**Antinomy Syndrome and Paralysis in Political Discourse**

There is a disease affecting many of us that I call “antinomy syndrome”, which is the disposition to assume, without evidence and in the absence of any probable cause, that any proven claim, especially regarding a matter of contention, is stalemated by an equally compelling proof of its counterclaim, whether or not such proof is enunciated, leaving a void in which unreasoned subjective preference is empowered to be sole motivator of our conscience. This cognitive malady is behind the worst choices we make or even can ever make, since it unleashes the worst of our demons to run rampant over the socio-political landscape.

The impetus for this disease, or “syndrome”, is the denial of the existence of sound argument outside of purely axiomatic endeavors such as logic and mathematics. A sound argument is a valid argument all of whose premises are true; a valid argument is one whose conclusion cannot fail to be true provides that all its premises are true. By logical necessity, a sound argument proves its conclusion, as the study of logic itself, which rarely is directly assaulted by those affected by this syndrome, clearly shows. Somehow, many people, without denying the validity of the study of logic itself, somehow find it quite easy to deny the main finding of logic: that sound arguments prove their conclusions.

In logic, an antinomy *simpliciter* would be a case of two sound arguments that actually prove mutually contradictory conclusions. No one has ever discovered such a thing, and most of us are convinced of its logical impossibility on the grounds of the law of non-contradiction, that necessarily, two contradictory claims can be neither both true nor both false.

There are, of course, weaker senses of ‘antinomy’. For example, Kant seemed to accept the possibility of epistemic antinomies, which are cases in which human reason, because of its inherent limitations, is stuck with some pairs of apparent antinomies unresolvable by us. Thus, we seemingly can prove both that God exists and does not exist, both the principle of universal causation and rational freedom, both the analyzability and unanalyzability of nature down to simple parts, and both the infiniteness and finiteness of time and space. Kant takes some time to present and discuss what he considers to be compelling arguments for each side of these four pairs of claims.

Less controversial than Kant’s application of the terms are the general acceptance of apparent antinomies that perhaps we can resolve, but only in the form of a perennial, ongoing process. It is not altogether clear that this is not, in fact, what Kant really intended.

The wiggle room for the ill-conceived, sleight-of-hand black magic set in motion in the minds of those afflicted by antinomy syndrome may come from at least two considerations: first, that although a sound argument proves its conclusion, in matters of controversy the proving process is not finite in duration but perennial, ever ongoing. The second is the confusion we make between dialectic argument and rhetorical argument, the former being truth-oriented and cooperative while latter is convenience-oriented and competitive. Rhetoric, in short, is about winning arguments, and for that reason is indifferent to truth, and so infinitely malleable in any direction the convenience of the moment requires. It is therefore, unlike dialectic argument, not productive, because by definition no reliable progress toward knowledge can be made by it practice; and it is also, unlike dialectic argument, non-progressive, since its aim is always short term and palpable: manipulation of the audience for a palpable short-term gain, and as such it creates no solid plateaus upon which subsequent argument can rely as a basis for further progress.

I could cite many examples of actual examples in speech of this syndrome, but perhaps it is simpler to mention the most commonly repeated tropes:

1. The Bible can be used to prove anything you want it to prove.
2. Sure, Fox News has a stated purpose of dedication to conservative bias, but much of the rest of the media has an equally skewed bias, stated or not, in the opposite direction.
3. The pundits are saying the economy is doing great, but anyone can take those same numbers they cite to prove the economy is failing.
4. The white supremacists of Charlottesville Virginia (August 12, 2017), but many of the Black protesters there and elsewhere are equally bad.
5. The Republican party may be anti-democratic, but the Democratic Party at heart is equally so.
6. Democracy itself is a wash, a neutral value, since it can just as easily produce bad results as good results, no different from authoritarianism.
7. Putin may be a vicious killer, but so is every world leader, including Joe Biden.

What all these have in common is that in the mind of one smitten by them and in the guise of a false air of sophistication, they have the effect of cancelling out the force of well-evidenced claims on the conscience, leaving only raw subjective preference in position to effect a choice, enabling choices to be made that otherwise could not be conscientiously made. All this, moreover, is accomplished without any attempt to present any evidence for the counterclaim, allowing its stalemating force to be bought with the help of the unsecured loan of an unguarded assumption.

Some of the false air of sophistication of this kind of self-deception comes by tacit acknowledgement that dialectic argument is an infinite process, and thus the book is never closed on any proof. So maybe, instead of denouncing war, we should give war one more chance; instead of denouncing dictatorship, we should give it another try. As the character Sportin’Life sings in Porgy and Bess:

It ain’t necessarily so! It ain’t necessarily so! The things that you’re liable to read in the

Bible, it ain’t necessarily so!

To be sure, Sportin’ Life’s message falls short of the more radically contrarian theologian, who might have sung instead:

The doctrines you’re liable to read in the Bible might be read in the opposite way.

Once this seed is planted, it is hard to go back to serious discussion of what this or that scripture really is trying to say. If it could just as easily be read in the opposite way, then the Bible couldn’t really mean anything at all.

We know that when it comes to the rhetoric of politicians, and sometimes even of marketers and advertisers, whose main concern is to manipulate you to do something in their favor, they may twist the evidence wildly to make it fit even opposite narratives. But this does not and cannot happen in dialectic argument, which is founded on the framing of valid arguments whose premises must be defensible as true, and the defense of which is not an arbitrary matter but based on evidence intended not to manipulate but to genuinely persuade.

Those yet afflicted with “antinomy syndrome” may shoot back – as they have to me on many occasions – that this “persuasion” we speak of here is itself just a euphemism for more manipulation, and that all we ever do therefore when arguing is manipulate. But is this not just a repeat of the same black magic of death-by-stalemate, in which dialectic argument, the arch-enemy of manipulative rhetoric, is itself reduced to equation with its opposite, so that truth-orientation in argument gets derided as a ruse, perhaps even a more vicious ruse than garden-variety manipulation in its pious pretense of holy transcendence?

In fact, the difference between manipulation and persuasion is obvious: manipulation demands a tangible good in the short term, whereas persuasion is oriented toward the indefinite long-term pursuit of an intangible good: truth itself.