

Ben Shapiro: The Tongue of the Devil

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According to Jane Coaston, a New York Times journalist, “Ben Shapiro, the conservative writer, prides himself on speaking bold truths to liberal power. His shtick goes something like this: ‘Set up a speech in a progressive bastion, ideally a college campus full of coastal elites who have never left their bubble’” (Coaston, New York Times).

At one such campus gathering in Michigan, Shapiro was addressing his conservative view on transgender people when a college student confronted his thesis. After going back and forth and not finding common ground, Shapiro asked the student: “How old are you”? She responded, 22. Then he asked: “Why aren’t you 60? What is the problem with you identifying as 60”? The student was stupefied, stumbled and didn’t quite know how to respond. Then Shapiro stated, “You can’t magically change your gender. You can’t magically change your sex. You can’t magically change your age” (Barrien, The Daily Wire). There was a sudden burst of applause from the audience after he asked his pre-closing question, ‘Why aren’t you 60’. The student froze, trying to comprehend what was happening, and completely unable to produce an intelligible response. Some of the Youtube comments in Shapiro’s favor include: “He decimated her with this argument”, “The validity of his argumentation is on fleek”, “Legend has it, she now identifies as someone who got destroyed”, “The best arguments not only get the point across directly and ‘a little sarcastically’ but also coincide with science... well done Ben!” (Youtube.com).

Upon looking over the dozens of comments, it becomes clear that most people were convinced that Shapiro was using pure logic in his argumentation, the reasoning so flawless that it had yielded a fair victory. Closer examination of Shapiro's closing argument suggests that his reasoning is not entirely logical (what, for instance, does gender have to do with age?) Why, then, did people in the comment section think his argumentation was sound?

In his book called "*Plato's Account Of Falsehood*" which is based on a direct translation of the original text written by Plato published by Cambridge University Press, Paolo Crivelli defines a sophist in the following modes: "Precisely the point that the Sophist appears to have many skills provides the starting point for a new characterization, which turns upon the concept of appearing: the essence of the sophist is exactly his appearing to have skills which he, in fact, lacks" (13). Then he continues, "Analogously, a linguistic imitator (a sophist) produces linguistic imitations of true sentences and leads young people 'who stand even farther away from the truth of things' to think that his linguistic imitations are the true sentences they imitate, and that can produce all true sentences (i.e., that he is wise)" (23). He furthers his argument, "Every imitation imitates something. It is associated with a 'cognate deception' which it aims to induce people to fall for, i.e., the false belief whereby one takes the imitation to be what it imitates". Thereafter, the author states the following, "The concept of 'propositional falsehood' (whereby what may properly be called false is a sentence or a belief or a proposition) is here linked with that of 'ontological falsehood' (whereby anything may be properly called a false so-and-so if it is deceptively so-and-so). A false sentence deceives people into regarding it as a true sentence, it is a false true sentence" (24).

Douglas Walton, Distinguished Research Fellow of CRRAR (Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric) at the University of Windsor, in his book "*Why Fallacies Appear to Be Better Arguments than They Are*", explains the paradox in the following way: "A fallacious argument might look better than it really is because it has the basic structure of a parascheme, and therefore looks reasonable because it is a heuristic of the kind we use all the time in everyday reasoning" (18). Let's understand how Walton defines the term parascheme,

“The parascheme represents the structure of the heuristic. Each parascheme sits alongside a given scheme in the background, like a ghostly double. It comes into play to explain the relationship between a reasonable argument that fits an argumentation scheme and the same kind of argument that has been employed in a way that makes it fallacious” (2). He then explains further, “When an arguer jumps to a conclusion by a parascheme, while ignoring implicit assumptions and exceptions that ought to be taken into account, his argument is fallacious. The error here is an unwarranted leap to a conclusion that is not justified by a careful analysis of the argument” (18). Next, Walton states, “Because heuristics are shortcuts or fast and frugal ways to proceed tentatively when there is not enough data and time to arrive at a definitive conclusion, they can be dangerous, and can sometimes take us to a wrong decision” (19).

In the case of Shapiro vs. college student, Shapiro had to close fast before the student had the time to come up with a clever answer that would cast doubt on Shapiro’s logic. As Walton describes the origination of fallacious arguments, Shapiro uses a parascheme, and the reason it is more effective is that it has a structure of the heuristic, and the fallacious parts of the argument are the ‘ghostly doubles’ slipped in the midst of it. His closing argument goes as follows: “You can’t magically change your gender. You can’t magically change your sex. You can’t magically your age”. A type of a parascheme he uses is a syllogism, a form of logical reasoning, which serves as an outer shell, i.e., an illusion that is meant to be mistaken for a legitimate, sound syllogism. This syllogism contains three mutually exclusive statements he enunciates with confidence, as if it had a standard structure: if (A is B), and (B is C), then (A is C), which it does not; the conclusion, (‘C’), ‘you can’t change your age’ is not a consequence of the premises (‘A’) ‘you can’t change your gender’ and (‘B’) ‘you can’t change your sex’. Similarly, (‘A’) and (‘B’) are not interconnected. “An argument is sound if and only if it is logically valid and all its premises are true” (Lecture 3, Atomic Sentences Handout, p. 8, Courseworks, Columbia University). The argument is not sound because the premise (‘A’) is false, while the conclusion is true; if taken literally, in fact, you can’t magically change your age, it would require some type of

enhancement procedures or some time for a healthy lifestyle to start showing results. Subsequently, we will see why claim ('A') is false from the scientific research.

Then, there is a psychological factor which explains why the student stumbled and was not able to pinpoint the erroneousness of Shapiro's reasoning, is that her brain was unable, in a scanty number of seconds, to process and appropriately respond to an argument that is inherently fallacious. The studies of a German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer "explore the cognitive theory that we have two minds one that is automatic, unconscious, and fast, the other controlled, conscious, and slow" (Walton, 2). In his syllogism, Shapiro uses a circular argument by assuming the very claim he wants to prove ('you can't change your gender') and the red herring logical fallacy to divert the attention of the audience to a new unrelated topic with the question ('why aren't you 60?'), which serves as a building block in the construction of the syllogism. The reason people advocate in support of Shapiro in the comments is not because he won, but because it sounds like he won. On the surface, the parascheme has a familiar structure of a syllogism, the student didn't have time to analyze the content of his argument to spot flaws in it, as a result, she appeared inarticulate, and confused, which makes it easy for the viewers to go: "Hmm, she's mumbling, and he sounds like he just won, let's support him." With his tone of voice, bullheadedness, unwillingness to lose, and the body language, Shapiro pretends to have pulled something incredibly deep, intelligent, and something only scholars would be able to understand which can be intimidating to an inexperienced student; which was precisely why she froze and was not able to continue the discourse with a clear mind. And this is precisely how Plato describes sophists, "they appear to have skills which they, in fact, lack" (Crivelli, 13).

To prove an earlier point, Shapiro didn't just use false analogy, he misrepresented the facts about gender studies, stating that "you can't magically change your gender", when in fact, according to a survey from the Williams Institute in 2016 more than 1.4 million adults in the United States identified as transgender (2). Furthermore, "More than one-third of transgender people describe themselves as nonbinary, which the National Center for Transgender defines as people whose gender is not exclusively male or female," which means that their gender can

change on a daily basis (Cummings, USA Today). The World Health Organization further verifies that biological sex and gender are different, “Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women” (Mills Ph.D., Psychology Today).

In the book “*The Dialogues Of Plato*” translated with comment by R. E. Allen, published by Yale University Press, Socrates defines two forms of encomium: “One concerned to praise without regard for truth or falsity, the other concerned for truth but picking out its best features. Depending on the circumstances, in his practice, Shapiro is doing both. His infamous slogan ‘Facts don’t care about your feelings’ illustrates his concern for people being ‘more motivated by emotion than facts’” (Hallowell, CBN News). “His controversial comments have made him a target for protesters, especially his comments about the LGBTQ community, including that he openly says he believes those who are transgender have a mental illness, wrongfully equating it to gender dysphoria.” In an interview on ABC News, he claimed the following: “It is a psychological disorder,” he said. “So that’s not an insult to people who suffer from psychological disorders... you are not doing a service to people who are suffering from a mental disorder to humor them by suggesting that their mental disorder is reflected in objective reality.” He repeatedly declared those same statements in his speeches at several college campuses. It is worth to say that, “The American Psychological Association does not define being transgender as a mental illness. Gender dysphoria is on the list of conditions, a diagnosis only applies if the individuals experience significant distress” (Harris, Torres, Effron, ABC News). Shapiro contradicts his own adage because he didn’t do the due diligence and research the topic before making false claims, or perhaps he did, but since the facts weren’t coherent with his program, he found a way to make his viewpoint appear convincing anyway by using a bullheaded tone of voice, making false comparisons by juxtaposing transgender to mentally ill people, and sticking to his argument regardless.

While it is true that his comments repulsed many people and there should be more people advocating for the LGBTQ community, we want to focus on analyzing his rhetoric as he makes those ‘false true’ claims in order to prevent our feelings from getting hurt or worse, stimulate an attempted suicide. Besides implementing false analogies, and distorting facts, he ensures to convince the audience, in several debates, that he is a person of a goodwill who is against racism, bullying, rape, views that most people agree on – and uses that as a way to connect with people and simultaneously demonstrate that he is a reasonable person and that you should be on his side.

After watching many of his debates back to back, it is tempting to take his side because he sounds unapologetically indubitable as if there were absolutely no way that he can be wrong while applying faulty thinking, warped logic, and misstating facts. Shapiro’s most provocative comments include hate speech against transgender people which he claims is an act of free speech. On Dr. Drew Show the topic was whether Caitlyn Jenner deserves the “Courage Award” where Shapiro was a guest who addressed Jenner as a “he”, refused to address transgender woman on the panel next to him by her preferred pronoun, and misinterpreted the goal of the discussion, stating that, “The entire discussion is whether we are embracing mental illness and delusion as a society” (Shapiro, Dr. Drew Show). Every panelist was infuriated, perturbed, and confronted him about being disrespectful while making inflammatory comments, although, trying to maintain composure while on the verge of coming across as somewhat psychotic. Nonetheless, Shapiro remained calm and continued his line of defense regardless of their reaction. Even a threat to send him home in an ambulance received from the transgender woman panelist he called a “sir” didn’t stop him from staying consistent to his thesis.

Plato talks about sophist’s prowess to bend reality: “Whoever produces false sentences that imitate true ones tries to deceive his or her hearers that the false sentences produced are true” (Crivelli, 25). In order to succeed in his deceit, Shapiro must commit to the program to sound as audaciously compelling as he, in fact, does. To be more specific, he has to indisputably believe that what he says is the truth to convince others in the truth he believes to be valid. It is the art of sophistry, to convince people to believe statements that aren’t true. It is a slippery slope, the

number of ideas that can be attempted to be publicly proven based on no factual evidence, such as confluence of fake news, or commentators like Shapiro who seek to pursue their goals based on uncorroborated statements, baseless research, and logical fallacies.

Let's play a logic game. Consider a fun question for your thought. We shall construct a hypothetical dialogue that uses valid argumentation as a counterexample to showcase the warped logic behind Shapiro's earlier argumentation. What would be Shapiro's response?

– “How old do you think I am”?

– “45”.

– “I am actually 60”.

– “Well, why don't you look 60”?

– “The reason I don't look 60 is that I feel younger. Therefore, I use tools such as cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery to modify my appearance so that the external looks are commensurate with my inner feeling, just as transgender people modify their physical features to resemble the image they identify with internally”.

This time, a similar argument sounds advantageous to the person opposing Shapiro's stance, but not only because the employed reasoning is valid. The benefit of such a rhetorical construct (The Socratic Method) is that in both cases the person asking an unsuspecting spectator a question is in the dominant position. Regardless of how old you say you are, the follow-up question, in this case, will work in your favor after a slight numerical modification, depending on the context.

The reason why Shapiro sounded more prepared in his line of defense is that he had the power to frame the questions and set up rhetorical traps an inexperienced college student did not know how to handle. Shapiro, on the other hand, can distort the facts because he knows the proper techniques to justify his rhetoric and make it appear conscionable, secure his victory, and exit any debate unscathed. If young minds don't make an effort to think critically about the

rhetoric they encounter, it makes it easy for individuals like Shapiro to mislead, deceive, and possibly cause harm to marginalized groups involved.

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