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Hyperbole argumentative comme sophisme

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Article abstract

In typical critical thinking texts, hyperbole is presented as being largely “argumentationally innocent” - its primary role being to express emotion of to bring desired emphases to a particular point. This discounts its prevalent use in argumentation, as it is also used as a device to persuade, and in particular, to persuade an interlocutor that they should take or support a course of action. When it is so used, the exaggerated claims would, if true, provide greater support for the conclusion. But since the claims are not fully accurate, this “greater support” is only illusory. Its use is thus deceptive and counts as fallacious reasoning.

Argumentative Hyperbole as Fallacy

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Abstract: In typical critical thinking texts, hyperbole is presented as being largely “argumentationally innocent”—its primary role being to express emotion or to bring desired emphases to a particular point. This discounts its prevalent use in argumentation, for it is also used as a device to persuade, and in particular, to persuade an interlocutor that they should take or support a course of action. When it is so used, the exaggerated claims would, if true, provide greater support for the conclusion. But since the claims are not fully accurate, this “greater support” is only illusory. Its use is thus deceptive and counts as fallacious reasoning.

Résumé: Dans les manuels de pensée critique typiques, l'hyperbole est présentée comme étant en grande partie "innocente sur le plan argumentatif" - son rôle principal étant d'exprimer une émotion ou d'apporter un accent souhaité à un point particulier. Cela écarte son utilisation courante dans l'argumentation, car l'hyperbole est également utilisée comme un moyen de persuader, et en particulier, de persuader un interlocuteur qu'il devrait adopter ou soutenir une ligne de conduite. Lorsqu'elle est ainsi utilisée, les affirmations exagérées, si elles sont vraies, fourniraient un plus grand soutien à la conclusion. Mais comme les affirmations ne sont pas tout à fait exactes, ce "plus grand soutien" n'est qu'illusoire. Son utilisation est donc trompeuse et considérée comme un raisonnement fallacieux.

Keywords: argumentation, exaggeration, fallacy, hyperbole, informal logic, reasoning, rhetoric

1. Introduction

Hyperbole, or exaggeration, is a common rhetorical device. We all use it to highlight the things on which we want the listener to

focus—the exaggeration is “for effect,” or to express emotion. And, “rhetorical device” is how it is most commonly characterized in popular critical thinking and argumentation textbooks, if it is discussed at all. Characterizing hyperbole this way, or ignoring it altogether, discounts its role in argumentation. The journal literature is little better, where hyperbole in argumentation has again been largely ignored. But, it is commonly used not just to focus attention, but also to persuade. Here I will argue that this use amounts to fallacious reasoning, and that if “good argument” requires having reasons that should guide the interlocutor towards believing that a conclusion is true, hyperbole has no place.

Before getting into it, hyperbole’s fallacious nature in argumentation, I first need to say more generally what it is. “Exaggeration” is a good enough starting point. An example from A. Francisca Snoeck Henkemans (2013) is someone saying, “I’m starving” as a way of indicating the significance of one’s hunger. Such utterances are, she claims, understood not to be taken literally. In fact, this is so commonly recognized in the case of “starving” that it barely counts as exaggeration, and rather is something closer to a dead metaphor. But what’s important here is that the exaggeration is, on this view, obvious to all. There really isn’t an argument at issue—it’s just a way of emphasizing how hungry someone is (very hungry). Robert Fogelin (1988) seems to agree, when he suggests that hyperbole is used “with the intention of having it corrected away from the extreme, but still to something strong.” Another way to put it might be to say that there is some truth to the hyperbolic claim, if not the full truth.

However, as above, the role of hyperbole in argument is largely ignored in common critical thinking texts,¹ and even where it is discussed, it gets short shrift. Notable for mentioning it at all are Fogelin and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s *Understanding argu-*

¹ Upon reviewing my bookshelf, its mention is missing entirely from the index in the 4th ed. of Trudy Govier’s *A practical study of argument*, Bassham et al.’s *Critical thinking*, the 4th ed. of Lewis Vaughn’s *The power critical thinking*, the 2nd ed. of David Conway and Ronald Munson’s *Elements of reasoning*, Royce Jones’ *Foundations of critical thinking*, Douglas Walton’s *Informal logic*, Stan Baronett’s *Logic*, the 3rd ed. of Stephen Layman’s *Power of logic*, and Peter Facione and Carol Gittens’ *Think critically*.

ments (FS) and Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker's *Critical thinking* (MP)—hyperbole gets a page in the former, two in the latter. In (FS), its mention is limited to a discussion of linguistic exceptions to Paul Grice's rule of quality—that we should not say what we believe to be false, and it is thus lumped in with sarcasm and metaphor. (MP) seems to stand alone in recognizing the potential for fallacy. They classify hyperbole as a “slanter” or rhetorical device that can be used to alter our beliefs and attitudes and can “add a persuasive edge to a claim that it doesn't deserve” (1998, p. 112).

Again, the journal literature is not much better. Hyperbole gets wide discussion in poetry and literature journals, again identifying its emotive force, but next to nothing in logic or argumentation publications, particularly in regard to fallacies. Two exceptions² are the aforementioned Snoeck Henekemans piece, and another by Zackery Beare and Markus Meade, “The most important project of our time! Hyperbole as a discourse feature of student writing.”

In “The use of hyperbole in the argumentation stage,” Snoeck Henkemans recognizes that hyperbole can be used to make one's argument “more forceful,” “a strong case” or “more difficult to attack” (2019, p.5). However, though she admits that hyperbolic claims so used are “strictly speaking not true, or not warranted” (2019, p. 7), she denies that this makes them fallacious. Her reason is that use of hyperbole should not be taken as a literal speech act.³ However, she admits that hyperbole may be used in the service of other fallacies, such *ad populum*, when one exaggerates the degree to which a claim is widely believed.

Beare and Meade also recognize the lack of literature on hyperbole in argumentation, though there are “veiled references to the rhetorical and moral dangers of hyperbole” (2015, p. 67). They claim that, anecdotally, hyperbole is sometimes seen as both sloppy speaking and sloppy thinking, and thus belongs, in the mind of

² There are a couple of other mentions in the literature, but they usually sing hyperbole's praises, as with “Recovering hyperbole,” by Joshua Ritter, or Rita Bydar-Szabo and Mario Brydar's “Mummy, I love you like a thousand lady-birds.”

³ A remarkable claim, that the hyperbole is simultaneously not to be taken literally, but also strengthens the argument.

some, in the group of fallacies generally. But they are sympathetic to the power that hyperbole can have in leading to rhetorical success.

My goal here is to at least partially dispense with the veil, and expose those dangers. With hyperbole, the exaggeration is not merely a way for the arguer to emphasize the importance of a thought or idea. Rather, it plays a key evidential role in attempting to convince the interlocutor of a further claim, and crucially, that were the exaggeration not taken as true (or close enough to true), the argument would be viewed by all parties as less convincing. This is the source of the fallacy, since hyperbolic descriptions are false (by definition even). They attempt to deceive the interlocutor by using a falsehood as a premise,⁴ and when done intentionally, they count as little more than lying.

2. Types of argumentative hyperbole

But before we get to the details of that claim, what are some kinds of hyperbolic use in argumentation? There are actually several types. The following is undoubtedly an incomplete list:⁵

Brute Hyperbole: This is just a straightforward exaggeration. An example might be something like: “Climate change is an existential crisis for humanity.” Or, “This is the greatest economy ever.” Though climate change may well result in threats to many lives, humanity will not cease to exist because of climate change. While the U.S. economy was good (pre-pandemic), it was hardly the greatest ever, by most metrics.

Hyperbolic Metaphor: This is, as it sounds, exaggeration by comparison. “The U.S. is facing an invasion of immigrants at the southern border.” Of course, though there are thousands of foreign-born people entering the U.S. every year, this doesn’t qualify as an invasion in any meaningful sense. Another famous example is “Godwin’s Law”—the idea that eventually in social media

⁴ When looking at some of the examples, we will see that it is a bit more complicated than this, but it’s a good enough jumping off point.

⁵ Though I make no claim to originality, except where noted, the nomenclature is my own.

discussions, someone compares someone or something to Hitler, Nazism, or fascism. Along these lines, Rush Limbaugh, a conservative radio talk show host, would call women advocating for strong workplace protections, “feminazis.” To be sure, many feminists have advocated for stronger government oversight of the workplace, but that is hardly fascistic.

Disjunctive Hyperbole: The exaggeration involved here deals with the ordering of a disjunction. For instance, if an accident, terrorist act, or military incident involved casualties, they are often reported numerically as to indicate the level of severity. But there is the option of the ordering of the disjuncts. Very commonly, casualties are reported as “killed or injured” as opposed to the reverse, even when the injured greatly outnumber the killed. The idea is for the interlocutor to associate the preceding number with those killed, making the situation appear worse than it is.

Causal Hyperbole (“cause shopping”): Here, the hyperbole is an exaggeration of the influence of one cause of an event when that cause is one of many, or is more distal than other proximate causes. This is sometimes called the *fallacy of the single cause*, or the *reductive fallacy*.⁶ To take a topical case, many politicians in the U.S. have been blamed for deaths due to a slow or inappropriate response to the COVID-19 outbreak—some critics going so far as saying that these politicians have “blood on their hands.” It is obviously appropriate to assign blame for failed policies, but there are many other causal factors that contributed to the deaths, some well beyond the reach of politicians.

Hyperbolic Omission (or “hyperbolic paltering”): This case is similar to cause shopping, in that relevant information is left out so that interlocutors will lack the context to properly evaluate the issue at hand, instead concluding that things are much worse or better than they are. Examples abound, but again include hot-button issues like immigration and climate change. For instance, a climate-change model might have a range of possible outcomes,

⁶ See the “*Logically Fallacious*” blog.

but only the most extreme is presented, as though that were the *de facto* prediction. Or, people might point out that illegal immigrants commit a certain number of crimes, while leaving out that the number is much smaller if immigration crimes are not counted, or that citizen crime rates are higher still.

Inductive Hyperbole:⁷ This involves exaggeration in inductive sampling in a way that makes a claim appear to have a high degree of inductive support, when it really doesn't. This is an example due to Bruce Thompson:⁸ "These findings that modest alcohol consumption can be beneficial for the heart completely upset all our previous assumptions about the health effects of drinking." Here, one study is taken to overcome all the evidential value in previous studies.

3. Argumentative hyperbole as fallacy

There are others,⁹ no doubt, but these are common enough to make the point I wish to address. As mentioned above, many instances of these, and perhaps most, are used fallaciously. By "fallacious" I mean that simply that type of argument wherein it appears as though good reason is given in order to convince someone that some other claim is true, when those reasons should not convince. The reasoning is deceptive. There are, to be sure, several competing accounts of fallacy that I want to take no stand on here.¹⁰ Whether the error I wish to point out is "fallacy worthy" in some fundamental sense is not my main concern. The more important goal is to identify that the use of the kind of hyperbole highlighted

⁷ There may be a broader category here, perhaps *epistemic hyperbole* that includes exaggerating the epistemic value of a claim or source. If so, then fallacies like *hasty generalization*, *appeal to inappropriate authority* and other inductive fallacies belong in such a category. Snoeck Henkemans also seems to have identified another, wherein one argues "Everyone knows that ...," in support of some claim. This surely occurs frequently as a way of exaggerating the extent of agreement.

⁸ Thompson's online blog is the only place I've come across the label "inductive hyperbole."

⁹ For instance, a reviewer noticed that there is a similarity between *straw man* and argumentative hyperbole, in that certain features of an argument are exaggerated in order to encourage its dismissal.

¹⁰ See Hans Hansen's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry, "Fallacies."

should not convince, even though it is often intended to convince and appears reasonable. Since it shouldn't convince, those arguing in good faith should not use it, intentionally or otherwise.

One reason such argumentation seems to be convincing is that there is a kernel of truth to the offending premise. Somewhere on the scale of the exaggeration lies the truth. The premise has the appearance of truth. This is a similarity that fallacious hyperbole has with *false dilemma*. With *false dilemma*, a premise is presented with an air of a necessary truth—“You must be for us or against us,” etc.—while ruling out other plausible possibilities, and the reasoning (validly) proceeds from there. It is not that the premise is merely false; a “fallacy of the false premise” is not especially interesting. It is the seeming plausibility of the false premise that makes it especially deceptive. So it is with hyperbolic premises. This is also why Fogelin's comment above is inapt. If the deception is “corrected away,” it loses some of its power to persuade.¹¹

A description that was fully accurate would (typically) not be hyperbolic. What is the point, then, of the exaggeration? As mentioned earlier, in often-used critical thinking textbooks, hyperbole is sometimes presented as a rhetorical device—something merely to add emphasis or to convey emotion (a “slanter”). With hyperbole in argumentation, the exaggeration is used as a way of conveying the seriousness of a particular issue, the goal being that an interlocutor, upon being convinced of the seriousness, will be moved to agree, and further, to action. However, this is problematic, because the degree to which the issue is serious (and thus, should be taken as serious, and further acted upon) is being misstated: it is being exaggerated.

None of this is to deny that hyperbole in argumentation also plays an “emotive force” role. Consider a critique, from Victoria Rodriquez-Roldan, of anti-trans “bathroom laws” and a study on their effect on the mental health of trans people:

There are real lives at stake that are being harmed, that are suffering as a result of this ... At the end of the day, these bills are killing people. That study is simply a confirmation of the fact that this

¹¹ See Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter's “There's millions of them,” for an additional defense of the “correct away” view.

persecution, trying to legislate the trans community out of existence, is killing people. (Kutner 2016)

There may well be some truth in the claims here, as the study in question raised the possibility that suicidal thoughts were higher among trans college students when they had anxiety about finding a harassment-free bathroom. However, the legislation obviously isn't killing people, and it isn't legislating a community out of existence (as if such a thing were even possible). There is indeed a good deal of emotive force present here (some might say, righteous rage), but there is more going on. There is an attempt to convince people that the bathroom laws should be opposed. This is not to say that that conclusion is false. It seems very plausible that such laws should be rejected on civil rights grounds. Fallacious reasoning can lead to the accepting of true conclusions—but for bad reasons.¹²

Why is the hyperbole necessary? It is used because of a fear that, if the seriousness of the issue were properly stated, people that need to be convinced won't be convinced, and thus won't take the needed action.¹³ It is, again, at bottom, a deception in order to get people to agree. To formalize things only slightly, the form will often go roughly as follows:

Premise: *X* is very serious (exaggeration).

Premise: Anything that serious should be acted upon.

Conclusion: *X* should be acted upon.

“Acted upon” should be read broadly here to include things like praise and criticism, and also secondary actions such as “You should vote for me as a result.” Additionally, though the “very

¹² To be sure, I am endorsing evidentialism—the idea that, if our beliefs and actions are to be governed by reasons, we should believe and act only with good reason. I'm further endorsing the idea that arguers should be evidentialists with regard to the arguments they use.

¹³ Remarkably, Beare and Meade seem to admit that hyperbole can play this role when they say it, “draws greater attention to the situation and may express the urgency of a given situation more so than an accurate statement.” Yet, they do not see this as problematic.

serious” typically indicates something negative, the hyperbole may be towards the positive. “This is the best economy ever,” as a reason to support a particular political candidate, is being used to convince voters of the (serious) risk of losing such an economy, were another candidate to take office. One might also notice that this form has a variant, wherein the exaggerated premise understates the seriousness of an issue, in order to defend the claim that action does not need to be taken. Consider the description of COVID-19 as “the Wuhan flu,” as a way of downplaying the need for economic shutdown.¹⁴

4. Examples

Let’s look at an example of *hyperbolic metaphor* alluded to earlier. The following was said by U.S. President Donald Trump in defense of his use of emergency powers in order to secure funding for a border wall:

We're going to confront the national security crisis on our southern border ... We have an invasion of drugs, invasion of gangs, invasion of people, and it's unacceptable ... Everyone knows that walls work. (BBC 2019)

This (in this context) can be taken as an argument along the lines of the following:

- (1) We're being invaded by immigrants from Central America, and being invaded is a threat to our way of life.
- (2) Walls work in protecting us from invasions.
- (3) Therefore, we are justified in building a wall, and I am justified in using my emergency powers to build it.

¹⁴ More clearly stated, though X is serious to degree n , the arguer presents X as serious to degree $(n+m)$ —which is the exaggeration. Then, since anything serious to degree $(n+m)$ should be acted upon, X should be acted upon. In the case of understatement, the ‘+’ would be replaced by a ‘-’, the premise that anything that unserious needn’t be acted upon (in whatever manner under discussion), and the conclusion that no action need be taken. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this characterization.

Of course, being invaded is indeed a threat to people's way of life, and I suppose there are some features that this immigration has in common with an invasion: there are people entering from another country, uninvited. But the immigrants coming across the southern border don't constitute anything like the threat posed by an invasion. This is not to say that unrestricted immigration is unproblematic or that there aren't real worries from an influx of drugs, or even that a border wall is a bad idea. But the description is hyperbolic. It is also deceptive in that something like the use of emergency powers requires an emergency. An invasion would count as one. The exaggerated state of affairs, the "invasion," plays a key role in convincing an interlocutor that a wall is needed and that emergency powers are a justifiable means to bringing this about. This then is a fallacy that turns on the use of hyperbole—a case of *metaphorical hyperbole*.

One might wonder if the "invasion" metaphor is really doing any work. Don't people know, deep down, that whatever is happening at the southern border of the U.S. doesn't really count as an invasion—that people can translate "invasion" as, "an important problem that has certain features similar to, though not as drastic as, an invasion"? Or, so the argument might go. I don't think this is a plausible rendering. If the first premise is read as having the more watered-down meaning, then the use of emergency powers wouldn't be warranted. Emergencies require emergency action. This is exactly why the hyperbolic description is used, because the weaker claim, even if "strong," isn't strong enough to make the conclusion plausible. This is why it simply cannot be correct that in hyperbole, the exaggeration is expected to be simply "corrected away" by the interlocutor.

Another example alluded to above concerns global climate change. In 2019, U.S. Representative Sean Casten, in discussing Elizabeth Warren's support for climate change legislation said the following:

The climate crisis presents an existential threat to all life on Earth. We need bold, comprehensive climate action. Public corporations must take responsibility for the large financial risks posed by the impacts of climate change, while embracing the economic opportunity of being global leaders in developing a clean energy econ-

omy. Our bill utilizes market mechanisms to incentivize climate action by ensuring that corporations disclose the risks posed by climate action to the benefit of their shareholders and the public. I'm proud to introduce this bold climate action bill in the House and am thankful for Senator Warren's partnership on this issue in the Senate. (Warren Press Release 2019)

This sentiment is hardly unique to Representative Casten. When he was a U.S. presidential candidate, Joe Biden, said similar things, including using the phrase, “existential threat” (2021). Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, the most public defender of the environmentally friendly New Green Deal, has spoken of “the end of the world” as a consequence of complacency (@People4Bernie 2019). One will note that these are cases of the *brute hyperbole*, and the reconstructed argument might look like the following:

- (1) All life on earth may end, if drastic actions to mitigate continued environmental degradation due to climate change are not undertaken immediately.
- (2) We cannot allow the end of all life on earth.
- (3) Therefore, dramatic and immediate action should be undertaken to forestall the effects of climate change.

To be sure, climate change is a real worry, and steps should be taken to mitigate its effects. However, there is no meaningful sense of “a threat to all life on this planet” where this comes out as true; as before, climate change is a serious issue, but not an existential threat all life. Why say it then? To motivate the hearer to action. “It’s THAT serious,” and if it’s that serious, we need to pass things like New Green Deal legislation. But though serious, it isn’t THAT serious. The worry is that if people don’t see climate change as apocalyptic, they won’t support the needed legislation. So, they must be deceived into thinking things are more dire than they are. Again, the use of the hyperbole is both inherently deceptive and crucial to the argument, and is thus fallacious.

As before, one might object that this is being unfair to Casten (and Warren, etc.) After all, who could really believe that life on Earth will cease or that the world will end if we don’t take the needed steps right now? Maybe they’re not really speaking seri-

ously, and thus aren't deceiving anyone. Ocasio-Cortez in fact said as much when responding to criticism, claiming that her comments about the world ending were "dark humor," and "sarcasm" (@AOC 2019). There's little doubt that she realized that she was engaging in hyperbole. But there are other things she could have said, like "Climate change will fundamentally change the way a lot of people live, in negative ways." And that would be true, even largely uncontroversial. But that interpretation does not reflect the urgency that she wants the interlocutor to feel: to be moved to support policies that will undoubtedly cause mass economic turmoil. But the goal is not just that the interlocutor *feel* a certain way, but that they come to *believe* something. If the world is on the line, then the most drastic of policies is justifiable. The hyperbole here is not just window dressing, it is a crucial part of the argument.

A somewhat different type of case is that of *hyperbolic causation*. Recall that the idea here is that one cause out of many is presented as the sole or chief cause—its role being exaggerated—in order to make a further claim, perhaps about degrees of responsibility. An interesting feature is that the claim in question may indeed be true, in that a genuine cause is identified. But the lack of appropriate context surrounding the claim is where the deception lies. To take an example, the following is an obituary for an Arizona resident who died from COVID-19:

Mark, like so many others, should not have died from COVID-19. His death is due to the carelessness of the politicians who continue to jeopardize the health of brown bodies through a clear lack of leadership, refusal to acknowledge the severity of this crisis, and inability and unwillingness to give clear and decisive direction on how to minimize risk. (Wilder and Shannon 2020)

This might be reconstructed as something like the following:

- (1) If our politicians would have acted as they should have, Mark would not have died.
- (2) Therefore, our politicians bear primary responsibility for Mark's death.

There is almost certainly a further conclusion to be drawn here, along the lines of “Politicians so at fault should be replaced by those more competent and less racist.” This is a tragic case, and the claim of a failure of leadership playing a causal role in the number of virus deaths is entirely plausible. However, to say that the particular death “is due to” the failures of politicians is to leave out a host of other causal factors that are almost certainly more proximate (including, perhaps uncomfortably, Mark’s own) such as mask wearing, social distancing, etc., which would play a crucial role. Part of the difficulty here may be a confusion between necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions. Perhaps, if Arizona politicians had taken the relevant steps, Mark would not have died. But that will be true for a number of other actions. The failure of the politicians is a cause of Mark’s death, but not *the* cause, or the most proximate cause.¹⁵

Let’s look at a case of *disjunctive hyperbole*. Here is an example from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center highlighting the extent of sexual assault in the US, and the need to take steps to reduce its frequency:

The self-reported incidence of rape or sexual assault more than doubled from 1.4 victimizations per 1,000 persons age 12 or older in 2017 to 2.7 in 2018. Based on data from the survey, it is estimated that 734,630 people were raped (threatened, attempted, or completed) in the United States in 2018. (NSVRC 2019)

The *disjunctive hyperbole* actually occurs twice here, the second time via parenthesis. Obviously, the U.S. has a sexual assault problem, especially on college campuses, and it is both right and important to point this out in order to make the systemic changes necessary to reduce the prevalence. However, this reading puts the emphasis on “rape” as opposed to “sexual assault.” The latter is

¹⁵ It might also be that the deception trades on violation of Gricean conversational norms. If I’m asked, “Do you have any pets?” And I respond with, “I have a dog.” It is reasonable to conclude from my reply that I have *only* a dog as a pet. For, if I had a cat and a dog, I should have answered that. Similarly, if I say that *X* caused *Y*, it is reasonable to suppose that I am claiming that *X* is the sole, or chief cause of *Y*. If so, then this might well count as a case of omission or paltering.

the more general category that surely includes rape, but it also includes much else that is not, like an unwanted kiss or consensual sex that is the result of pressure. It is also much more common and constitutes the bulk of cases mentioned in the statistics.¹⁶ And threatened rape, traumatic though it is, will likely not be as traumatic as a rape itself. What is again interesting here is that the disjunctions are true, but they are misleading, and encourage the reader into the error that rape is more common than it is. The fallaciousness here is all the more striking in that it is seemingly unnecessary to make the point the authors want to make (namely that steps need to be taken to reduce sexual assault). Simply switching the order of the disjunction to say, “the incidence of sexual assault or rape ...,” or putting ‘raped’ after the parenthetical modifiers avoids the unnecessary exaggeration. As with *causal hyperbole*, the claim at issue (the disjunction) is technically true, but still used fallaciously.¹⁷

To re-emphasize an earlier point, when I say that the reader is encouraged into error, I do not mean that they are (necessarily) being directed to believe a conclusion that is false. Rather, I mean simply that they are being directed to believe a conclusion for which they have not been provided good reason.

As above, *inductive hyperbole* involves looking at one study and giving the results in the study outsized dispositive authority in settling a matter in question. This technique is commonly used in conspiracy theories, and trades on the fact that science proceeds in fits and starts, instead of unanimous agreement from the outset. One current such example concerns the supposed risk of wearing masks to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. For those who oppose a government-imposed mask-wearing requirement, one touchstone is the idea that wearing a mask can lead to “carbon dioxide poisoning,” by causing the wearer to re-inhale expelled carbon dioxide. There are, in fact, a couple of studies that suggest

¹⁶ According to the FBI (2018), there are approximately 140,000 forcible rapes in the U.S. annually.

¹⁷ Perhaps Fogelin and Sinnott-Armstrong’s “false suggestion,” is an apt description of this phenomenon. The claim at issue is, strictly speaking, true, but conversationally implies a falsehood.

there may be such an effect.¹⁸ However, the medical consensus is that a property fitting mask poses no such risk, except perhaps to those with significant breathing problems. Certainly, the risks of becoming infected with COVID-19 far outweigh those of carbon dioxide poisoning, both in terms of sickness and mortality. Waving a couple of studies around as though that is the end of the matter exaggerates their importance, in a way that can lead interlocutors to error. As with some earlier types of hyperbole, it is not that the premises are false, but that the hearer is encouraged to believe that *p* on less than satisfactory evidence.¹⁹ No doubt, our tendency towards confirmation bias encourages the committing of this fallacy.

In a similar vein, *hyperbolic omission* deals with premises that are true, but over-values the epistemic value of those premises by omitting the fuller picture. Such a fallacy involves telling the truth, but perhaps not the whole truth, in a way that encourages the target audience into exaggerating the seriousness of an issue.²⁰ Here is an example, alluded to earlier, from the Heritage Foundation (a conservative think tank) on the threat immigrants pose to American citizens:

Non-citizens constitute only about 7 percent of the U.S. population. Yet the latest data from the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics reveals that non-citizens accounted for nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of all federal arrests in 2018. Just two decades earlier, only 37 percent of all federal arrests were non-citizens. (von Spakovsky 2019)

The key stat in here is true. It is also true that more than 90% of these arrests were for their immigration violation. Of course, that illegal immigrants to the U.S. have violated U.S. immigration law isn’t much in dispute. Most immigrant advocates advocate for changing the law in order to allow for normalization of these

¹⁸ Smith et al. 2019. There are a handful of other, similar studies.

¹⁹ It might be noticed that inductive hyperbole does not map as well onto the general formalization discussed earlier, as it not the seriousness of the issue that’s exaggerated, but the value of one bit of evidence over others.

²⁰ The idea of deceiving by telling the truth has been called “paltering.” See Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Norton, and Sweitzer (2016). See Powell, Bian, and Markman (2020) for examples of unintentional deception by paltering.

immigrants or for more expansive immigration policies. When people express concern about immigrants and crime, they aren't worried, primarily, about their immigration crime, but about things like violent crime—things that might make their neighborhoods “unsafe.” What this passage leaves out is that several studies have suggested the illegal immigrants commit less violent crime, per capita, than US citizens do. So, to reconstruct the argument:

- (1) Though only a small percentage of those living in the US, non-citizens commit the significant majority of federal crime.
- (2) This group of people constitute a threat to the citizenry.
- (3) Therefore, we should restrict the number of non-citizens residing in the country.

This was indeed the main conclusion of the article. The reasoning is deceptive, because the interlocutor is encouraged to infer something that they would not infer had the additional evidence been provided. It is important to emphasize though that “not telling the whole story” isn't sufficient to be a case of *hyperbolic omission*. That only occurs when the omission exaggerates something about how the claim is to be interpreted. The criminality of immigrants is exaggerated, to support the relevant conclusion. It is not unreasonable for the reasoner to think of non-immigration crimes, when introduced to the statistic about “federal crime.” Even worse, in this case, the author knew full well that it isn't the whole story, as later in the article, they admit that these crimes “aren't just immigration crimes.”

No doubt, readers can readily identify further cases. The common theme among them is that something is being exaggerated to encourage belief in a conclusion. That the exaggeration is unwarranted makes the reasoning fallacious.

5. Intent

I have so far danced a bit around an important consideration: whether the exaggeration must be purposeful. I have discussed the reader as “being encouraged” into error, as though it is the intention of the arguer to prevaricate. As above, Fogelin might reason-

bly say that in order for the exaggeration to count as hyperbole, the speaker must know that they are exaggerating, and be willing to “walk back” their claim upon being pressed on it. Perhaps exaggeration, like lying, requires knowing the truth. Immediate retraction is seemingly what Ocasio-Cortez did regarding her climate change remark. That suggests that the arguer is fully aware of the deception. Further, as mentioned earlier, perhaps to count as hyperbole, the exaggeration must be recognizable as such by competent language users. If so, then there really can be no fallacious reasoning based in deception, because there really is no deception at all.

I think this is incorrect, but if others wish to use the word ‘hyperbole’ more narrowly, I have no objection. I will instead opt for ‘overstatement.’ But, why think this other reading is incorrect? Regarding the latter claim, in several of the above-mentioned types of hyperbolic argumentation, the exaggeration is somewhat subtle, and thus it is implausible to think that what is exaggerated is known to the relevant parties. Surely in cases of omission, induction, and causation, it can’t be seriously argued that the targets of the reasoning know that certain information is missing, that there are other more relevant causes, that the induction rests on weak evidence, etc. The arguments *seem* convincing, because these ideas are not present. To be sure, often the one pressing the argument will know that they are exaggerating, and they will also know that they are being deceptive in arguing as they are, thus reflecting a lack in moral as well as epistemic virtue.

But, the most obvious reason to question the purposeful nature of the error is that the exaggeration appears, in at least some of the cases, to be sincerely believed by those doing the arguing. They would perhaps not be engaging *in* exaggeration, but would simply be using an exaggerated claim. It might well be that, upon reflection, they would retract that exaggerated claim, but that they would do so is not sufficient to conclude that they knew they were exaggerating (though they might say just that, to avoid some embarrassment). Sometimes, upon reflection, we revise our views. Why would the charge of climate change being “an existential threat” be so often repeated by so many people, if at least some of them didn’t believe it to be so? Conservatives in the U.S. continu-

ally speak of an invasion on the border. They certainly appear to be sincere. They are passionate defenders of their position. And if that is the case, then argumentative hyperbole does not require that the exaggeration be known to its users.

6. Conclusion

Hyperbole is sometimes described as a way of attaching emotion to an idea. To be sure, topics like climate change and immigration arouse strong passions, and it's no surprise that hyperbole finds its way into argument. My goal here was to correct the seemingly widespread characterization of hyperbole as largely "argumentationally innocent." It is clear that hyperbole figures prominently in argumentation, and not for the better, if the goal is to persuade based on good reason. Exaggerating the seriousness of a situation, in order to motivate interlocutors to act as the arguer thinks they should, is deceptive. Whether intentional or otherwise, such arguing should be eschewed by those arguing in good faith, as the argumentation is appropriately characterized as fallacious.

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