

Fallacious Reasoning and Argumentation

Reasoned argumentation can go awry in numerous ways. Faulty logic comes in various forms, all of which are to be avoided. The following list lays out how the logic train can become derailed.

Fallacies Based on Emotional Appeals

Scare Tactics: Emotional appeals based in threats are known as scare tactics. When my brother or I would make a crude face when we were kids, we might expect to hear our mother say in a scolding tone, "Your face will freeze that way!" Scare tactics represent faulty reasoning because they appeal to our fear response, and may be used to rouse irrational suspicion, prejudice, and hostility toward targeted groups. Scare tactics, for instance, played a role in demonizing the Jewish population of post World War I Germany, leading to the rise of Fascism and the Holocaust.

Either-Or-Thinking: The either-or appeal reduces the audience's options to two rigid choices; polarized thinking is therefore encouraged, with one option being presented as wholly preferable while the other is wholly abhorrent. In addition, issues presented in either-or appeal deny the complexity inherent in choices, reducing them to simple equations. A claim by a politician that school vouchers must be enacted or we will forever be stuck with ineffective public schools may appeal to the pro-voucher audience but doesn't address the myriad ways in which school reform is taking place aside from the voucher issue. Either-or appeals do not encourage a heightened level of awareness about issues due to the tendency to oversimplify.

Slippery Slope: The metaphor here is of a snowball which starts down a hill and gathers mass until it forms into a destructive, unstoppable boulder. While it is true that an action in the present does have consequences for the future, the slippery slope appeal distorts the connection, stretching to unreasonable limits the predicted impact of future events. The NRA might fallaciously argue, for instance, that a ban on assault rifles is one step away from negation of the Second Amendment's right-to-bear arms clause. The slippery slope appeal can thus be tied to the strategy of scare tactics, for it is designed to exaggerate beyond reasonable evidence feelings of fear and threatening (but totally unrealistic) consequences.

Hopping on the Band Wagon: This fallacy asserts that what is popular is preferable or right. In other words, because everyone else is doing it makes it (whatever it is) the right course of action. Teenagers (and adults, too) may be driven toward certain buying decisions based on what is fashionable or trendy. However, the fact that an item is popularly consumed does not inherently argue for its value. The bandwagon effect, when attaining widespread following, has had disastrous consequences, as evidenced by events such as the Salem Witch Trials, the persecution of Americans under McCarthyism, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Fallacies Based on Character Appeals

False Authority: Fallacious reasoning can be based on the notion that just because a person is an authority (or is asserted to be one), his/her claim is inherently true. The authority of the person is not, in and of itself, grounds for accepting the claim. To say that something is true simply because a person in authority said so is a linkage obviously open to question and challenge. Claims to authority may also be grounded in sacred objects such as texts (e.g. the Bible, the Koran) and through the power of institutions; however, the same principle applies--appeals to authority alone are not sufficient grounds for a claim to be accepted.

Dogmatism: Dogmatism presents claims as doctrinally (inherently) true, not subject to revision or falsification. As such, dogmatic proclamations do not invite argumentation and fail to meet the standard of controversiality. Dogmatism has the effect of enforcing one world view by shutting out an examination of alternatives.

Moral Equivalence: The moral equivalence appeal falsely collapses minor and major wrongdoing into one common category. An office co-worker might argue, for instance, that he/she is not stealing but "borrowing" office supplies like pens and staplers for use at home. Here, the argument is that minor theft is not theft at all when compared, let's say, to a bank robber committing armed robbery. Likewise, a man who is having an affair may argue that he is no different from the millions of other married American men who have cheated on their wives, thus recasting his immoral behavior as acceptable since it falls within a perceived societal norm.

Ad Hominem: An ad hominem appeal (in Latin, meaning "to the man") directs its attack at the person making the claim rather than the claim itself. Ad hominem amounts, therefore, to character assassination, the linkage being that if the reputation of the arguer can be attacked and discredited so, too, will his/her ideas. Reasoned argumentation refrains from stooping to the low, manipulative level of irrelevant personal attacks. Ad Hominem attacks can be seen in abundance in political campaign advertising.

Fallacies of Fact/Reason-Based Appeals

Hasty Generalization: Generalizations are often made without sufficient evidence. On the basis of a limited sample size, a broad-based generalization is made which tries to account for more than it reasonably can. Hasty generalizations are easily seen in inaccurate racial stereotypes such as "Irishmen are all drunks" or "Jews are cheap." Valid, reliable reasoning ensures that any inference made rests upon a sound sampling of representative evidence.

Faulty Causation: The Latin name for this fallacy is "ergo propter hoc", meaning "after this, therefore because of this." Our minds are naturally geared toward cause-effect analysis; however, to avoid this fallacy we must be careful about critically examining the causal linkages to see how well they hold. If, for example, a member of a Native American tribe performs a traditional rain dance and rain begins to fall, can we say that the rain dance produced the effect? Causality is not a simple equation--an effect may have myriad causes, some of which we aren't readily aware of.

Begging the Question: To understand the fallacious reasoning in begging the question, one must uncover how the reasoning offered on behalf of the claim is asserted as if it is an unquestionable fact when the truth is exactly the opposite. Take for example this claim: "You can't arrest me; I'm the president of the United States." The reasoning asserts that the President is not subject to the same laws as any other U.S. citizen--a clearly false reason. Begging the question is an appeal which attempts to divert attention away from the true relationship between the claim and the evidence.

Equivocation: Think of equivocation as a wolf in lamb's clothing, a falsehood dressed up as if it were the truth. A person who says "I didn't lie; I simply didn't tell the truth" may be said to be caught in an equivocation. President Clinton's testimony that he did not have sex with Monica Lewinsky was seen as an equivocation by those who regarded oral sex as sex (a definition President Clinton did not subscribe to).

Non Sequitur: Arguments need to follow a logical connection between the evidence, reasoning, and claims. A non sequitur fails to follow this requirement. For example, a husband who says to his wife "If you loved me, you'd go to the 49er's game with me" is engaged in a non sequitur. Tying love for her husband to attendance at a football game does not constitute a logical linkage. The conclusion (you don't love me if you don't do I want you to do) does not follow from the premise.

Faulty Analogy: Analogies can be powerful tools for critical thinking. When Shakespeare compares human beings to players on a stage, the analogy is rich in meaningful implications (each person plays a role, our life is a drama consisting of actions, etc.). However, analogies can be stretched beyond reason, setting up a false equivalence or context. To equate death with sleep, for instance, may work on some levels but clearly not on others (sleepers wake up while the dead do not).