

Logical Fallacies

Fallacies are everywhere. Politicians, celebrities, and almost anyone else in a position to influence others often resort to faulty reasoning to try to advance their beliefs. In addition, many of us – whether we know it or not – have a tendency to sidestep coherent, logical, and legitimate argument, supplanting it instead with nothing more than rhetorically persuasive language. Even though fallacious arguments can be quite convincing (sometimes more so than non-fallacious ones depending on your audience), they are still errors in reasoning and you should never use them in a debate setting to justify a claim. By knowing some of the more common fallacies that will be listed below, you will gain the ability to strengthen your own ethics arguments; and, of equal importance, gain the ability to effectively criticize and rebut the fallacious arguments of your opponents.

Argumentum Ad Hominem

Latin for “argument against the person,” ad hominem fallacies attempt to disparage a certain claim by attacking the source of the claim, rather than the claim itself. Fallacies of this nature are the most common of all mistakes in reasoning. The different types of ad hominem are listed below:

Personal Attack Ad Hominem – attributing a negative feature to the source of a claim in an effort to refute the claim itself. Though the negative feature may be true, in no way does it refute the claim’s merits.

Example: “Congressman Peters is a scoundrel with three ethics violations. The last thing we want to do is vote for his tax cut proposal” (*His tax cut proposal could be a good idea, regardless of the fact that the Congressman is a scoundrel*).

Example (Case #5): “Fred Phelps is a sick individual who protests at the funerals of America’s fallen heroes. I feel it is right to reject his views regarding the extent of the First Amendment.”

Inconsistency Ad Hominem – attempting to refute the source’s claim because the claim is inconsistent with something that the source has said or done. Just because the source is a hypocrite does not make the claim itself any weaker.

Example: “How dare these celebrities tell us not to drive big cars and waste fuel because it is bad for the environment when they fly around in big, fat, gas-guzzling, private jets?” (*Certainly a case of the pot calling the kettle black, but the claim that we should reduce fuel consumption should be examined on its merits*).

Circumstantial Ad Hominem – Attempting to refute the source’s claim because of the source’s particular circumstances. Though the source’s circumstances could call the source’s motives into question, in no way does such a situation refute the claim’s merits.

Example: “Congressman Peters thinks that we should use tax dollars to help build a highway in his district. It’s obvious that he’s just doing this to try to get reelected, so we should vote against the project.”

Example (Case #11): “Forget about Dr. Suarez’s proposal to allow museum visitors to view live surgeries. As curator, all he cares about is making more money for the museum” *(Even if true, his proposal could still be a good idea on its own, regardless of the circumstances created by his motives).*

Begging the Question (Circular Reasoning)

Fallacy that occurs when one attempts to prove a conclusion by using the conclusion itself as its premise. If your argument attempts to prove X, then you cannot use X to help prove your argument, because such a tactic would presuppose that X has already been proven.

Example (Case #2): “It would be immoral for the university to advertise the morning-after pill. Allowing the university to do something like that runs contrary to all things good, honest, and decent” *(In other words, advertising the morning-after pill is immoral because, well, its immoral).*

False Dilemma

A fallacy that occurs when one attempts to limit considerations to only two extreme alternatives when more alternatives exist. Such an action stands as quite unfair to those you force to face the dilemma.

Example: “You are either with us or against us in the fight against terror” – President George W. Bush, 11/6/01 *(Bush presents one of the most classic false dilemmas here, refusing to afford people a middle ground).*

Example: “We have to send Jimmy to the expensive baseball camp this summer, or else he will get fat” *(Not necessarily, maybe Jimmy could go to a less expensive camp instead, or not go away to camp and just exercise more during the summer, or go on a diet. Again, there are gray areas within the extremes).*

Example (Case #9): “If you let Bay Bridge open a ship breaking plant, you have no concern for the environment” *(This one’s a little trickier, but the two extremes are impossible to ignore: Either you prohibit the plant, or you hate the environment. What if you let Bay Bridge build the plant, but only if they took some measures to harm the environment less? Clearly, this would show some concern for our ecosystem that our speaker asserts you do not have).*

Irrelevant Appeal to Authority

We often like to bolster certain claims by asserting that a credible source holds the same belief. What better way to prove the crime rate is decreasing by citing statistics

from the Department of Justice, or to attest to the strength of the American economy by quoting the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Unfortunately, some of us fallaciously attempt to strengthen a claim by appealing to a source that possesses irrelevant or no credentials to address the issue at hand. Tom Cruise might think that the crime rate is going down, but chances are he lacks the expertise to legitimately dissertate on the subject; and, even though Stephen Hawking is an exceedingly brilliant individual, he is not an expert on the American economy, and thus his opinions on the subject should not carry much weight.

Example (Case #7): "My Uncle Bill has been a deer hunter for his entire life, and he says that companies have no legal right to prevent people from keeping guns in their car, even when the car is on company property" (*Unless Uncle Bill became a law professor in between hunting seasons, this is an irrelevant appeal to authority*).

Line-Drawing

Belief that, because you cannot specifically specify the exact point when A becomes B in a given situation (determine the line when force becomes excessive force or when speech becomes obscenity), that one must concede that we can never identify *some* point where B has occurred. Such reasoning stands flawed. Think of it this way: imagine you are broke. A kind individual approaches you, offering to give you one dollar every minute for the rest of your life. It would be very difficult to pinpoint the exact time you would become "rich" (is it after 100,000 minutes? 100,001? 100,002?). Rest assured, though, after the kind man has put a billion dollars in your pocket, no one would rightfully call you poor anymore.

Example: "We should not abort human life. No one knows precisely when in the gestation period a fetus becomes human life, so policymakers should outlaw abortion throughout a woman's entire pregnancy" (*Just because no one can determine the exact point when a fetus becomes a human does not mean that there isn't a point when a fetus has yet to achieve a human state*).

Perfectionist Fallacy

Some might try to argue that a certain policy or idea should not be refuted simply because it will not meet its goal to perfection. Those who do this commit the perfectionist fallacy. If such idea stands as the best option possible or available, one would want to implement it anyway.

Example: "The NFL should not use instant replay to help make calls. No matter how many cameras they have on the field, they are still going to get some calls wrong" (*yeah, but they'll get a lot less wrong*).

Popularity, Argument from

Also known as the “everybody knows...” fallacy, arguments from popularity occur when one urges another to accept a claim because a substantial number of people (other than authorities or experts) agree with your claim. People often employ this fallacy in an effort to mask the fact they do not actually have an argument.

Example: “Most people believe in God. Therefore, God exists” (*The statement, in no way, proves the conclusion. If most people did not believe in God, using that as evidence of God’s nonexistence would stand as equally fallacious.*)

Post Hoc, ergo Propter Hoc

The name of this fallacy (known as “Post Hoc” for short) is Latin for “after it, therefore because of it.” It refers to any argument where, just because something happened *after* event X, that it was necessarily the result of event X. You might wake up before the sun rises every morning, but it is foolish to assert that your waking up *causes* the sun to rise. To avoid committing this fallacy in general, you would need to provide some insight into how X causes the event in question.

Example (Case #5): “The Westboro church is justified in protesting because they are right in their beliefs. America tolerates homosexuality, and now our soldiers are dying in Iraq. Thus, the fact that our soldiers are dying must be a direct result America’s tolerance of homosexuality” (*Even if we were willing to grant that the first sentence is necessarily true if the second and third are true, the statement still commits a post hoc fallacy – and a rather disturbing one at that.*)

Example: “I wear a red shirt every day that I take an exam. I have received an A on every exam. I should probably wear a red shirt to my exam tomorrow or I won’t get an A” (*unless we are dealing with some sort of magic shirt, the test taker’s superstitious reasoning stands quite fallacious.*)

Slippery Slope

When debating an issue on its ethical merits, one can make a very convincing argument by examining the positive or negative consequences a particular action may create. However, take special care not to say that action X will absolutely lead to result Y unless you have evidence of such. To do otherwise constitutes a slippery slope fallacy. You cannot make an argument that one occurrence will inevitably follow another without an argument for that inevitability.

Example (Case #4): “If we say that it is ethical for the Miami Herald to fire the columnist, then the next thing you know no reporters will try to push the envelope at all anymore for fear of their jobs. It will be the end of freedom of the press as we know it.

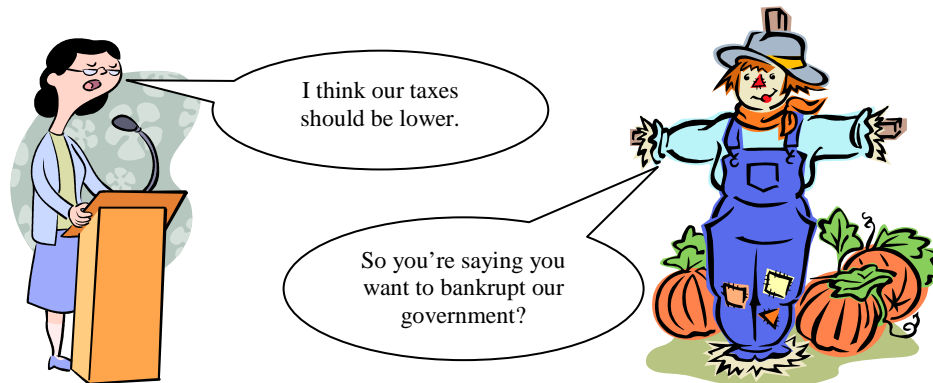
Example: “If you allow prayer in school, you’re going to open the floodgates. Next year, teachers will have to read a verse from the bible to start class each day. The year after that, all students will have to recite the ‘Our Father’

at lunchtime. The year after that, our schools will require church attendance every day" (*There is no argument provided here that leads us to believe that school prayer will lead to any of those consequences*).

Example: "What is next? Will our courts now strip 'so help me God' from the pledge taken by new presidents? This is the worst kind of political correctness run amok." - U.S. Senator Kit Bond, reacting to a Federal Appeals Court ruling that the phrase "one nation under God" makes the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional.

Straw Man

Among the top ten of the most commonly used fallacies, straw manning occurs when one misrepresents, oversimplifies, or distorts a claim and then attempts to refute the new, weaker, claim (akin to a fighter building a man made out of straw because such an opponent would be easier to defeat than an actual man).



Example (Case #3):

Team A: "I think that it is okay for the producers of *Idol Starz* to select each week's winners rather than go by who received the most votes."

Team B: "That's a terrible idea. I, unlike my opponent, do not believe that it is always okay for people to lie on television. That's the last thing our country needs. What if news broadcasters lied? No one would receive the right information about important issues." (*The debater has altered his opponent's claim. Team A did not claim that it is always okay for people to lie on television*).

Example: "[Animal rights groups] view me with some measure of hostility because I am constantly challenging their fundamental premise that animals are superior to human beings." - Rush Limbaugh

Tradition, Appeal to

Also known as the appeal to common practice, one engages in the fallacious appeal to tradition when arguing that something is better or more correct simply because it is older, or that “things have always been done that way.” The quality of being an older course of action in itself does not inherently make it better than a newer action.

Example (Case #8): “People do not really use in vitro fertilization to create a child compatible for transplants. I don’t see any reason why we should start doing that now. Why not keep things the way they are?”

Example (Case #2): “The University of Wisconsin Health Center has offered the morning-after pill for years. Why rock the boat? (*If it is better for the center not to offer the pill, then why not rock the boat?*)”