The Synecdochic Fallacy in a Mass-Technological Society

by Stephen M, Weinstock

[Presented to the 67th annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 1981, Disneyland California, as part of a panel on "Communication in a Mass-Technological Society." This research was supported by grants from the University of the Open Road.]

> "The necessity of imposing form of some sort has continually led to the danger of imposing what is essentially a false and artificial form. Once the process of categorizing ideas is begun, it is likely to become an end in itself and to give rise to the subject a symmetry that is entirely false."
> --Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime.[1]

My research into the mass and technological characteristics of contemporary society as they affect both theory and practice of human communication, led to many different but integrally related fields of experience, including art, science, politics, philosophy, technology and business. Frequently, a somewhat bothersome problem seemed to pop up momentarily and then disappear. The problem occurred in many variations in many fields; however, the seemingly diverse fields did not address the variations as a common problem. Each field was content to chase each instance of the problem independently, so it seemed.

For a variety of reasons, all working together, I call the class of elusive problems the synecdochic fallacy, a collective name which is both fitting and useful.[2]

In brief, the purpose of this paper is to identify the synecdochic fallacy as an option for analyzing and generating communication in a mass-technological society. This purpose is attempted through three means: first, by explaining what it is; second, by offering historical warrant for its uses and third, by exploring several examples derived from contemporary society.

The Synecdochic Fallacy: What It Is

A fallacy is a deceptive, misleading, erroneous, or false notion, belief, idea, or

statement.[3] A flawed conception is fallacious if it contains any of these. Fallacies and flawed conceptions are only significant if they make a difference. If a particular flawed conception has little or no consequence, it has little or no significance and can be ignored. If a particular conception is flawed and it has much consequence, it can still be ignored, but perhaps it should not be ignored. If a number of different problems seem to share a similar flaw, there probably is a common fallacy as a cause.[4]

Traditionally, the synecdoche is a figure of speech. Generally, it is a linguistic device where a word representing a part of something is used to call forth an image of the whole, as in the expressions, "all hands on deck" and "head count." In the first expression "hands" represents "persons" as does "head" in the second expression. The synecdoche also includes expressions where a whole is used to represent a part, species for genus, genus for species, cause for effect, effect for cause, container for thing contained, vice versa, and several other variations. Though synecdoche frequently refers to a class of figures of speech, the term also applies to matters of thought that see expression linguistically.[5]

Logically speaking, a synecdochic fallacy is a deceptive, misleading, erroneous, or false notion, belief, idea, or statement where a part is substituted for a whole, a whole for a part, cause for effect, effect for cause, and so on. Furthermore, any particular instance of this fallacy and any conception flawed on account of this fallacy is only significant if it is consequential.

Rhetorical-Historical Warrant

Neither the concept of the synecdochic fallacy nor its name is new. The concept of the synecdoche appears twice in Book II of Aristotle's Rhetoric under lines of argument.[6] To Aristotle, one legitimate line of argument is treating separately the parts of a subject.[7] Also, to Aristotle, one sham argument is asserting that what is true of the parts is true of the whole, and vice versa.[8] Though neither of these communicative options open to rhetors is labeled as synecdoches, both demonstrate the synecdoche at work, with Aristotle's sham argument demonstrating the principle of the synecdochic fallacy.[9]

In Roman pedagogical frameworks of communicative options, many of what

Aristotle calls lines of arguments became codified as recurring patterns of linguistic expression, that is, as figures of speech. As a figure, the synecdoche is discussed in the Rhetorica ad Herennium and Quintilian's Institutio Oratoria.[10] In addition to the whole for part (and part for whole) substitution, the author ad Herennium includes under synecdoche the linguistic substitution of singular for plural to which Quintilian adds a temporal class of antecedent-consequent (cause-effect) substitutions.[11] Though these authors use both the concept and the name of the synecdoche, they do not explicitly link the figure to a line of argument. Nor do they develop the synecdoche as a potential fallacy.

In contemporary history, the synecdoche has been revived akin to a line of argument in the rhetorical scheme of Kenneth Burke.[12] In Burke's contemporary synthesis of the history of communicative options, the synecdoche is both a codified linguistic expression (a figure of speech) and a line of argument. And though he specifically names the synecdochic fallacy as a fallacy only once, the concept is a major one in Burke's thought.

For Burke, the synecdoche figure includes uses of language where a part is used to represent the whole, where the whole is used to represent a part, container for thing contained, cause for effect, effect for cause, and the like.[13] Yet, Burke believes that it is no mere stylistic ornament as the Roman teachers might have us believe. The more he studies language and the uses of language in the drama of human relations, says Burke, “the more I become convinced that this is the 'basic' figure of speech, and that it occurs in many modes besides that of the formal trope.”[14]

Further study of the synecdoche as a basic figure is demonstrated in Burke’s Grammar of Motives. There, he discusses "Four Master Tropes" (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) as the four basic attributes of human conceptualization and expression.[15] For Burke, synecdoche is a basic process of representation.

> Sensory perception is, of course, synecdochic in that the senses abstract certain qualities from some bundles of electro-chemical activities we call say, a tree, and these qualities (such as size, shape, color, texture, weight, etc.) can be said "truly to represent" a tree.

> Similarly, artistic representation is synecdochic, in that certain relations within the medium "stand for" corresponding relations outside it. There is also a sense in which the well-formed work of art is internally synecdochic, as the beginning of a drama contains its close or the close sums up the beginning, the parts all thus being consubstantially related.[16]

In this larger sense, the synecdoche as the process of representation (a mental process through which thought, expression, and communication take place) is at once useful as a codified linguistic expression (a figure as stylistic expression) and useful as a mode of thought for generating ideas (a topic as a line of argument).

Burke expressly refers to the synecdochic fallacy only once, though he expands upon the principal throughout much of his writing. In an essay he calls a rhetorical defense of rhetoric, Burke states his thesis invoking the synecdochic fallacy, "the ideal of a purely 'neutral' vocabulary, free of emotional weightings, attempts to make a totality out of a fragment, 'till that which suits a part infects the whole.'"[17] In further developing a refutation to the sham distinction between scientific and artistic expression and thought (that is, between "the sciences" and "the humanities"), Burke comments, "Only by a kind of 'synecdochic fallacy,' mistaking a part for a whole, can this opposition appear to exist."[18] Beyond this one instance, I know of no other overt namings of the synecdochic fallacy, It does however appear through other names.

The synecdochic fallacy is implied in Burke's discussion of his "Four Master Tropes," the last appendix to A Grammar of Motives. The entire book is devoted to the development and elaboration of a holistic, non-reductive, non-fragmentary analytic-synthetic framework. In the book, Burke develops at length his oft misunderstood pentad of terms for discussing human motive and action. After presenting and illustrating the pentad (act, agent, scene, agency, purpose) and their various ratios as terms (a grammar) for clarifying sources of ambiguity (motives), Burke emphatically notes,

> A terminology of conceptual analysis, if it is not to lead to misrepresentation, must be constructed in conformity with a representative anecdote–whereas anecdotes "scientifically" selected for reductive purposes are not representative.

(Burke's emphasis.) [19]

This statement represents for Burke a purpose for his Grammar--to provide a set of terms for addressing problems of misrepresentation.[20] Though he does not state the synecdochic fallacy by name, Burke strongly implies it. If, as he states, the synecdoche as one of his four master tropes is the basic process of representation, the synecdochic fallacy is another name for misrepresentation. Specifically, using Burke's framework, misrepresentation (the synecdochic fallacy) is the use of language to deceive with societally undesirable consequences wherever any conception is based upon a misrepresentative substitution of part for whole, whole for part, species for genus, genus for species, cause for effect, effect for cause, thing contained for the container, and the like.[21]

Thus, the synecdochic fallacy is new neither in concept nor by name. It exists conceptually in the lines of argument of Aristotle. The synecdoche occurs as a figure of speech in Roman pedagogical rhetorics. And the synecdochic fallacy exists in concept and by name as a representative mode of thought (that is, as a figure and as a line of reasoning) in Burke's writing, though Burke uses the name itself only once.

The remainder of the paper explores several examples of the synecdochic fallacy derived from contemporary society. A rhetorical purpose for the examples is to open up for analysis potentially harmful misrepresentations.

Examples

The following examples have been selected to illustrate the synecdochic fallacy in a wide variety of instances. Some pertain to education, some to business, some to science, some to politics; some pertain to communication in interpersonal relations, some to problem solving, some to oratory, some to academic and professional dialogue, some to mass communication, and some to societal communication.

Example # 1: During spring term 1980, a student of public speaking offered a persuasive speech on the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics to be held in Moscow. The boycott came into public discussion as a result of two news items: (1) the report of Russian troops sent into Afghanistan and (2) the report of a U.S. option

to retaliate by the Olympic boycott, among other options. When the student addressed the boycott without referring to the Aghanistan situation, I invoked the synecdochic fallacy. The student had entered into a public discussion and had evaluated a proposed solution (the boycott) to a perceived problem (the invasion of Afghanistan) without addressing the relationship of the solution to the problem. In terms of the synecdochic fallacy, she took a part of an issue out of its container and tried to make it stand by itself. In this particular case, the part (thing contained) was very fluid and spilled onto the floor.

Example # 2: On July 6, 1981, economist Lewis Lehrman appeared on NBC's Tomorrow show. At one instant, host Tom Snyder reiterated a popular idea, government is the largest cause of inflation. Lehrman, appearing as an authority figure on national TV, took the idea one step further and responded, "Government is the only cause of inflation." The audience responded with enthusiastic applause. Insofar as there was no mention of private businesses who receive government contracts, insofar as there was no mention of laborers organizing to get higher pay, and insofar as there was no mention of any other factor that might contribute to the vicious cycle called inflation, one cause out of many was portrayed as the only cause. It is therefore an instance of a synecdochic fallacy that someone could argue is consequential because it breeds divisiveness on the basis of deception.[22]

Example # 3: In his essay on "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger invokes a particular synecdochic fallacy involving a cause-effect substitution currently receiving much attention in many fields:

> Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets up nature to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.[23]

Example # 4: In the area of art and aesthetic experience, Susanne K. Langer pioneered research on a longstanding synecdochic fallacy that for some time has obscured human perception and experience, Langer begins to chase an elusive problem in Philosophy in a New Key.[24] The chase continues though several works

including Feeling and Form and Problems of Art,[25] but the basic synecdochic fallacy can be heard (not seen) in the title of the pioneering Philosophy in a Hew Key. Her argument is consistent with this statement:

> Vision has been the primary sense for understanding the world around us; sight has dominated human perception for thousands of years, as civilization was transformed from an aural culture to a written culture. Because of the dominance of sight over sound in Western Civilization, we have been blinded and have been prevented from seeing, or rather from hearing, other essential components of human experience.[26]

Similar instances to this fallacy based on the dominance of sight over other sense perceptions can be found, if one listens.[27]

Example # 5: Tim LaHaye, pop author for the "Moral Majority," has popularized another part-for-whole synecdochic fallacy. In The Battle for the Mind, LaHaye undertakes the task of exorcising humanism, which he claims, "is not only the world's greatest evil but, until recently, the most deceptive of all religious philosophies."[28] If one were to argue that LaHaye's straw man conception of humanism is based upon the taking of only a portion of what humanism has been historically as opposed to the whole of humanism, one would be attempting to thwart the effects of an up and coming synecdochic fallacy. What makes this example interesting is that LaHaye's version of the fallacy is based upon yet another, The Humanist Manifesto, which itself took only portions of humanism for the whole. A tragedy here is that the two portions still do not make up a whole, as one might get from understanding classical humanism and Renaissance humanism. In this case the sum of the two parts equals less than the sum of the two parts, because the two parts tend to diminish each other.[29]

Example # 6: A similar part-for-whole instance occurs in Martin Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology." Speaking of technology as a force of much dominance in the twentieth century Heidegger laments a semantic shift which represents a much larger actual shift:

> There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name techne. Once that revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of

radiant appearing also was called techne.

> Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called techne. And the poiesis of the fine arts also was called techne.[30]

In this instance, typical of many others, only a portion of what was once a whole range of meaning was given exclusive right to a name while other parts were lost, both linguistically and actually.[31]

Example # 7: Actually, this last example is a class of instances. In relationships between persons, role stereotyping frequently occurs. Wherever stereotyping occurs, the synecdochic fallacy is in action. Thinking of a fellow human being only in the capacity of a janitor is one instance. Seeing a man or a woman only--or almost exclusively--as a potential sex partner is another. Hollywood typecasting offers many other instances: Blacks portrayed as intimidated comic characters who sure do dance a lot and have natural rhythm), Mexicans portrayed as wetbacks or as fighters, troublemakers and all around ignorant agitators, and Whites portrayed as good workers, owners of suburban homes, always wearing nice clothes, modern cars, ans with fathers who always know best. All of these instances of stereotyping can be considered as synecdochic where attributes of a part are taken to be attributes of a whole. And insofar as they cause harm, they are consequential and significant.

Conclusion

Through logical definition, historical warrant, and illustrative examples, I have identified the synecdochic fallacy to be a fitting name for a useful concept. It describes a variety of similar problems related to many aspects of communication in our mass-technological society. Such a descriptive name (or handle) can enable individuals with different sets of experiences to talk with each other about common problems. As a problem, the synecdochic fallacy can belocated and named, as shown above. As a concept, the synecdochic fallacy can generate analytical and critical discussion in both public and private arenas. (That is to mean, as a rhetorical topos, it can be used to generate ideas for persuasion and dissuasion.)

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But, there are problems with the synecdochic fallacy which have not been addressed here. And in not addressing them, that is, by painting only a partial picture, so to speak, this paper commits a synecdochic fallacy. The examples selected demonstrate a variety of instances of a seemingly common problem, yet, these are only a few out of many. No discussion Has made of countless other instances: the substitution of quantity over quality, the dominance of fact over value,[32] the mass mediated temporal dominance of the here and now found pervasively in "the news," speaking of American Indians only in the past tense, the biasing of history that yielded the twentieth century need for films like "Black History: Lost, Strayed, or Stolen," and the need for the aphorism, "Anonymous was a woman."

Nor was any attempt made here to organize the various types of synecdochic fallacies around topical schemes such as space, time, and mind; whole-for-part, part for whole, cause for effect, effect for cause, container for thing contained, vice versa, and so on.

Nor was any attempt made to organiee the synecdochic instances around various types of communication, such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, dyadic, small group, large group, private, public, mass, societal, inter-cultural, person to person, person to machine, machine to person, machine to machine and so on.

Also, all of the examples tend to illustrate the part-for-whole synecdochic fallacy--that is, where harmful consequences can be argued as resulting from replacing a whole in a fragmentary way with a part (e.g., "Government is the only cause of inflation."). None of the examples discussed above illustrate a whole-for-part substitution where harm can be argued as resulting from replacing a part in a synthesizing way with a whole, such as the use of the synecdochic fallacy as an umbrella term (the whole) in substitution for a variety of similar but different instances (the parts).

In defense of my own selectivity, I can only ask that my hearers agree that our mass-technological society has tended to overemphasize analysis, fragmentation, and divisiveness over synthesis, fusion, and harmony, and that at the present point in time the latter (i.e., communication) is needed.

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NOTES

1. Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935), p. 4.

2. Neither the concept nor the name is original with this paper; I have merely inherited them from much previous research. For some sources of both the concept and the name, see the rhetorical-historical warrant section below, pp. 3-6.

3. See also Burke's A Rhetoric of Motives (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1950), especially pp. 43-46. Compare this with I,A, Richards' exhortation, "Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies." (The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 3.)

4. See also Burke's A Rhetoric of Motives (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1950), especially pp. 43-46. Compare this with I,A, Richards' exhortation, "Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies." (The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 3.)

5. A very lucid expression of this last idea is found in James J. Murphy, the concept of topic and the concept of figures of speech and thought, presented to the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas, November 1979.

6. Aristotle, Rhetoric, translated by W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), pp. 149 and 156-57 (1399a6-9 and 1401a24-1401b3).

7. Ibid., p. 149.

8. Ibid., p. 156-57.

9. The concept is also to be found in the body of works discussed as “The Topics.”

10. [Cicero], De Ratione Dicendi (Rhetorica ad Herennium), with an English translation by Harry Caplan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Loeb Classical Library, 1954), pp. 340-43 (4.33.44-45); Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, vol. 3, with an English translation by H.E., Butler (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Loeb Classical Library, 1921), pp. 310ff. and 478-81 (8.6.19ff. and 9.3.58-61).

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11. Ibid.

12. Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, 3rd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp.· 25-29, 60, 77-78, 102, 122, 138, 139, 278, 280, 288, and 450; and A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969; originally published in 1945), pp. 503, 507-511, and 516-17.

13. Burke, Philosophy, pp. 25-26 and Grammar, pp. 507-508.

14. Burke, Philosophy, p.26.

15. Burke, Grammar, pp. 503-517.

16. Ibid., p. 508.

17. Burke, Philosophy, p. 138. (The essay is titled, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning.")

18. Ibid., p. 139.

19. Burke, Grammar, p. 510.

20. This point is made evident in Burke's introduction to his Grammar, pp. xv-xxiii. See especially the photographic analogy (Road to Victory), on p. xvi.

21. See also Burke's A Rhetoric of Motives (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1950), especially pp. 43-46. Compare this with I,A, Richards' exhortation, "Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies." (The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 3.)

22. Lehrman was identified as "Economist." According to Who's Who in America, 1980-81 (vol. 2, p, 1990), Lehrman had been the chair of the executive committee of the Rite Aid Corp, since 1977; was chair of the board of trustees and president of the Lehrman Institute, and held several other positions of respect.

On the synecdochic fallacy of single causation, see note 4 above. On the matter of the mass media as purveyors of synecdochic fallacies, see Justice William 0. Douglas' dissenting opinion, Branzburg v. Hayes, 408 U.S. 665 (1972), p. 721; "TV's Battleground in El Salvador," Newsweek (March 23, 1981), 17; I.F. Stone's

Weekly (a documentary film), (n.p.: Open End Cinema, 1973); Black History: Lost Strayed, or Stolen (a documentary film), (New York: CBSTV, 1968). Evidence of a temporal synecdochic fallacy in news media is implicit in Arthur Herzog's "Newsthink," in The B.S. Factor: The Theory and Technique of Faking It in America (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 109-113.

23. Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology, p. 21. For additional instances concerning technology, see note 30 below, and James A. Kelso, "Science and the Rhetoric of Reality," Central States Speech Journal 31 (Spring 1980), 28; Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Second ed., enlarged, vol. 2 no. 2 International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); William Barrett, The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), pp.165-66; and Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement, second ed., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968; originally published in 1932), p, 31.

24. Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 1942.).

25.Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) and Problems of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).

26. This is a composite synopsis synthesizing many ideas found in the works of Alfred North Whitehead, Susanne K, Langer, Kenneth Burke, I,A, Richards, H. Marshall McLuhan, and Waiter J. Ong, S.J. among other contemporary thinkers.

27. For more on the matter of sound, see Don Ihde, Sense and Significance (distributed by Humanities Press, New York for Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1973) and Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press). Waiter J. Ong's The Presence of the Word, Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, and Interfaces of the Word also have much to say on sound, understanding and civilization.

28. Tim LaHaye, The Battle for the Mind (Old Tappan, New Jersey, Flemming H. Revell, 1980), p. 57.

29. For related material, see Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives, pp. 332-333, The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1970; originally published in 1960), and Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature,:and Method, third printing (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 406-407.

30. Heidegger, Question Concerning Technology., pp. 12-13.

31. Many other contemporary thinkers argue the same point about reclaiming a fuller meaning for techne. Ihde's Technics and Praxis, for example, is a renaming of theory and practice which seeks to restore techne as more than mere doing without great forethought. For other instances relating to technology, see Don Ihde, Technics and Praxis (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979), pp. Xix, 3, 4, 11, 83, and 85; Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology, pp. 28 and 34: Barrett, The Illusion of Technique, p. 183; and Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced industrial Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 238-39.

A linguistic truncation similar to what happened with techne happened with discrimination. Whereas the word once meant differentiation and distinction, repeated usage in our mass-mediated society linked the word to matters of race and civil rights until the word took on a more and more limited meaning. At one moment, the meaning became so restricted that the biasing of circumstances against a white male could no longer be called discrimination, but rather an inferior sounding re-VERSE discrimination.

32. See, for instances, Wayne C. Booth, Modem Dogma and the Rhetoric of Ascent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp, 13-21, 121-25, and 207-11; J. Bronowski, Science and Human Values (New York: Harper & Row; Harper Torchbooks, 1965), pp, 6, 27, 56, 65, and 70-71; Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," in Language as Symbolic Action, pp.:44-62, especially pp. 44-46; Barry.Commoner, "Scientific Statesmanship," in Representative American Speeches, 1962-63, edited by Lester Thonssen (The Reference Shelf, vol. 35, no. 4), pp. 68-81; Walter R. Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," Quarterly Journal of Speech 64 (December 1978), 376-84; and Herbert Marcuse One-Dimensional Man, pp. 133, 139-40, 142, 146ff., 167, and 184.

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