Rhetorical Fallacies

Arguments are always series of claims, but a valid argument connects those claims. Think of fallacious arguments like a table—if the legs aren’t connected to the tabletop, or if there are no legs, then the table will fall over. Most disagreements operate in the realm of “informal” argumentation, so formal logic doesn’t necessarily help us. Often, what determines whether an argument is fallacious isn’t simply the “form” of the argument, but how it works in context. Productive disagreements need the people disagreeing (the “interlocutors”) to argue about the same issue, use compatible definitions, represent one another’s positions fairly, hold one another to the same standards, and allow each other to make arguments. To facilitate productive disagreement, the following list of fallacies works to flag some pitfalls in reasoning.

**Fallacies of relevance**

Many fallacies are claims that aren’t relevant to the disagreement, but they are inflammatory. They either distract people into arguing about irrelevant topics or else shut down the argument altogether.

**Red herring.** Some people use this term for all the fallacies of irrelevance. Red herrings are claims that distract the interlocutors (or observers) from the trail we should be following. The claim someone has made is so stinky that people get distracted.

**Argumentum ad hominem/motivism.** Contrary to what many people think, an attack on an interlocutor is not necessarily ad hominem. It’s only the ad hominem fallacy if the attack is irrelevant. Attacking someone’s credibility on the grounds that they don’t have relevant authority, accusing someone of committing a fallacy, or pointing out moral failings is not necessarily fallacious, *if those factors are relevant*. If I say that you shouldn’t be believed because you’re a woman, and your gender is irrelevant to the argument, then it’s ad hominem. Ad hominem is sometimes so inflammatory that we stop having a disagreement at all and are just accusing one another of being Hitler. A somewhat subtle form of ad hominem is what’s often called **motivism**; i.e., a refusal to engage an interlocutor’s argument on the grounds that you know they’re *really* making this argument for bad motives. The problem with motivism is that it’s often impossible to prove or disprove someone’s motives. Sometimes people really do have bad motives, but they might still have a good argument.

**Argumentum ad misericordiam/appeal to emotions.** As with ad hominem, appeal to emotions is not always a fallacy. When it’s an attempt to distract or when the appeal is irrelevant, the appeal to emotions is fallacious. All political arguments (perhaps all arguments) have an emotional component—otherwise, we wouldn’t bother arguing. But it’s fallacious if I say that you should vote for me because I have a really cute dog, I’ve had a hard life, I’ll cry if you don’t vote for me—those are all fallacious appeals to emotion because they are irrelevant to the argument. Crying to get out of a traffic ticket is a fallacious appeal to emotions because it distracts from the issue behind the traffic stop. (And that example brings up the problem that fallacies are often effective.)

**Tu quoque**/**whataboutism.** This fallacy is the response that, “You did it too!” It’s fallacious when whether the interlocutor did it is irrelevant. For instance, if you and I are running for Treasurer, and I say that you’re a bad candidate because you embezzled, and you say that I embezzled too, that *might* be fallacious. If you’ve been Treasurer of multiple organizations and embezzled substantial amounts every time, and I once took a pen home for personal use, it’s fallacious. If my crimes are comparable, it’s no longer fallacious.

**Appeals to personal certainty/argumentum ad vericundiam/bandwagon appeal.** When we’re arguing, appealing to an authority is inevitable. Appeals to authority are fallacious when they’re irrelevant—the site, source, or person being appealed to is not an authority, is not a relevant authority, has not made a claim relevant to the argument. For instance, if I say that squirrels are evil, and my proof is that I’m certain of that, then, unless I’m a zoologist who specializes in squirrels, my opinion is irrelevant. Appealing to a quote from Einstein would also be irrelevant—while he’s an expert, he was never an expert about squirrels. Saying that something is true because many people believe it is another form of appeal to irrelevant authority—many people have been wrong about things before. That many people believe something is relevant for showing it’s a popular perception, but not for showing that it’s true.

**Fallacies of process**

In informal logic, to determine whether something is a fallacy we must consider the way in which the argument’s claims are related. In fallacies of process, claims are related weakly, or they not related but might appear so, or they don’t *necessarily* follow. The notion of whether something *necessarily* follows is important. The claim that “A caused B” might be true (“Being hungry caused me to eat cookies”), but the two terms aren’t necessarily related—I might have eaten something else. When things are *necessarily* related, then A *always* causes B.

**Binary reasoning.** Some people argue that this fallacious way of thinking is behind a lot of fallacies of process. Binary reasoning is the tendency to put everything into all or nothing categories (black or white thinking). So, a person is either a Christian or a Satanist, Republican or Democrat. Since situations are rarely, putting things into binaries is frequently fallacious.

**Genus-species fallacy /fallacy of composition/fallacy of division/cherrypicking.** Drawing a conclusion about an entire category (genus) from a single example (species) is a fallacy, even if it’s from a small set of examples. We tend to fall for that fallacy because of confirmation bias, a cognitive bias that means we notice (and value) data that confirms what we already believe. We’re also prone to let striking examples mean more than they should, simply because they come to mind (called “the availability heuristic”). An example is useful for illustrating a point, but it rarely proves it. Coming to a conclusion about a category on the basis of one example is moving from species to genus (fallacy of composition), such as assuming that because the one French person you knew liked tap-dancing, all French people like tap-dancing. The more common fallacy is to move from genus to species (fallacy of division), assuming that, since something is part of a large category, it must have the characteristics we attribute to that big category. For instance, it’s fallacious to assume that, since the person is French (genus), they love croissants (species). Even if the characteristic is statistically true of the majority in that category, it’s fallacious to assume an individual necessarily fits that generalization. Picking only those examples (studies, quotes, historical incidents) that fit your claim is generally called “cherrypicking.”

**False dilemma.** If there are a variety of options, and one of the interlocutors insist there are only two, or insists that we really only have one (because they have unfairly dismissed all the others), then that person has fallaciously misrepresented the situation. “You’re either with me or against me” is a classic example of the false dilemma, especially since “with me” usually means “agree with everything I say.” You might disagree with something I say *because* you’re “for” me—you care about me, and think I’m making a bad decision.

**Straw man/nutpicking.** We engage in straw man when we attribute to the opposition an argument much weaker than the one they’ve actually made. We generally do this in one of three ways. First, if people are drawn to binary thinking, then they’re likely to assume that you’re either with us or against us. For instance, if I’m a binary thinker, and a Republican, and you criticize a Republican policy, I might assume that you’re a Democrat and then attribute to you “the” argument I think Democrats make. Second, we will often unconsciously make an opposition argument (or even criticism) more extreme than it is—you’ve said something “often” happens, but I represent your argument as saying that something “always” happens. Third, we will often take the most extreme member of an opposition group and treat them as representative of the group (or position) as a whole—that’s often called “nutpicking.”

**Post hoc ergo propter hoc/confusing causation and correlation.** This fallacy argues that A preceded B, so it must have caused B. Of course, it isn’t always a fallacy—if A always precedes B, and/or B always follows from A, they must have some kind of relationship. The relationship might be complicated, though. While a fever might precede illness, reducing the fever won’t necessarily reduce illness. Lightning doesn’t *cause* thunder—they’re part of the same event.

**Circular reasoning.** This is a very common fallacy, but surprisingly difficult for people to recognize. It looks like an argument, but it is really just an assertion of the conclusion over and over in different language. For instance, if I argue, “Squirrels are evil because they are villainous,” that’s a circular argument—I’ve just used a synonym.

**Non sequitur.** This is a general category for when the claims don’t follow from each other.

**A few other comments.** An argument might be fallacious in multiple ways at the same time. Finally, identifying a claim as a fallacy almost always requires *explaining* how it is fallacious.

Handout Source: Roberts-Miller, Patricia. “A Short List of Fallacies.” *Patricia Roberts-Miller: Professor, Writing Center Director, Scholar of Train Wrecks in Public Deliberation*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.patriciarobertsmiller.com/2020/07/16/a-short-list-of-fallacies>. Accessed 22 July 2020.