Like many others, I have been watching events unfold at NAMI and have been somewhat perplexed by the various narratives that have arisen in regards to it. I have my opinions about who is right and who is wrong (where such terms can even be said to be appropriate in such a context) but they are not relevant, or even important, to anyone but me.

I have, however, been fascinated by one of the narratives that has come forth, that being that one of the reasons that Peterson, Hamblin, Midgley, Smith, et. al., have been let go is because they have regularly engaged in vicious “ad hominem” attacks against the various people whose works they reviewed. Of course, the charge is nothing new. For years, critics of NAMI (and before that FARMS) have claimed that these people engage in rampant ad hominem attacks. I must admit, therefore, that I found it somewhat amusing when Mr. John Dehlin, of Mormon Stories fame, posted a request on his Facebook page for examples of ad hominem attacks coming from NAMI. See <http://www.facebook.com/johndehlin>. It is also quite instructive that, as of this writing, not single response of the 48+ responses that has been posted, has actually identified a single instance of an actual ad hominem attack. One would assume that if such tactics were as common as critics often claim then such examples should be readily forthcoming. I suspect that that the reason that such examples are not more ubiquitous is because many critics have confused sarcasm and irony for ad hominem when, in fact, they are not the same.

Nevertheless, I suspect that a sustained search of the thousands of pages of apologetic writings, both in print and on the internet, will probably turn up some example or another of an ad hominem attack. The question is, however, is an ad hominem attack always, and for all purposes, illegitimate? Personally, I think not. It is, as the title of my post suggests, a question of relevance.

Relevancy, as the word suggests, is not inherent characteristic of any piece of evidence but exists as a “relation between an item of evidence and a proposition sought to be proved.” See George F. James, “Relevancy, Probability and the Law,” 29 *Cal. L. Rev*. 689, 690-91 (1941). If a piece of evidence tends to prove (or disprove) the proposition for which it is put forth then it must needs be relevant.

As I read some of the posts in response to Mr. Dehlin’s request, two names were often given up as examples (1) Martha Beck; and (2) Grant Palmer. I am an attorney by profession and my thinking and approach to various subjects is informed by my education and experience in that profession. Based on that, I have to say that I find these two examples to be particularly poor examples to flaunt as proof positive of the apologist’s “ad hominem” approach.

Take, for example, Marth Beck. Ms. Beck is the daughter of Hugh Nibley, one of the most respected LDS scholars of the past century and the man whom many would perceive as the father of modern LDS apologetics. Without recounting the whole sordid mess, Ms. Beck wrote a book in which she made some extremely serious allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of her father towards her. As can be imagined, LDS response was swift and, I’m sure Ms. Beck felt, quite personal. The question is, however, was the response appropriate? Was it appropriate to look at Ms. Beck’s personal history, character and reputation? My reply is, How could it have been otherwise?

You see, the problem with Ms. Beck’s allegations was that they were totally unsupported by any other “evidence” which could be considered. Therefore, she made her history and character a legitimate source of inquiry by her own allegations. She wanted her readers to take her word for the veracity of what she claimed occurred, but how can we, as her reader, do so when we know nothing about her? In other words, her character was “relevant” to the very case that she was making. Your character, while not definitive, is relevant to resolving probabilities of guilty. Thus, when many of the claims that Ms. Beck made were shown to be demonstrably false, and when her siblings came forward to directly contradict her account, her reputation for veracity became subject to examination. Moreover, would anyone really want it any other way? Just ask anyone who has ever been unjustly accused of a heinous crime such as sexual abuse and see if they don’t want their accuser’s reputation for honesty and integrity fully vetted. Of course, this does not mean that a serial liar cannot also be the victim of abuse; it simply means that the liar’s testimony is going to come under additional scrutiny because it seems axiomatic that the more of a penchant a person has for shading the truth, the more likely their testimony is false.

Fortunately for all of us, allegations such as those made by Ms. Beck are rare. That brings us to the second example that was posted on Dehlin’s board, that being the case of Grant Palmer. At the time he published his book, *An Insider’s View to Mormon Origins*, several essays were published which took a searching look at Mr. Palmer’s career in CES and were highly critical of his time there. Many people took offense to this penetrating look at the person of Mr. Palmer. The question is, again, was this appropriate? Or, better stated, was it “relevant”? Again, I have a problem seeing how it could not be.

As Dr. Midgley pointed out in is review at the time, both Mr. Palmer and his publisher, made much of his “insider” status. Why? Obviously, because it lent a sense of credibility and expertise to the argument that he made. If a person sets himself out as an expert in some field of endeavor, his claim to expertise is, by definition, relevant. In a legal setting, when either side calls an expert witness, the very first thing that happens before the “expert” is allowed to present any material testimony regarding the actual facts of the case, is a vetting of his alleged experience and expertise. Why? Because the expert is about to present evidence to jury which he wants them to accept. It is the jury’s job to weight that evidence and make an informed decision. The expert’s actual level of expertise is, therefore, relevant to the case being made.

Palmer claimed, at the beginning of his book, that “for thirty-four years I was primarily an Institute director for the Church Educational System (CES)" (p. vii). Palmer raised this issue, not his reviewers, and he used this claim to establish his credibility. Midgley then described what he learned, *with Palmer’s help*:

“Palmer began his CES career teaching at the Church College of New Zealand, which is the Latter-day Saint high school in Templeview (1967—70). He was hired to teach British Empire history but was eventually shifted to teaching religion classes. For health reasons, he did not complete his four-year contract. Palmer was then made the CES coordinator, his official title, for the Whittier Stake in California (1970—73), where he also taught some college-age students at Rio Hondo Jr. College and Whittier College. He then worked one year on a Ph.D. at Brigham Young University before being again assigned as CES coordinator for the Chico Stake (1975—80), where he also taught college-age students at Butte College in Oroville, California. These assignments, where he was the sole CES employee, came at the beginning of his career. He had nothing to do with LDS Institutes of Religion, as that label is commonly understood, for the last two decades of his CES career. Why? In 1980 he relocated to the Salt Lake Valley, where he taught seminary first at East High School (1980—81) and then at Brighton High School (1981—87). He ended his CES career not teaching but counseling in a jail. What the word "primarily" means is that for nine of the thirty-four years of his CES career, while supervising local seminary teachers, he was also an institute "director." Even if one were inclined to count his counseling work at a jail as being an institute director, which I am not willing to do, his career seems to have taken a downward spiral, but neither this fact nor any of the reasons for it is mentioned by Palmer or in the Signature hype for An Insider's View.

I realize that some will complain that, by probing Palmer's background (or beliefs), I offer a diversion from the issues he raises and that what I have presented is an ad hominem attack. This is nonsense. Palmer and his publisher have made his CES career an issue.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

And so, it turns out that Palmer misleads his audience about his CES role and experience. How can this not be relevant? He raised the issue, and used it to strengthen his argument, and augment his own authority. Those who disagree must be allowed to demonstrate that the claim is misleading. Do the critics think it right for Palmer to get away with being deceptive? If not, how can that be remedied if reviewers cannot point out the facts—facts which Midgley acquired with Palmer’s assistance?

Why is this relevant? Perhaps another example, more removed LDS apologetics, can enlighten. The PBS program Frontline recently ran a program dealing with forensic evidence and its uses in criminal trials. A part of that program included an examination of forensic credentialing and the American College of Forensic Examiners International (ACFEI). It investigates whether certification can aid in a person’s ability to testify as an expert witness in court — and whether certain types of certification are acceptably rigorous for this role in the legal system. In short, it turns out that ACFEI is little more than a diploma mill (you can read the report for yourself here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/criminal-justice/real-csi/dr-cyril-wecht-the-benefits-of-forensic-credentialing/>). Do you think a jury would not be interested in this fact? Would it not affect their deliberations? At the very least, doesn’t it affect the weight given to the evidence presented? Dozens, if not hundreds, of people were sent to jail (and in some cases received the death penalty) based at least in part on the testimony of the “experts” certified by this organization. It would seem that the relevancy of the education and training of the person providing the testimony should be quite clear. Moreover, how should this not apply in a scholarly context?

For example, if a critic of the Book of Abraham has no formal training in Egyptology, is that not relevant to the weight given to his conclusions? If a critic of the Book of the Mormon who criticizes the Mesoamerican aspects to the book’s claims has no formal training in Mesoamerican studies, is that not relevant? Interestingly, one of the most prevalent ad hominem attacks that I have seen come in this context, when critics dismiss the work of trained experts such as John Clark, Brant Gardner, and John Gee because “they are Mormon.” It is a classic example of the ad hominem fallacy of trying to get people to ignore the actual argument due to a perceived flaw in the person who made the argument. This is not to say that amateurs cannot and do not present reasoned arguments that must be dealt with. In my profession, there are many people who believe they are every bit as capable of defending themselves as a trained attorney.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nevertheless, most people prefer to hire a person who has the training and field work.

Another example comes to mind: In his biography of Joseph Smith, author Dan Vogel employed Family System Theory in an attempt to understand the Mormon Prophet. Nevertheless, Mr. Vogel is not a trained psychologist, psychiatrist or even a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. How is that information not relevant? And the corresponding review by NAMI employed a response from people with the relevant training who provided what I thought were materially damaging responses to the argument’s Vogel made.

My whole point here is that, in many instances, an examination of the person making the argument is appropriate. It gives us a basis for weighing and measuring the argument being made as well as understanding the context in which the argument is made. That is not ad hominem.

Non-LDS scholars have long realized these facts. If (say) Vogel were to present a logical syllogism, it makes little difference whether he is trained in Family System Theory or anything else. All that matters is the syllogism. Unfortunately, most issues with scripture, ancient langauges, history, and all the other topics that impact “apologetics” aren’t like mathematical or logical syllogisms. One historian noted that these issues sometimes need to come to the fore if we care about the truth, even though people will get upset:

Except with very good friends, it is considered tactless and discourteous to suggest that someone’s views are a reflection of his or her background, prejudices, or psychic needs. We stick to the reasoned arguments advanced, even if privately we think those arguments are shallow rationalizations. The need to behave this was in scholarly discussion is obvious, as are the costs of violating the rule. But if, as historians of an ongoing discussion, we believe that the protagonists are in fact often disingenuous in their arguments, are following hidden agendas, and are expressing views shaped by ‘extra rational’ factors, what kind of historians would we be if we suppressed this perception? (Of course, the perception might be wrong, but that is quite another issue.)[[3]](#footnote-3)

And yet (as in the case of Palmer, above) sometimes this type of analysis is vital:

…an *ad hominem* argument is a device intended to divert attention from the critical examination of the substance of an argument, and to discredit that argument by dragging in **irrelevant** **considerations** having to do with the character or motives of its author. That this is disreputable procedure is clear enough in cases where the argument itself is ‘followable’: in which those being addressed have the opportunity of addressing themselves systematically and exclusively to ‘relevant’ considerations. The impersonal ethos of science is based on the proposition that what science offers is ‘public knowledge,’ subject to criticial examination by the scientific community. The ‘replicable experiment’ is the prime example of this characteristic of science…. On this assumption, *ad hominem* arguments are surely an irrelevancy, and should be scornfully dismissed.

But, are the characteristic products of historians like this? The historian has seen, at first hand, a great mass of evidence, often unpublished, and difficult to access. The historian develops an interpretation of this evidence based on years of immersion in the material [critics of the Church develop their views in a much shorter period of time, and with much less profundity]—together, of course, with the perceptual apparatus and assumptions he or she brings to it. Historians employ devices, the footnote being the most obvious example, to attain for their work something resembling ‘replicability,’ the the resemblance is not all that close.

Most historical writing is, at best, ‘semipublic’….The historian is less like the author of a logical demonstration...more like a witness to what has been found on a voyage of discovery [or in a court room]. And arguments which are illegitimate when addressed to the author of a transparently followable syllogism are quite appropriate in the case of a witness.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The same author goes on to quote a logic textbook, which tells us: “certain motives weaken our competence and our readiness to observe certain facts or to state them fairly. Hence the existence of such motives, if such existence can be be proved in any given case, is relevant to determine the credibility of a witness.”[[5]](#footnote-5),[[6]](#footnote-6)

Finally, as I noted before, I think many critics have confused sarcasm, irony and cynicism for ad hominem. Others seem to feel that these have no place in scholarly pursuits. I think this is wrong. A bit of well placed sarcasm can be quite effective in the context of an overall argument (conceding the fact that a response that is nothing but sarcasm isn’t very effective). They can be used to effectively –and colorfully – point out the deficiencies in an argument. Furthermore, while I make no claim to having read extremely wide-afield, it is my experience that virtually every form of academic writing that I have come into contact with has included sarcasm, irony and cynicism as accepted facets of the form. To focus on these aspects, and refuse to address or even acknowledge the serious argument being made, is to commit another fallacy: the “style over substance fallacy” (<http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Style_over_substance_fallacy>). And, critics of the Church commit this fallacy (and others) every time they complain about, say, Dan Peterson’s sense of humor (or lack thereof) without acknowledging the serious argument he is always making. G.K. Chesterton, a Catholic apologist with a similarly sharp wit, once observed, “Mr. McCabe thinks that I am not serious but only funny, because Mr. McCabe thinks that funny is the opposite of serious. Funny is the opposite of not funny, and of nothing else.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In fine, looking at *relevant aspects* of the person making the argument is not a fallacy. In many aspects it is essential to making an informed judgment of the argument. It’s a matter of relevance. The fact that critics have to stoop to their own invocation of *ad hominem* and the style before substance fallacy argues that they are ill-equipped to confront the arguments being made.

1. <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=15&num=2&id=514> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We call them inmates. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Novick, 219-220, bold added [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Morris R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel, *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method* (new York, 1934), 180; cited in Novick, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is true of another example that has recently popped up on Mr. Dehlin’s board, that of D. Michael Quinn. Mr. Quinn wrote a paper about same-sex dynamic among early Mormons in which he found much more sympathy for homosexual behavior among the early Mormons. His evidence and conclusions were hotly contested. How is the fact that Mr. Quinn is also a practicing homosexual not relevant to a discussion of his handling of the evidence, the conclusions he draws and his possible motives for drawing such conclusions? [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gilbert K Chesterton, "On Mr. McCabe and a Divine Frivolity," [Heretics](http://www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/heretics/) (New York: John Lane company, 1905 [twelfth edition, 1919]). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)