

Logical Fallacies

Instructor: Gil Yoder

The term “fallacy” refers to a mistake in reasoning. Sometimes it is used to refer to any erroneous idea, such as “the fallacy of infant baptism,” but in this class we will use the term as it is used in Copi to refer to “an error in reasoning or in argument” (Copi, p. 89).

It is difficult to offer a classification system for fallacies, because there are so many ways in which a fallacy may be committed. However most known fallacies are well known and can be classified in several broad categories. In this study we will consider some fallacies that fall under the categories of *Fallacies of Relevance* and *Fallacies of Ambiguity*.

Fallacies of Relevance

The following fallacies have a common characteristic in that the fallacies relate to premises which have no logical relevance to the conclusion. There may be a psychological relationship to the conclusion that may make the fallacious arguments persuasive, but the logical connection is missing. They may be “successful” owing to the “expressive function of evoking attitudes” (*ibid.*, p. 91), but they lack logical force. The result is that men and women are persuaded to accept a conclusion that is not justified by the premises and caused to accept a proposition that may or may not be true.

In the following fallacies we will generally use the English name for the fallacy, except where the Latin name may be familiar.

1. Appeal to force.

This fallacy is committed when one attempts to use threats of force to coerce others to accept a particular point of view. It normally occurs when reason fails to produce sufficient justification for the conclusion, but it is also possible to commit the fallacy when sufficient justification for the conclusion also exists.

Much of the time the fallacy is very subtle, and deceiving. Even the suggestion of force being applied if a conclusion is not accepted is an appeal to force.

It should be noted that not all appeals to force are fallacious. To say, “If you cross a busy street, you might get hit by a truck,” is an appeal to force, but it is also relevant to the conclusion, so this appeal is not considered a fallacy.

2. Ad hominem attack (abusive).

This term means “argument to the man,” and refers to an argument that attacks an opponent. By attacking the person who makes an argument, attention is deflected away

from the argument to the one making the argument. One form of *argumentum ad hominem* is an abusive type where in the character of an opponent is questioned. One might say, “We shouldn’t listen to Jim, because Jim is an atheist.” It may be true that Jim is an atheist, but that alone does not mean that his proposition is wrong.

The apostle Paul wrote,

Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice (Phi. 1:15-18).

It was not important to Paul whether the teacher was sincere or insincere as long as the truth was preached. We should be willing to accept true propositions regardless of the source of those propositions.

3. *Ad hominem attack (circumstantial).*

Another variety of *argumentum ad hominem* is of the circumstantial variety. This fallacy occurs when one attempts to persuade another to accept a conclusion not based on the facts that support the conclusion, but upon the circumstances surrounding the individuals he is seeking to influence. Someone might argue, “You should drink Dr. Pepper, because you work for Dr. Pepper.” A child might say to its father, “You shouldn’t tell me not to smoke, because you have smoked all your life.”

There is a form of *ad hominem* argument, however, that may not be fallacious. If a debater makes contradictory assertions, it is appropriate to use this fact to show that both assertions cannot be true.

Foy Wallace debated a Baptist on the essentiality of baptism and premillennialism. During the first part of the debate the Baptist argued that Mark 16:16 was not a part of the Bible because it was missing from the oldest manuscripts of the Bible. Brother Wallace ignored the argument and made his arguments for baptism from other passages of scripture. When it came time to discuss premillennialism, and the Baptist made his arguments from Revelation 20, brother Wallace pointed out that the same old manuscripts that leave off the last chapter of Mark, also leave off the last few chapters of Revelation including Revelation 20.

4. *Argument from ignorance.*

In this fallacy the argument is made that a proposition must be true because no one has proven it not to be true, or that a proposition is false because no one has proven it to be true.

The claim that the universe is billions of years old depends upon this kind of argument. One of the popular arguments in support of this claim is that star light coming to the earth from distant stars travels through billions of light years of space (a measurement of distance, not time) at a very well known speed (one light year per year). The argument states that no known mechanism exists, or any other facts, to explain how star light from a star billions of years from the earth could reach the earth in less than a few thousand years. The claim is true, but the fact that we are not aware of facts that can explain this is not proof that facts do not exist which could explain it, if known.

5. Appeal to pity.

In this fallacy an appeal is made to the hearers to draw a certain conclusion because of the pity the hearers might have for the one making the argument. The pity might come from various sources. It could come because of circumstances such as poverty, or race, or religion. It might occur owing to the fact that the hearers have a special relationship to the one making the argument. "I'm your preacher, so you should agree with me, rather than my detractor."

6. Popular appeal.

This argument is based on the popularity or lack of popularity of a conclusion. "Everyone is doing it," is one example. "No one believes that any more" is another. Advertisements often use this fallacy to promote their products. They want everyone to believe that their products can make them popular with other people, so buy this to make you look more attractive, and this to make you smarter, etc.

Often in debate the argument is made that a position should be accepted because "most brethren" believe it to be true. This is a form of popular appeal.

7. Appeal to authority.

The fallacy of the appeal to authority refers to the improper use of authorities to draw a conclusion. For example one might say, "My doctor told me that it was perfectly safe to drive ten miles over the speed limit." A medical doctor might be an authority in many things, but not necessarily in safe driving practices.

Many times this fallacy is less obvious. A respected leader might be given too much credit for his opinions, and used improperly in this regard. Usually "brother Yoder says so and so" would not be a very good argument. One ought to ask if "so and so" a valid and sound argument, and then base his conclusions on the answer, and not only on why says it.

Many times authoritative books, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, lexicons, are used improperly. A lexicographer is an authority on the meaning of words, but he is not an authority on the interpretation of scripture. If an authority makes an argument for his

views, we should pay attention to the argument, but we should not accept their conclusions uncritically.

8. Arguing from the general to the particular.

This argument is called “the fallacy of accident.” It refers to applying a general principal to a particular application. General statements however usually have exceptions, so the fallacy of accident occurs when one attempts to make this kind of argument.

Consider this example:

American made cars have always been popular automobiles.
The Edsel was an American made car.
Therefore the Edsel was a popular automobile.

The error in this argument is that the first premise speaks only of what is generally true, and not what is always true.

9. Arguing from the particular to the general.

It is appropriate to draw general conclusions by comparing particular members of a set, and drawing a conclusion about them, but the study must be of those members which are typical for the set. If one argues from an isolated anecdote to what is true of the general he commits the fallacy of converse accident.

10. False cause.

This fallacy errs in that it assigns as a cause of an event another event merely because the latter preceded the former.

11. Begging the question.

When one assumes the truth of his position as a premise of his position, he is begging the question. Usually the error is subtle and the fact that the conclusion of the argument is included in the arguments premises is hidden from view. Example: Since I am not lying, it follows that I am telling the truth.

12. Complex question.

A complex question is a question that presupposes a proposition in addition to the answer the question seeks. “Have you stopped beating your wife,” is a well known complex question. Although the question appears to call for a yes or a no, to answer with either yes or no would imply that at some point the respondent actually beat his wife.

Complex questions are not confined to jokes. They might be used to trick an opponent into saying something he does not mean. For example consider the question, “Do you

disagree with the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith only?” This question presumes that the doctrine of salvation by faith only is a biblical doctrine, so to answer yes is to affirm the doctrine of salvation by faith only, and to answer no is to imply that you disagree with a biblical doctrine. Either answer is untenable because the question is complex.

The correct answer to a complex question is not to answer yes or no, but to expose the hidden implication, and then to rephrase the question to remove the implication, and to answer that.

13. Irrelevant conclusion.

This fallacy refers to an argument is made for a conclusion that differs from the conclusion the speaker intends to support. For example one might present an argument proving the importance of worship as a justification for buying a piano for the church. Everyone would agree with the argument but the argument would be irrelevant to the question of whether a piano should be purchased. The question to be asked in this case, and the argument that would need to be made would be, would a piano help to satisfy the need for worship.

Fallacies of Ambiguity

These fallacies refer to various ways that arguments are presented so as to capitalize on a lack of clarity. If the lack of clarity is not exposed, arguments of this nature can often be persuasive.

1. Equivocation.

The fallacy of equivocation refers to the practice of using words or terms in one sense to establish a specific proposition, and then using the same words or terms in another sense to draw an unwarranted conclusion. For example the word “supernatural” is susceptible to equivocation, because it has several accepted meanings. One of the meanings of the term is “things and the actions of things which are not part of the natural universe.” By this definition angels, devils, and God are all supernatural, and the things they do directly are supernatural actions. By this definition God’s forgiveness of sins is a supernatural act.

However, the term supernatural has another meaning that is not equal to that meaning. In some contexts the term supernatural means “actions or events which supersede the laws of nature” such as levitation (a superseding of the law of gravity), virgin conception (superseding of the law of procreation), *ex nihilo* creation (superseding of the laws of thermodynamics).

Sometimes proponents of the idea that God supersedes the laws of nature today will make an argument that depends on an equivocation of this term. The argument states that the forgiveness of God is proof that God works supernaturally today, so we should accept the

conclusion that supernatural acts still occur today. Since supernatural acts still occur today, we should accept the “fact” that God still works today by superseding the laws of nature.

2. Amphiboly.

An “amphibology” is a word or phrase that is susceptible to more than one meaning. There are many humorous examples such as:

Dog for sale. Will eat anything. Especially fond of children.
I don't have a problem with smoking.
A Cretin once said, “All Cretins are liars.”

When a proposition is susceptible to various interpretations the fallacy of amphiboly has occurred.

3. Accent.

This fallacy occurs when the meaning of a term or proposition shifts in meaning as a result of a change of accent or emphasis. Consider the meaning of the following phrase as different words are accented:

We should not speak *ill* of our friends.
We should not speak ill of *our* friends.
We should not speak ill of our friends.
We should not *speak* ill of our friends.

This error can also occur when quotations of men are taken out of context wherein a different slant is given to the words because of the missing words that surrounded them in the original setting. Consider this hypothetical quote:

My friends, the negative of this debate just said, “the affirmative’s argument is true”! By saying this he has given up his position, and we can all now go home. The debate is over.

Now consider the hypothetical context of the quote:

My friends, we are here to explore the truth in this debate. If my opponent can support his arguments with valid and sound arguments, then *the affirmative’s argument is true*. But we will show that affirmative cannot provide us with sound arguments, because his position is false.

4. Composition.

The fallacy of composition refers to an error in which one assumes that the characteristics of the components of a thing are also characteristics of the whole. An example would be

that since an aspirin makes one feel better, the whole bottle of aspirin should make him feel great. Another example would be that since a feather is light, it should be no trouble lifting a ton of feathers.

Another similar error (also going by the same fallacy name) occurs when one assumes that a characteristic of a single member of a class must also be true of the whole class. For example it would be fallacious to say that since a marble is larger than a grain of sand, that all marbles are larger than all grains of sand.

5. Division.

This fallacy is the opposite of composition. It argues in reverse that the characteristics of a thing must also be the characteristics of the parts of the thing. For example if one says that he agrees with a certain point of view, it is a fallacy to say that he must agree with every argument that has been used to lead to that point of view.