



Logic and Fallacies: thinking clearly

Michael Ramsden

Logic and Fallacies

§ Fallacious reasoning, once detected, can often be dealt with by asking the questioner a clarifying question in turn.

§ If we learn to recognise how people think, we can then engage with them more effectively.

Phrasing or punctuating the same set of words in different ways can produce entirely different meanings:

§ Some statements can be read in two ways:

§ News headlines often suffer from this problem:

This is when the either/or reasoning is used in a faulty way. The Law of Non-Contradiction applies when there are two mutually exclusive options being presented. With a faulty dilemma, 2 options are given by the speaker while in reality there are more options.

The dilemma in this second statement is faulty – the person assumes that there is such a thing as evil and therefore is assuming that there is such a thing as good. If there is such a thing as good, how, with that reasoning, can they disprove God?

This reasoning aims to show that a particular proposition is unacceptable because of increasingly unacceptable events which are shown to follow from the proposition. It can be used positively – to help one see where a particular line of thought may end up, but as a means of logic it is fallacious.

This is when two otherwise unrelated points are conjoined and treated as a single proposition. The person who is replying is expected to accept or reject both together when in reality one may be acceptable, while the other is not:

In this second question the complexity is assumed: the implication is that as the Romans are evil conquerors, if you pay you are on the side of evil. But, if you propagate not paying you are breaking the law. Either you are on the side of evil or you defy Rome. This was a trap for Jesus – a complex question is often powerful because of the assumptions of the cultural context from which it comes. Be careful before jumping in with a yes or no answer – identify what is going on, as Jesus did.

Psychological or emotional

§ Appeal to force – the listener is told that certain negative consequences will follow if they do not agree with the proposition:

§ Appeal to pity – the listener is encouraged to agree to a proposition because of the pitiful state of the speaker:

§ Appeal to consequences – the speaker points to a negative consequence of a particular proposition to show that the proposition is false:

If we allow these people to preach the gospel, then our culture will be changed, therefore we should not allow them to preach.

§ *Character Assassination* – this is when a person or a group are attacked rather than the proposition itself.

Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. (Mathew 11:19).

§ *Appeal to Popularity* – this is when something is argued to be true on the basis that a large number of people hold to it:

§ *Hasty Generalisation* - this is the fallacious reasoning by which a person will write off an idea or practice, when his or her exposure to the whole is not sufficient to do so.

In this kind of fallacy a person will make an assumption and go through a process of circular reasoning whereby their original assumption appears to be the conclusion. They haven't proved anything – the argument is circular. We can see this in the reasoning of the philosopher David Hume. He makes an assumption:

This is where a person makes a case appear much weaker than it actually is:

This is the reasoning by which ideas or a people are rejected on the basis of their origins:

The telephone rings and the doorbell immediately sounds therefore the telephone ringing must have caused the doorbell.

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