

The Demonic Fallacy
Resisting the Temptation to
Discredit and Dismiss those with whom we Disagree

By
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The outrageous radio propagandist Rush Limbaugh has been in the news a great deal ever since he said he wants President Obama to fail, and has emerged as the potential voice of conservatism, if not the Republican Party itself. This has upset a lot of people on both sides of the political spectrum. The Chairman of the Republican Party, Michael Steele, got himself into a lot of trouble just for insinuating that Limbaugh is merely an entertainer. And two days ago on *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, a guest, Matt Taibbi, when asked, “Why don’t people like Rush Limbaugh?” responded, “He’s abrasive, he’s divisive, he’s a fat, pill-popping idiot...”

As a lover of logic, or what is more commonly called today, *critical thinking*, I find myself intellectually disappointed to hear these kind of fallacious arguments put forward, especially through the national media which ought to be obligated to provide us with substantive information and rational arguments. When I hear such things, like any logician, I try to reconstruct the arguments I hear to determine for myself if they are reasonable or not.

Michael Steele’s argument, for example, is a bit difficult to reconstruct because most of it was merely implied by the single statement, “Rush Limbaugh is an entertainer. Rush Limbaugh—his whole thing is entertainment.” Nevertheless, we know he said this while countering the claim that “Rush Limbaugh... is the *de facto* leader of the Republican Party.” So here’s how the argument might be reconstructed.

P1) Entertainers only want to entertain.

P2) Rush Limbaugh is an entertainer.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh only wants to Entertain.

Or here’s another way to put it:

P1) Entertainers don’t really believe what they say.

P2) Entertainers only say things to entertain others.

P3) Rush Limbaugh is an entertainer.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh doesn’t really believe what he is saying, and only says things to entertain others.

Such a conclusion then becomes part of a further argument:

P1) Rush Limbaugh doesn’t really believe what he is saying, and only says things to entertain others.

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P2) People who don't really believe what they're saying and only say things to entertain others can't be taken seriously.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh can't be taken seriously.

Although all of these arguments are deductively valid, meaning that if their premises are true their conclusions must also be true, they can only be considered as *sound* arguments if their premises are indeed true. In this case, the premise that Rush Limbaugh is merely an entertainer is questionable. He does not call himself an entertainer, nor claim that what he does is entertainment. Nor is there good reason to suspect his listeners tune into him purely to be entertained. It is also unreasonable to presume that most entertainers don't believe what they say. There may be many entertainers who draw upon their own opinions and experiences in the material they use.

Some of the comments of Matt Taibbi, a columnist for *Rolling Stone*, are a bit more egregious because they don't seem to have anything to do with whether or not it is logical to take a person seriously. In other words, just because a person can be described in any or all of Taibbi's terms, *abrasive*, *divisive*, *fat*, or *pill popping*, is no reason to believe that person isn't telling the truth. Let's consider each of these statements in the form of a logical argument:

P1) Abrasive people don't tell the truth.

P2) Rush Limbaugh is abrasive.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh doesn't tell the truth.

Or;

P1) People who are divisive are untrustworthy.

P2) Rush Limbaugh is divisive.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh is untrustworthy.

Or;

P1) Fat people can't be taken seriously.

P2) Rush Limbaugh is fat.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh can't be taken seriously.

And finally;

P1) Those who take pills are idiots.

P2) Rush Limbaugh takes pills.

C) (Therefore) Rush Limbaugh is an idiot.

When reconstructed in this way, we see that Taibbi's arguments are unreasonable because his premises are untrue. Sometimes, for example, the truth can be abrasive and divisive. Nor is it valid to claim that people who are overweight or on medication can't be trusted. In fairness to Mr. Taibbi, however, he was not directly answering the question, "Why don't people trust Rush Limbaugh?" but, "Why don't people *like* him?" As irrational as it is, there are many who dislike people they find abrasive, divisive, overweight, or on drugs. But his tone was clearly to discredit Rush Limbaugh on these grounds, not merely to answer the question put before him.

In *critical thinking* this tendency to counter an argument by criticizing the person giving it, that is, to "kill" the proverbial messenger, is a fallacy known as *ad hominem*, the Latin phrase meaning, "to the man." Psychologically speaking, if we don't like what we're hearing, our tendency is to project our negative feelings onto the person delivering the message. It represents an inability to decipher the difference between being *dislike* somebody, and *disliking* somebody. In my case, I am dislike Rush Limbaugh in many ways, particularly when it comes to our political opinions. So long as I keep this in mind I can logically consider the differences between our two viewpoints. But as soon as I make it personal and allow our differences to turn into dislikes, I run the risk of dismissing him as a "big fat idiot."

I prefer, therefore, to call this fallacy, *The Demonic Fallacy*, because it attempts to discredit and dismiss what others have to say by attacking them personally, or, in short, by demonizing them.

Thanks to the advent of modern medicine, we now know that many of those who were once considered "possessed" by demons actually suffered from dissociative disorders like schizophrenia, or physical conditions like epilepsy. But what if not everyone accused of being possessed in ancient times wasn't mad or ill, but was, instead, simply demonized by others? Let's take an example from the *Gospel of Luke*.

For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"—for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Nowadays, should we encounter such a person, we would not consider him "possessed," but might certainly consider him "touched," if not stark raving mad! Indeed, given his level of rage, it's unlikely that this fellow was either epileptic or schizophrenic, but was simply a madman; that is, a man filled with such anger he could not control it. But if, rather than merely dismissing him as a madman, we ask why is he so mad, we entertain the possibility that he his anger might be legitimate. Perhaps the chains and shackles that kept him bound and guarded are but a metaphor of the harsh

economic and political realities we know existed in ancient Palestine that may have kept him impoverished and powerless. And since he lived in a society in which he was not free to complain, his anger came out in an insane way. Or, maybe, he was so angry he complained anyway, and in his society anyone who complained would have to be crazy!

You see, in ancient societies, the authorities would often tolerate the presence those they considered demon possessed, just as today we tolerate homeless people walking about the streets talking to themselves. But we don't pay attention to what they are saying because we assume they're crazy. "In these circumstances," writes theologian William Herzog, "demonic possession becomes a form of 'oblique protest' against the colonial overlord because, if he is viewed as possessed, a demoniac can express what others feel but repress."¹ So, perhaps this man, whose grievances were so many he called them "legion," simply came to the point that he would rather be considered crazy than to repress his outrage any longer, that is, to return, in his words, "into the abyss" of silence. He would rather be excluded from society, living like a wild man, than to repress his truth.

But the real point is that the authorities would have had a hand in "demonizing" him in order to prevent him from being taken too seriously by others. It's the same reason conservative propagandists like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson have in recent years respectively called Al Gore "unhinged" and a "wild-eyed religious nut" for expressing his "inconvenient truth" about global warming. To portray him as unstable, as a madman, as a nutcase, is an effort to invalidate his message. In the same way, this "man of the city" may have been called "demon possessed" to invalidate his tirades against tyranny. "It was a form of social control," Herzog says, "In effect, this labeling degrades the possessed 'by destroying their selfhood' and denying what they have experienced and expressed in their fits of possession."²

So, in exorcising the demons of men like this, Jesus was effectively validating what they had to say, just as, in another story, he restores speech to a man whose demon had made him mute. This subversive behavior is most likely why Jesus made so many political enemies and is what eventually got him killed. But, again, instead of refuting what he had to say, his opponents committed the fallacy of demonizing Jesus himself. "It is only by Beelzebub," they declared, "the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."³ Again, as Herzog writes, "When unauthorized exorcists arise to address the problem, collaborators will stigmatize them by using witchcraft accusations or branding them as sorcerers."⁴ Like Tucker Carlson, who once referred to Al Gore as "a bad guy" on his propagandistic "Beat the Press" segment on MSNBC, Jesus' adversaries tried to dismiss and discredit his message by demonizing him.

¹ Herzog, William R., *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God*, Westminster Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2000, p. 209.

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 9:24.

⁴ Herzog, *ibid.*, p. 210.

The modern equivalent of demonizing others is, again, to call them, “a bad guy,” “unhinged,” “a wild-eyed religious nut,” or, “a big fat idiot.” But here my intention is not to defend Rush Limbaugh, who I recognize I am dislike in many ways. Rather, it is to defend reason, and pluralism, and intelligent conversation about the important issues facing all of us. Jesus instructed his followers to cast out demons, and as one who has the highest regard for the humanitarian and egalitarian teachings of Jesus, I strive not to demonize others, but to consider and converse with what they have to say in a rational manner. If what they have to say doesn’t hold up to the rules of logic, I can more easily dismiss it without dismissing them. I can distinguish the difference between being dislike others and disliking them.

So this morning I cast the demon out of Rush Limbaugh that I might more rationally consider what he has to say. And I do find myself disagreeing with his conclusion that President Obama should fail, not because I think he’s a “big fat pill-popping idiot,” but because I disagree with his premises that, in his words, “Liberalism is our problem. Liberalism is what’s gotten us dangerously close to the precipice here.” I think I could make a much stronger argument that it is actually conservatism that has brought us to the economic and environmental precipice we’re at today. But the real point here is that the truth of what Limbaugh has to say doesn’t have anything to do with his personality, his weight, or the nature of his work, but everything to do with the validity of his premises. And as rational people we ought to remain reasonable. And as religious people we ought to be about the business of casting out demons, not demonizing those with whom we disagree. It’s sometimes difficult to do, but it is the right thing to do, the compassionate thing to do, and the reasonable thing to do. So, as Jesus said, “Go forth and cast our demons.”