Pathologizing Healthy Opinions

At some point you've probably heard an opinion of yours about morality, religion, or politics summarily dismissed with a reaction like: "You only say that because you're a _____!" or "That's just an excuse for _____."

Frustrating, isn't it? If you've supplied reasons for your position, they don't tackle those reasons. They just assume you're wrong and purport to explain, usually in terms unflattering to you, why you make your error.

What many might not realize, however, is that this action is a fallacy known as Bulverism. The name was coined by C.S. Lewis in an essay included in his widely read collection *God in the Dock*. In essence, Bulverism is a toxic hybrid of two better-known fallacies: *petitio principii* (begging the question) and *ad hominem* (impugning one's opponent's character without addressing his argument).

For reasons that should alarm critical thinkers, Bulverism has become so common – especially in politics – as to approach the status of a rhetorical norm. I shall explain that shortly, but first a caveat.

Not every criticism that sounds like Bulverism is a fallacy. For instance, if somebody denies a basic principle of logic, such as that of non-contradiction, it's usually pointless to address her argument because she's already abandoned an indispensable "first principle" of argument. It makes sense in that case to seek an explanation for her position other than the one she gives, if she bothers giving one. Or if somebody denies a well-established fact, e.g. that the shape of the Earth is roughly spherical, it's often useless to address his argument and probably more useful to seek to understand his

psychology.

But Bulverizing people about their positions on controversial matters has become all too common these days. You know the sort of thing I mean:

"Conservatives only want to rein in 'entitlements' because they hate the poor and the sick!"

"You only believe in God because you can't face life without an imaginary Big Daddy to turn to!"

In essence, what's always been an occasional rhetorical trope now seems to dominate public discourse.

That, I submit, is ultimately because Bulverism has become philosophically respectable. The permission real thinkers have given themselves to Bulverize has trickled down to the masses.

This trend seems to have started with Karl Marx. He defined religion and morality in general, and especially political positions other than his own, as "mystifications," or rationalizations of the self-interest of whatever the economically dominant "ruling class" happens to be.

A few generations later, Sigmund Freud purported to explain nearly all human behavior as expressions or distortions of two "drives": the sex drive and the death drive.

More recently, this kind of thinking is represented in the thought of Jacques Lacan, whose work is widely studied in humanities departments. The Frankfurt School that arose toward the end of Freud's life produced a powerful tool, "critical theory," that proposed to examine all human phenomena in terms of power relations. Its default tendency was to ask: "Who has the power here, and how do they benefit?"

In the late 20th century, such thinkers as Jacques Derrida

(and, more broadly, those called “post-modernists”) extended that tendency of critical theory to consideration of the very structure of language itself.

Today we confront the phenomenon of “cultural Marxism.” Often defined too broadly, it simply means the extension of Marx’s critique of false consciousness from economics alone to race, gender, and even sexual orientation.

Cultural Marxism finds its characteristic expression in leftist “identity politics.” (There’s a sense in which all politics is identity politics, but I made the necessary distinction here.) The standard trope of leftist identity politics is the weaponization of victimhood. Thus, if you belong to a class of people recognized as historically oppressed—such as women, people of color, or homosexuals—then you are assumed to have a claim on people who do not belong to such a class—especially white Christian men. The motives of the “oppressed” are assumed to be good; the motives of the non-oppressed are assumed to be bad. People of even moderately conservative views are thus seen as fair game to be Bulverized. And they are, regularly. Thus: “You only say that because you’re (white) (Christian) (a man) (cis)!”

The only solution to widespread Bulverism is widespread rejection of the sort of philosophizing that makes it respectable. We might have to wait a long time for that. In the meantime, I heartily recommend a read of Lewis’ essay.

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