

## Argumentum Ad Hominem

Stephen M. Perle, DC, MS

I have heard people complain that chiropractors so often attack each other, and that such behavior is not common in other professions. I beg to differ. It seems to be the norm that people attack those who are not the same as them. Shermer<sup>1</sup> notes that the biblical prohibitions against killing really only apply to killing a member of one's own group.

Thus, we find antipathy all the time between people who are part of different groups. Yankee fans dislike Red Sox fans. People in one religion snipe at another religion. One specialty in medicine makes snide remarks about another specialty, because they don't all see themselves as the same (e.g., all MDs); they see themselves as being different (e.g., neurosurgeons vs. orthopedic spine surgeons). One technique in chiropractic complains about and claims superiority over another.

However, there is a difference between remarks about someone's thoughts and beliefs, and remarks about that person. In the study of logic, the latter is a fallacy that relies on an argument called *argumentum ad hominem*, or simply *ad hominem*. *Argumentum ad hominem* is a Latin phrase translated literally as "argument [aimed] at the person," but usually translated as "argument to the man."

In logic, the *argumentum ad hominem* is typically described as having the following form:

1. A makes claim B.
1. There is something objectionable about A.
1. Therefore, claim B is false.

There are three basic forms of *argumentum ad hominem*:

1. *Ad hominem* abusive; also called *argumentum ad personam*. Instead of attacking an assertion, the argument attacks the person who made the assertion.
2. *Ad hominem* circumstantial: Instead of attacking an assertion, the attacker points to the relationship between the person making the assertion and the person's circumstances.
3. *Ad hominem tu quoque*: Literally translated as, "at the person, you too," this could be called the "hypocrisy" argument. In this form of attack, one argues that the person does not practice what he or she preaches.

I never took a logic class in college or high school, so *ad hominem* is not a phrase I learned about in a formal way. However, I have learned about *ad hominem* extensively as a chiropractor. I first learned the term as a member of an electronic mailing list for chiropractors. If one used an *ad hominem* argument, that person would get bumped off the list. In Internet terminology, an *ad hominem*

comment is called "flaming."

I am amazed at how often a chiropractor's counterargument to something he or she does not agree with, typically regarding chiropractic, is an *ad hominem*. This is the most feeble reply one can make and generally reflects poorly upon the person who does it. Those who are not biased see this as having no probative value in the argument, and it signals that the person using that reply has no valid counterpoint and is not acting professionally.

There is one situation in which *ad hominem* is a valid argument - when it is used to attack the credibility of a person who is the sole source of information, not on the validity of their deduction, for there is none. For example, one chiropractor wrote me: "You are the most unprincipled man on earth and should do the profession a favor and jump off a cliff." Since he presented no logical argument or evidence that I am unprincipled, attacking his credibility is a valid argument.

I "googled" this chiropractor and found out that he had practiced without a license in California and had his license suspended in the U.K. for violating standards of practice. Obviously, he is not a credible source or a principled person.

Over the years, I have discovered a few basic types of chiropractic *ad hominem* replies to a chiropractor (Table 1) and to a nonchiropractor (Table 2). Personally, I am not bothered by these comments. They do not insult me; instead, I often find them funny.

Table 1:

Common Chiropractic *Ad Hominem* Replies to a Chiropractor

- The chiropractor is a medi-practor or mixer.
- The chiropractor is an MD wannabe.
- The chiropractor is a failed practitioner.
- The chiropractor does not really know real or true chiropractic.
- The chiropractor went to or teaches at such-and-such chiropractic college.
- The chiropractor works for an insurance company.
- The chiropractor owns pharmaceutical stock or works for a pharmaceutical company.

Table 2:

Common Chiropractic *Ad Hominem* Replies to a Nonchiropractor

- The person is an MD or has been brainwashed by MDs.
- The person is stupid.
- The person does not really know real or true chiropractic.
- The person learned about chiropractic from some chiropractor who has one of the characteristics in Table 1.
- The person works for an insurance company.
- The person owns pharmaceutical stock or works for a pharmaceutical company.

Someone thought the fact that I teach in a chiropractic college is a problem of "biblical proportions." I could not be more complimented, because how many people can have such a monumental effect on anything? There were those who wanted to write the University of Bridgeport to try to get me fired, and then offered to pay for me to go to medical school. As a tenured faculty member, just recently promoted to full professor, I didn't think they would be very successful in getting me fired, but I gave them the university address. As to the offer to pay for medical school, I would rather have the money, thank you very much.

I have no interest in going to medical school, because I love being a chiropractor ... even though I

often feel embarrassed about being one. I am not embarrassed because of chiropractic, but because of chiropractors. Those chiropractors who so regularly resort to *ad hominem* make our profession look bad. When people outside our profession hear these comments, it only debases our profession and makes us seem as if we should not be called a profession at all. Lose the *ad hominem*, and gain self-esteem and stature.

### *Reference*

1. Shermer M. *The Science of Good & Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule*. New York: Times Books; 2004.

*Stephen Perle, DC, MS*  
*Bridgeport, Connecticut*

JULY 2005