The Persuasive Force of the Ad Baculum

Standardly, the ad baculum fallacy consists in using the threat of violence or sanction to solicit agreement to a standpoint. A common informal logical account of its fallaciousness is that the threat is irrelevant to the truth of the conclusion. While this is a compact account, it is hard to find satisfactory cases. More plausibly, a dialogical account locates the error in the subversion of the purpose of a critical discussion. This makes better sense of actual cases, but, I shall argue, it fails to explain what makes the ad baculum an effective and pernicious form of persuasion. While attempting to force someone to adopt a standpoint is obviously unacceptable, it’s not very deceptive, because it relies on the target recognizing the changed dialogical situation, and it is of limited value, as it likely terminates the exchange. This paper offers a new account of the ad baculum where the main purpose is that an audience downstream from the initial ad baculum exchange will unknowingly take up the illegitimately acquired commitment as evidence in their reasoning. Ultimately, therefore, the ad baculum consists in misrepresenting the quality of evidence by means of the forced adoption of a particular standpoint.