

Phil 2302 Logic
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Fallacies of Relevance¹

"Good reasons must, of force, give place to better."
—Shakespeare

"There is a mighty big difference between good, sound reasons,
and reasons that sound good."
—Burton Hillis

"It would be a very good thing if every trick could receive some short and
obviously appropriate name, so that when a man used this or that particular trick,
he could at once be reprov'd for it."
—Arthur Schopenhauer

Introduction:

There are many ways to bring irrelevant matters into an argument and the study below will examine many of them. These fallacies (pathological arguments!) demonstrate the lengths to which people will go to win an argument, *even if they cannot prove their point!* Fallacies of relevance share a common characteristic in that the arguments in which they occur have premises that are logically irrelevant to the conclusion. Yet, the premises seem to be relevant psychologically, so that the conclusion seems to follow from the premises. The actual connection between premises and conclusion is emotional, not logical. To identify a fallacy of relevance, you must be able to distinguish between genuine evidence and various unrelated forms of appeal.

FALLACIES THAT ATTACK

I. Appeal to Force (*Argumentum ad Baculum* ="argument toward the club or stick")

"Who overcomes by force has overcome but half his foe." Milton.

"I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable.
There is something unfair about its use. It is like hitting below the intellect."
Oscar Wilde

¹ NB: This material is taken from several logic texts authored by N. Geisler, H. Kahane, and others. I make no claim to originality in this material.

A. Definition

This type of argument does not even attempt to be relevant. It says: "Accept this argument, or I'll beat you up!" It seeks to persuade by force, threat, blackmail, and intimidation. It assumes that "might makes right" and persuades in its arousal of the hearer's fear of physical or psychological harm. Someone who is the victim of the "Stick" might respond to it like this: "Sir, the logic of your argument is highly questionable, but your forceful method of presentation is exceedingly frightening and thus irrefutable." It might take the following form:

1. Those who have the power to control other person's psychological and physical welfare are always correct in the beliefs and opinions.
2. XYZ has the power to control other person's psychological and physical welfare, and XYZ believes that ABC is true.
3. Therefore, ABC "is true" (or is at least accepted).

The best way to respond to the argument of the stick is to remind the person committing the fallacy that his/her position, power, and authority do not constitute evidence for his/her conclusions. Power corrupts not only character and personality, but also thinking and logic!

B. Examples

1. Acts 4:14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. Acts 4:21 And when they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which they might punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; Acts 5:40 And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and {then} released them.
2. The Spanish Inquisition in defending the RCC used the appeal to force. Dissident Catholics would spend eternity in Hell if they did not repent.
3. USS Pueblo: "You will sign this confession to spying, or we will shoot your crew one at a time in your presence."
4. Feminism: "If particular attention is not paid to the rights of ladies, we will foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no power or voice of representation."

5. The Sibling argument: "If you don't do what I say, I'm gonna call my big brother and he will beat you up."

6. The employer argument: "I'm the one who signs your paycheck." "I'm the boss around here." "I own this company." "I have the power to fire you."

7. Adolf Hitler's use of the stick via military maneuvers and rhetoric.

II. Attack the Person (*Argumentum ad Hominem* = argument to the man)

"You can prove I'm the devil's brother, and you still haven't answered my argument." Anon.

"If the premises are sufficient, they are so, no matter by whom stated."
M. R. Cohen

A. Definition

This fallacy always involves two arguers. One of them advances an argument, and then the other responds by directing his or her attention not to the person's argument, but to the person him/herself. When this occurs, the second person is committing an argument against the person. Instead of addressing the issue, *ad rem*, address the man, *ad hominem*. It is not an attack on the argument, but an attack on the arguer, not the proposition, but the person. *Argumentum ad Hominem* can assume three distinct forms: *ad Hominem* abusive; *ad Hominem* circumstantial; and *tu quoque* ("you too!"). And the best way to respond to such arguments is to point out that the irrelevant attack has nothing to do with the issue at hand, and that the discussion needs to return to the argument as such.

B. *Ad Hominem* abusive

1. Definition: This is the argument by means of character assassination. Reject whatever so-in-so says because so-in-so is a bad person. An abusive argument leveled against the opponent can have the effect of discrediting any statements they may make. It goes something like this:

a. Anything that a person with characteristics A, B, C says, believes, or advocates is false.

b. Person XYZ has characteristics A, B, and C and also advocates position P.

c. Therefore, P is false.

2. Examples:

a. VP Spiro Agnew to the press: you are "an impudent corps of effete snobs, nattering nabobs of negativism."

b. Law partner's note to the defense attorney: "We have no case. Abuse the plaintiff's attorney."

c. Lawyer to the Judge: "We have no case, your Honor, but surely you are not going to believe the alcoholic, El Sleazo, ambulance chaser that the plaintiff hired, are you?"

d. About Jesus: "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners." Matt. 11: 19.

e. Poet Allan Ginsberg has argued in favor of abolishing censorship of pornographic literature. But Ginsberg's arguments are nothing but trash. Ginsberg, you know, is a pot smoking, homosexual and an advocate of the drug culture.

f. Are President Bush's attacks on Bill Clinton's character *ad Hominem* abusive?

g. Senator Jennings Randolph: Feminists: "small band of bra-less bubbleheads."

C. *Ad Hominem* circumstantial

1. Definition: this time the argument is not on the arguer's character, but on some special belief, lifestyle or circumstance surrounding him/her that would seem to render the argument invalid.

2. Examples:

a. Of course she favors highway construction. Some of her biggest political supporters was a manufacturer of road building equipment.

b. Why shouldn't those welfare mothers support public day care? They are the ones who will benefit from it and they don't have to pay for it.

c. This man who condemns corporeal punishment goes hunting every weekend and kills harmless animals.

d. If Mrs. Jones really believed that the hospital is understaffed, she would work as a volunteer.

e. Why should we believe in what Solomon says about marriage in the Song of Solomon when he had 700 wives and 300 concubines?

f. Why should we believe anything he says. After all, he believes that some UFOs are satanic manifestations.

g. Of course Mr. X argues this way. Just look at the circumstances that affect him. If a person stands to benefit personally if the conclusion he or she is presenting is accepted, then the argument must be a bad one. For example:

Sure, economist and millionaire Milton Friedman has argued in favor of reducing federal income tax. As a millionaire, he will benefit greatly and he also has no need for government social programs that the taxes will provide.

h. Of those who support prolife positions and home schooling it has been said: "They are all religious people."

D. *Tu Quoque* ("You, too!" have committed the same or a similar act)

1. Definition: Those who try to justify an apparently wrong action by charging their accusers with a similar wrong, on the alleged grounds that if they do it, then its all right for others to do it also. "If someone else did X, then it is all right for me to do X." This renders you guilty of the fallacy called two wrongs make a right. Most likely, neither of the actions were/are correct or right. It is the Fighting Fire with Fire or An Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth argument. However, even though the one who points out your fault is guilty of the same fault, this does not mean that you are not guilty and do not have to take notice of the accusation coming, as it were, from a hypocrite. This has generated the remark: "You are a fine one to talk."

2. Examples:

A parent admonishes his or her child for stealing candy and the child responds: "Your argument is no good because you told me that when you were a kid, you stole candy, too."

INAPPROPRIATE AUTHORITIES

I. Argument from Ignorance (*Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*)

"Never reason from what you do not know.

If you do, you will soon believe what is utterly against reason." Andrew Ramsay

"To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know know what we do not know, that is true knowledge."

Confucius, *Analects*

A. Definition: An argument from ignorance occurs when you use the *absence of evidence* to prove that a claim is either true or false. This generally occurs in "macro" situations or events where it is virtually impossible to know the factors required to come to a belief or conclusion. It says: Nothing is known with certainty about X, and yet concludes that we know something definite about X. Ignorance proves nothing, except, of course, that one is ignorant. In such cases, it is best to claim temporary agnosticism at least.

B. Examples:

a. People have been trying for centuries to disprove the claims of astrology and no one has ever succeeded. Therefore, we must conclude that the claims of astrology are true.

b. No one has ever seen Mr. Smith drink a glass of wine, beer or liquor. Therefore, we must conclude that Mr. Smith is not a drinker.

c. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury: you have heard the prosecution presents its case against my client and nothing has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Therefore, in the eyes of the law, my client is innocent."

d. No intelligent life exists on other planets since we have not proved that there is.

e. Human life exists on other planets since we have not proved that there is not.

f. Atheist: "There cannot be a God, because I have never seen any evidence for Him."

g. Theist: "There must be a God, because no one can prove that He does not exist."

h. "I do not have much information on this [alleged communist] except the general statement of the agency (CIA?) that there is nothing in the files to disprove his communist connections." Joseph McCarthy.

B. Proper use of ignorance (or better, knowledge)

This is when the failure of a search does count as evidence against or for a claim. This generally occurs in "micro" situations or events where it is possible to know all the factors required to come to a belief or conclusion.

1. Does a planet exist between earth and Mars?

2. Is there urine in this blood sample?

C. Other Considerations

You may protect yourself against arguing from ignorance with two fundamental rules of polemics:

1. He who asserts must also prove. The burden of proof is on the person who asserts anything. And this cannot be done from silence or ignorance but with positive evidence.

2. A lack of evidence for a position does not automatically prove or establish the opposite side of an issue. In philosophy or theology, especially, one cannot win an argument by default ("Well, since you can't really prove God, then naturalism wins by default. "Well, since you can't prove creationism scientifically, evolution wins by default").

a. Before you can win by default, you must prove there are only two alternatives on a question. But there may be a third or a fourth. You cannot say "I win" when only one alternative is eliminated; others may be waiting to compete.

b. Even if there are only two alternatives, the failure to prove one does not prove the other necessarily. There must be some independent evidence for the second theory if it is to

stand on its own. If one theory proves to be false, and there are no good reasons for believing the alternative, then admitting to insufficient data and suspending judgment may be the best alternative.

II. Appeal to Pity (*Argumentum ad Misericordiam*)

A. Definition

This is the classic student's fallacy (as you will see in a minute)! It is committed when an arguer poses a conclusion and then attempts to evoke pity from the reader or listener in an effort to get him/her to accept the conclusion. It says, "Accept this because you should feel pity (or sympathy) for the one involved." The appeal to pity is frequently used by students at exam time and by lawyers on behalf of their clients before judges and juries. For example:

Student to professor: Please change my grade from a D to a C. Why? I was sick much of the semester with ingrown toenails, my car broke down on several occasions, and the night before the final exam, I had a head cold, and also a date with the homecoming queen. Plus, if I get a C, I'll lose my scholarship and my parents will disown me. Pleeeeassee!!!

Taxpayer to Judge: Your Honor, I admit that I declared 13 children as dependents on my tax return, even though I only have two, and I realize this was wrong. But if you find me guilty of tax evasion, my reputation will be ruined, I'll lose my job, my poor wife will not be able to have the surgery she needs, and my kids will starve. Surely you will not find me guilty!

In both cases, it is obvious that the arguer is not appealing to logic but to emotion. The arguments are aimed at the heartstrings, not at the head. They are relevant psychologically, but not logically. Which raises an exception. An appeal to pity may be relevant when the conclusion reached is not a factual matter, but only one of sentiment. Here, an sentimental appeal is relevant. Otherwise ask yourself: "Is there a logical connection between the misery and the thing to be proved?"

B. Examples:

1. If this man is given the death sentence, who will take care of his wife and kids?

2. "Permit me first to go and bury my father." Luke 9: 59.

III. Appeal to the People (*Argumentum ad Populum*)

"Vox populi, vox dei." Latin proverb (the voice of the people is the voice of God).

"Let us not dream that reason can be popular. Passions and feelings may become popular; but reason always remains the sole property of a few eminent individuals."
—Goethe.

"Seek not the favor of the multitude; it is seldom got by honest and lawful means. But seek the testimony of the few and number not voices, but weigh them."
—Immanuel Kant.

"Counting noses may be a great method of running a government, but it is no necessary criterion for truth."
—C. S. Lewis

A. Definition

This is the fallacy of deciding truth by opinion polls. "Accept this because it has popular appeal." It is based on psychological insecurity, and the need to be loved and accepted by others. You commit this fallacy when you debate an issue not on the basis of facts, but rather on the basis of popularity or a popular slogan. This is grand-standing, playing to the galleries, people-pleasing, trendiness, snob appeal, jumping on the bandwagon, be apart of the in-crowd, everybody's doing it, etc. It is a maneuver that bypasses reason and manipulates the passions, prejudices, and identity of an audience, a tactic often used by advertisers: "One million people a day can't be wrong! (or can they?). It could be laid out like this:

1. If most people believe, like, or want something, then that something must be true, good, valuable, etc.
2. Most people believe, like, or want, XYZ.
3. Therefore, XYZ must be true, good, valuable, etc.

Of course, right is right, and true is true, no matter how **few** people may believe or do it. And wrong is wrong, and false is false, no matter how **many** people may believe or do it. Truth and value is not settled by majority opinion; reality is not settled by democratically!

B. Examples:

This fallacy can have several nuances:

1. Bandwagon argument:

"Of course you want to use Zest toothpaste. 90% of the American population uses Zest!"

2. Appeal to vanity:

"Only the ultimate in fashion could complement the face of Bianca Jagger. Spectrum sunglasses--for the beautiful people."

3. Appeal to snobbery:

"A Rolls Royce is not for everyone. If you qualify as one of the select few, this distinguished classic may be seen and driven at British Motor Cars, Ltd. (By appointment only, please!)."

4. Consensus Gentium: requires a majority opinion, deciding truth by a majority vote.

"But, Columbus, no one believes the world is round!"

"The vast majority of scientists believe in evolution."

"But dad, everybody's doing it."

III. Appeal to Authority (*Argumentum ad Verecundiam* = argument toward reverence)

"The power of authority is never more subtle and effective than when it produces a psychological atmosphere or climate favorable to the life of certain modes of belief, unfavorable and even fatal to the life of others." — A. J. Balfour.

"Anyone who conducts an argument by appealing to authority is not using his intelligence." —Leonardo Da Vinci

"If you rely on expert opinion, at least choose experts who have been relatively successful in the past." —Howard Kahane.

A. Definition

1. Proper use of authority

Since no one is omniscient, we all find it necessary from time to time to appeal to an authority or expert to prove something we believe. There is nothing wrong with this if the authority is competent and trustworthy. We trust an authority if he is trustworthy.

Keep in mind these considerations/rules when appealing to authority in order to avoid its improper use:

- a. You should not use an expert to prove something unrelated to his field of expertise or competence. (e.g. Isaac Asimov's *Guide to the Bible*)
- b. You should not assume that an authority's opinion is infallible, even when he is speaking in his field. Authorities are still human, finite, fallen, subject to error. the letters after a name do not necessarily mean anything. Ph.D. = "Piled higher and deeper;" "Post hole digger;" "Phenomenally dumb;"
- c. Legitimate authorities will disagree and when they do, you must do your own homework. "For every Ph. D. there is an opposite and equal Ph.D."
- d. There must be evidence that one really is an authority before his testimony can be trusted. What are your credentials?
- e. Some experts are more trustworthy than others, either because of training, experience, character, etc.

2. Improper use of authority

This fallacy simply says: "Accept this because some authority said it." It is fallacious when the cited authority is not qualified to address the issue in question. He/she is in fact a "pseudo-authority." An internist may be qualified to speak about diseases, but not about the stock market. An attorney's political views are not necessarily fool proof, even though his courtroom techniques may be. The basic form of argument that commits this fallacy goes like this:

- a. Person A is an expert on subject X.
- b. Person A says that such-and-such is the case about Z.
- c. Therefore, such-and-such is the case about Z.

The trouble with the appeal to authority is that it freezes thinking. The BIG name, thinker, book, quotation, etc. attempts to make you feel that you are at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and that any word of protest is blasphemy. This is not

so. The best approach, however, is suggested by a sign in British schools as a safeguard against misuse of authority: "The teacher could be wrong. Think for yourself." Another response to someone who is called upon to speak as an authority outside of his/her field is to take what is said *cum grano salis* !

B. Examples

"My daddy said so."

"My teacher said so."

"My priest/pastor/rabbi said so."

"My analyst said so."

IV. Chronological Snobbery (*Argumentum ab Annis* = argument because of age; *Argumentum ad Futuris* = Argument to the Future)

"Old truths, old laws, old boots, old books, and old friends are the best."
—Polish proverb.

"All the mischief in the world may be put down very plausibly to old laws, old customs, old religion." — G. C. Lichenberg

This fallacy has two aspects

A. *Argumentum ab Annis* = argument because of age.

This is the error of attempting to refute something by dating it, by asserting that it is old. You commit this fallacy when by saying that an argument is false because it is old, "victorian," "medieval," "primitive," "prescientific," or "antediluvian." If you can show that some idea originated in the Dark Ages, you need not say anything about it. The assumption here is the progress of knowledge and that anything old is false, and anything new is true. For example, "sexual abstinence before marriage is Victorian."

But age is not a criterion of truth. Age is beside the point. The question is: "What is the evidence for the opinion, not its age." It does not matter how many birthdays it has had! G. K. Chesterton says it well:

"It is incomprehensible to me that any thinker can calmly call himself a modernist.... The real objection to modernism is simply that it is a form of snobbishness. It is an attempt to crush a rational opponent not by reason, but by some mystery of superiority, by hinting that one is specially up to

date or particularly in the know. ... To introduce into philosophy discussions a sneer at a creed's antiquity is like introducing a sneer at a lady's age. It is caddish because it is irrelevant. The pure modernist is a snob; he cannot bear to be a month behind fashion." —GKC, *All Things Considered*, p. 9

B. *Argumentum ad Futuris* = Argument to the Future

This is the fallacy of the eternal optimist: "Accept this because future evidence will support it." Here, since you don't have your evidence in hand, you appeal to the future as proof of your assertions: future research, future explorations, future discoveries, future evidence. It appeals to the authority of progress, to hope, not proof! It is an argument by anticipation, and speculation, not demonstration.

- Missing links may someday be found to support evolution.
- Scientists may soon find a natural cause for the origin of life.
- The Supercollider will tell us all about the origin of the universe.

But, of course, no one knows the future for sure. The hoped for, yet unknown future data supports no position in the present. Rational decisions must be made by hard and fast evidence that is now known. Truth is established by proper evidence, and this is a timeless truth.

FALLACIES OF STACKING THE DECK

I. Begging the Question (*Petitio Principii* = "Postulation of the Beginning")

A. Definition

Begging the question is reasoning in a circle, assuming what you are trying to prove, slipping the conclusion into the premises which in turn are allegedly used to prove the conclusion. Abra Cadabra! It is called 'begging the question' because the very question being asked is given the desired answer before any reasoning is done. "Why is the sky blue?" Because its blueness makes it blue!

Once upon a time there were three fools who rode their horses into town up to the saloon. Instead of tying their horses to the rail in front of them, each fool tied his horse to

the next one to his, thinking he had secured his own horse. In a few minutes all three horses ran away!

Premises in an argument, like the fools' horses must be tied down or the argument will run away. Begging the question is like tying the parts of your argument to each other rather than to something solid. What the argument sets out to do is postulated instead of proven. The conclusion is used to support the premises, and the premises proves the validity of the conclusion. To discern this error, check all premises to make sure that they are not the conclusion in an altered form.

B. Examples

1. Capital punishment is justified for the crimes of murder and kidnapping because it is quite legitimate that someone be put to death for having committed such hateful crimes.
2. The Bible is the inspired Word of God because 2 Timothy 3: 16 says that all Scripture is inspired by God.
3. A miracle, being by definition an exception to the laws of nature, is based on the lowest degree of probability. But a wise man should always base beliefs on the highest degree of probability. Therefore, a wise man should never believe in miracles.
4. All the experts and authorities on this question agree with me. How did you know they are experts and authorities?
5. The good is that of which a good man approves and a good man is one who approves of that which is good. Aristotle!
6. Evolutionists argued in a circle when they proposed their dates for fossil bearing rocks. They assumed the theory of evolution to be true, and then dated the rocks with simple organisms early and the rocks with complex organisms late.
7. What is the cause of unemployment? C. Coolidge: "When more and more people are thrown out of work, unemployment results." Heavy!

II. Straw Man (Fallacy of Extension)

A. Definition

This is a way of "stacking the deck." Here's what you do: you draw a false or distorted picture of the opposing argument, and then say: "This should be rejected because this (exaggerated, distorted) picture is wrong." If you set up a "straw man," he is easier to knock down than a real man. This is how the fallacy works: set 'em up, knock 'em down!" It is an argument by caricature, or an argument by extension, that is, you extend the opponent's true belief into

something more than it really is, and then attack your own extension as if you attacked your opponent's argument. It enables you to deal not with a real argument, but with one that is easier to tackle.

B. Examples:

1. Supporters of the equal rights amendment have advanced a number of arguments in favor of its passage: identical roles for men and women, women in combat roles in the armed forces, same restroom facilities, etc. But these things will weaken our defense, and promote sexual license. Thus, the arguments supporting the ERA are not so good after all.

2. Consumer groups that argue in favor of increased product safety are deluding themselves. Any car driven at 90 mph into a brick wall will kill driver and passengers; any toy will cause injury if a child uses it to beat up another child. No matter how much these products are improved, it will be impossible to eliminate every conceivable cause of injury.

III. Special Pleading

"Preference becomes prejudice when we refuse to see the good in anything we happen to dislike." —C. E. Katerndahl

"Tolerance is the positive and cordial effort to understand another's beliefs, practices, and habits without necessarily sharing or accepting them." —Joshua Liebman

A. Definition

This is another way to stack the deck, insuring the fact that the other side does not get a fair hearing. This fallacy is reductionistic. Here, only the evidence that supports one view is cited, and the rest is left out. "Accept this because this selected evidence (to the neglect of other evidence) supports it." If there are ten studies, and one supports your view, and the other nine supports the opposing view, then set forth only that one study that supports your view.

This argument counts on the reader or listener to be ignorant of basic facts. Anything can be claimed, and no objection can be raised. If, however, someone knows about the issue—like the other nine studies—you can be in big trouble. Nonetheless, special pleading involves the dramatization of material that supports your conclusion, and ignores or belittles the arguments that oppose it.

Be suspicious of one-sided presentations. Ask: "What are the arguments on the other side of the question?" Have you dealt fairly with the arguments that oppose your own position? "One man's case seems just, until another comes and cross-examines him."
Proverbs

B. Examples:

1. The criticisms of Voltaire and Freud of religion and Christianity especially can be seen as cases of special pleading in that they both used evidence that did a "knife job" on Christianity and church history, basing their findings on the bizarre, the fringe, the ludicrous elements, the fables, the superstitions, the political, rather than the sound and the whole (straw man!).
2. This is why courtrooms require that witnesses testify to the "whole truth" and nothing but the truth. Partial truth can be very misleading, and very consequential. Lawyers frequently resort to special pleading, to which the opposing attorney will frequently object.
3. When polls are cited, one has to ask many questions to make sure the poll itself is not an act of special pleading to get people to believe certain things.