, thanks to his small but groundbreaking book *On Bullshit* (Frankfurt 2005, based on a 1986 essay). In *Time* magazine he summarizes his own account as follows:

> The liar asserts something which he himself believes to be false. He deliberately misrepresents what he takes to be the truth. The bullshitter, on the other hand, is not constrained by any consideration of what may or may not be true. In making his assertion, he is indifferent to whether what he says is true or false. His goal is not to report facts. It is, rather, to shape the beliefs and attitudes of his listeners in a certain way. (Frankfurt 2016)

There is certainly much more to be said about the nature of bullshit, especially given the hopeless vagueness of the phrase "in a certain way" (Frankfurt's book is of course more illuminating). But his interesting little essay for *Time* provides a helpful discussion of the way in which some of Trump's questionable statements appear to qualify as bullshit, while others are full-blooded lies, and also of the occasional difficulty of distinguishing between the two. (Also helpful in this regard is Leonhardt 2017.) Indeed, this discussion links up with the topic of the definition of lying that is covered in Unit I. I would note as well that all fallacies that manifest an indifference to the truth lend themselves to bullshitting; the red herring and straw man especially come to mind.

3. Limits to the use of Trump examples

Donald Trump has been at least as much of a godsend to comedians as to critical-thinking teachers: for them he is (to vary the metaphor) the gift that never stops giving. But, of course, comedy and teaching are distinct occupations that impose on their practitioners somewhat different ethical and professional responsibilities. It's one thing for Stephen Colbert (on "The Tonight Show") or Trevor Noah (on "The Daily Show") to mock our current president on a regular basis. They have no clear ethical or professional duty to be balanced, although it may be prudent for them to vary the targets of their political humor. It is quite another thing for the instructor in a critical-thinking course (at least at a putatively respectable educational institution such as a nonprofit liberal-arts university) to continually make one-sided use of Trump-examples in ways that display Trump's dishonesty and foolishness. Students (at least at such institutions) arguably have a right to expect their

instructor to strive for a significant degree of balance in using politically loaded examples. This is especially so in critical-thinking courses, given that critical thinking itself demands a willingness to consider diverse perspectives and is inconsistent with indoctrination.

I wasn't always convinced by this argument. When I realized while teaching my Spring 2017 critical-thinking course that I was using quite a large number of Trump-examples, I told the class that this wasn't a matter of political partisanship. After all, I assured them, I would use the same sorts of examples even if Trump were a liberal Democrat. That assurance was genuine, but I don't think it was sufficient to exculpate me from the charge of excessive bias in the classroom. Indeed, I could see at least one conservative student, a Trump supporter, starting to become alienated in the course—quite possibly because of my constant mockery of the man he voted for. And so I began to take steps to achieve greater balance, without hiding the fact that I was no fan of Donald Trump.

Let me follow up on this last point before I go on to talk about the steps I took and could have taken. It is by no means my position that critical-thinking instructors (among others) must remain politically (ethically, religiously) neutral in order to stay true to the demands of critical thinking and to refrain from indoctrination. Much less is it my view that perfect neutrality in the classroom is always possible. My own preference (especially in introductory courses) is indeed to strive for neutrality, at least until the last day of class when I welcome questions about my own views. My experience has been that this pedagogical approach promotes trust and reduces suspicion about professors (especially liberal ones) looking to pursue their personal agendas in the classroom. But I acknowledge that it is possible (though perhaps difficult) to be open in class about one's personal views (in politics, ethics, or religion) while treating students of diverse perspectives with fairness and helping them feel safe in voicing those perspectives.

Back to creating more political balance in my critical-thinking course: Of course, I needed to look harder for a more varied diet of political examples. One step I took was to find cases of fallacies

committed by progressives, which is easy enough to do, perhaps especially if one is willing to draw on one's own experiences of political discussion and debate. For me the straw-man and false-dilemma fallacies (among others) come readily to mind; here's a timely pair of relevant examples that are directed at progressives in general.

> Straw man: "Progressives who oppose Antifa's use of violence to silence white nationalists are pacifists."

> False dilemma: "Either you support Antifa's violence or you are a pacifist."

I also encouraged students to come up with examples involving Hillary Clinton and other well-known liberals. And let me not forget to mention that in the late-term B.S. contest, Trump-examples were verboten! ("Too easy," I said; but I also feared that the contest would be dominated by such examples.)

Another step I could have taken would be to assign an article on the targeting of progressives by creators of fake news, which would balance our earlier focus on the targeting of conservatives (particularly Trump supporters). One such article is Robinson Myer's "The Rise of Progressive 'Fake News'" (Myer 2017); I did indeed mention it in class after I became aware of it. When I teach the course again I will probably assign a more recent article by McKay Coppins called "How the Left Lost Its Mind" (Coppins 2017) on the susceptibility of some leftists to fake news and conspiracy theories. Indeed, many examples of fake news targeting the left are about Donald Trump himself! The second *Atlantic* article includes a few of them, and the factchecking website snopes.com, among others, provides such examples on a regular basis, summarized to some degree by Dan MacGuill in "The Lies of Donald Trump's Critics, and How They Shape His Many Personas" (MacGuill 2017).

None of this requires stating or implying that right-wingers and left-wingers are equally susceptible to fake news and conspiracy theories: that would quite likely be a false equivalence. But it does

assure conservative students that they are not being singled out for disapproval or ridicule, and so reduces the risk of alienating them unnecessarily. It also reminds progressive students (or informs them) that their side of the political spectrum is hardly immune to the kinds of foolishness for which they often look down on conservatives. This is quite a useful reminder in a period of intense political polarization in the United States, a period in which political discussions and debate all too readily degenerate into ideological stereotyping, ill-grounded speculations about the motives of particular politicians, harsh *ad hominems,* straw man fallacies, and worse. (Facebook users will know that such debates are common occurrences on this immensely popular social-media site.

4. Conclusion

Critical-thinking instructors are very much in Donald Trump's debt for his stream of unwitting contributions to the teaching of their subject. But they should not allow it to lead them to use Trump-examples in seriously imbalanced ways.

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