10 Argumentative Fallacies

Argumentum ad hominem (argument directed at the person). This is the error of attacking the character or motives of a person who has stated an idea, rather than the idea itself. The most obvious example of this fallacy is when one debater maligns the character of another debater (e.g, "The members of the opposition are a couple of fascists!"), but this is actually not that common. A more typical manifestation of *argumentum ad hominem* is attacking a source of information -- for example, responding to a quotation from Richard Nixon on the subject of free trade with China by saying, "We all know Nixon was a liar and a cheat, so why should we believe anything he says?" *Argumentum ad hominem* also occurs when someone's arguments are discounted merely because they stand to benefit from the policy they advocate -- such as Bill Gates arguing against antitrust, rich people arguing for lower taxes, white people arguing against affirmative action, minorities arguing for affirmative action, etc. In all of these cases, the relevant question is not who makes the argument, but whether the argument is valid.

It is always bad form to use the fallacy of *argumentum ad hominem*. But there are some cases when it is not really a fallacy, such as when one needs to evaluate the truth of factual statements (as opposed to lines of argument or statements of value) made by interested parties. If someone has an *incentive to lie* about something, then it would be naive to accept his statements about that subject without question. It is also possible to restate many *ad hominem* arguments so as to redirect them toward ideas rather than people, such as by replacing "My opponents are fascists" with "My opponents' arguments are fascist."

Example of Ad Hominem

Bill: "I believe that abortion is morally wrong."
Dave: "Of course you would say that, you're a priest."
Bill: "What about the arguments I gave to support my position?"
Dave: "Those don't count. Like I said, you're a priest, so you have to say that abortion is wrong. Further, you are just a lackey to the Pope, so I can't believe what you say."

Bandwagon

The Bandwagon is a fallacy in which a threat of rejection by one's peers (or peer pressure) is substituted for evidence in an "argument." This line of "reasoning" has the following form:

1. Person P is pressured by his/her peers or threatened with rejection.
2. Therefore person P's claim X is false.

This line of "reasoning" is fallacious because peer pressure and threat of rejection do not constitute evidence for rejecting a claim. This is expecially clear in the following example:

Joe: "Bill, I know you think that 1+1=2. But we don't accept that sort of thing in our group. "
Bill: "I was just joking. Of course I don't believe that."

It is clear that the pressure from Bill's group has no bearing on the truth of the claim that 1+1=2.

It should be noted that loyalty to a group and the need to belong can give people very strong reasons to conform to the views and positions of those groups. Further, from a practical standpoint we must

often compromise our beliefs in order to belong to groups. However, this feeling of loyalty or the need to belong simply do not constitute evidence for a claim.

Examples of Bandwagon

1. Bill says that he likes the idea that people should work for their welfare when they can. His friends laugh at him, accuse him of fascist leanings, and threaten to ostracize him from their group. He decides to recant and abandon his position to avoid rejection.
2. Bill: "I like classical music and I think it is of higher quality than most modern music."
   Jill: "That stuff is for old people."
   Dave: "Yeah, only real woosies listen to that crap. Besides, Anthrax rules! It Rules!"
   Bill: "Well, I don't really like it that much. Anthrax is much better."
3. Bill thinks that welfare is needed in some cases. His friends in the Young Republicans taunt him every time he makes his views known. He accepts their views in order to avoid rejection.

Equivocation

The fallacy of equivocation occurs when a key term or phrase in an argument is used in an ambiguous way, with one meaning in one portion of the argument and then another meaning in another portion of the argument.

Examples of Equivocation Fallacy:

1. I have the right to watch "The Real World." Therefore it's right for me to watch the show. So, I think I'll watch this "Real World" marathon tonight instead of studying for my exam.
2. The laws imply lawgivers. There are laws in nature. Therefore there must be a cosmic lawgiver.
3. God: "One million years to me is a second." Man: "What about one million dollars, my Lord?" God: "A penny." Man: "May my Lord give me a penny?" God: "No problem, just a second."
4. Noisy children are a real headache. Two aspirin will make a headache go away. Therefore, two aspirin will make noisy children go away.
5. A warm beer is better than a cold beer. After all, nothing is better than a cold beer, and a warm beer is better than nothing.
6. Sure philosophy helps you argue better, but do we really need to encourage people to argue? There's enough hostility in this world.
7. I don't see how you can say you're an ethical person. It's so hard to get you to do anything; your work ethic is so bad
8. From Lewis Carroll*, Through the Looking* Glass: "You couldn't have it if you didn't want it," the Queen said. "The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today." "It must come to jam today," Alice objected. "No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every other day: today isn't any other day, you know."
9. Philosophy is supposed to stand on neutral ground. But most philosophers argue for very definite conclusions. This is hardly standing on neutral ground. Shouldn't we conclude that most philosophers aren't doing philosophy?
10. Sarah was put in classes for the exceptional student. But i discovered that despite her age she could hardly read. Surely she was put in these classes by error.

Hasty Generalization This is the fallacy of making a sweeping statement and expecting it to be true of every specific case -- in other words, stereotyping. Example: "Women are on average not as strong as men and less able to carry a gun. Therefore women can't pull their weight in a military unit." The problem is that the sweeping statement may be true (on average, women are indeed weaker than men), but it is not necessarily true for every member of the group in question (there are some women who are much stronger than the average).

As the example indicates, _dicto simpliciter_ is fairly common in debate rounds. Most of the time, it is not necessary to call an opposing debater down for making this fallacy -- it is enough to point out why the sweeping generalization they have made fails to prove their point. Since everybody knows what a sweeping generalization is, using the Latin in this case will usually sound condescending. It is also important to note that some generalizations are perfectly valid and apply directly to all individual cases, and therefore do not commit the fallacy of _dicto simpliciter_ (for example, "All human males have a Y chromosome" is, to my knowledge, absolutely correct).

Examples of Hasty Generalization:

1. Smith, who is from England, decides to attend graduate school at Ohio State University. He has never been to the US before. The day after he arrives, he is walking back from an orientation session and sees two white (albino) squirrels chasing each other around a tree. In his next letter home, he tells his family that American squirrels are white.
2. Sam is riding her bike in her home town in Maine, minding her own business. A station wagon comes up behind her and the driver starts beeping his horn and then tries to force her off the road. As he goes by, the driver yells "get on the sidewalk where you belong!" Sam sees that the car has Ohio plates and concludes that all Ohio drivers are jerks.
3. Bill: "You know, those feminists all hate men."
   Joe: "Really?"
   Bill: "Yeah. I was in my philosophy class the other day and that Rachel chick gave a presentation."
   Joe: "Which Rachel?"
   Bill: "You know her. She's the one that runs that feminist group over at the Women's Center. She said that men are all sexist pigs. I asked her why she believed this and she said that her last few boyfriends were real sexist pigs. "
   Joe: "That doesn't sound like a good reason to believe that all of us are pigs."
   Bill: "That was what I said."
   Joe: "What did she say?"
   Bill: "She said that she had seen enough of men to know we are all pigs. She obviously hates all men."
   Joe: "So you think all feminists are like her?"
   Bill: "Sure. They all hate men."

Non Sequitur ("It does not follow"). This is the simple fallacy of stating, as a conclusion, something that does not strictly follow from the premises. For example, "Racism is wrong. Therefore, we need affirmative action." Obviously, there is at least one missing step in this argument, because the wrongness of racism does not imply a need for affirmative action without some additional support (such as, "Racism is common," "Affirmative action would reduce racism," "There are no superior alternatives to affirmative action," etc.).

Obfuscation Fallacy (or Empty Words Fallacy). Don't make a decision after someone presents you with a load of confusing factors. If you do, you will have committed the Obfuscation Fallacy. The Obfuscation Fallacy occurs when someone adopts a position after hearing, or presenting, an argument containing unnecessarily complex language that either impresses (when it shouldn't), confuses or deceives. "To obfuscate: to make obscure, unclear or unintelligible"

An Example of Obfuscation Fallacy

"I cannot say that I do not disagree with you."
(American comedian Groucho Marx, 1890–1977)

It allows you to say "you're wrong" but leaves the other person thinking you said "you're right".

Deliberately clouding the message to help press home a point or to avoid answering a difficult question means you are committing the Obfuscation Fallacy. But, falling for the argument due to a clouding of the facts means you're guilty of committing the fallacy too.

Obfuscation is not, in itself, a logical fallacy. It can only be described as a fallacy if it forms part of an argument. Here's an example. First, without the obfuscation:

Lee: "Swans can be black or white. Jack is a swan. Therefore, Jack is white."
Mark: "I disagree. Jack could be black."

Here is the same argument with obfuscation:

Lee: "Whilst the pigment particles embedded in some swans' plumage will reflect the vast majority of electromagnetic radiation from ~700 nanometers to ~400 nanometers, the plumage and structures in others' feathers will absorb a high proportion of the wavelengths perceivable as white light. Jack is a swan. Therefore, Jack is white."

Mark: "Yeah, whatever. Sounds like you know your opinions."

Post Hoc (after this, therefore because of this.) This is the fallacy of assuming that A caused B simply because A happened prior to B. A favorite example: "Most rapists read pornography when they were teenagers; obviously, pornography causes violence toward women." The conclusion is invalid, because there can be a correlation between two phenomena without one causing the other. Often, this is because both phenomena may be linked to the same cause. In the example given, it is possible that some psychological factor -- say, a frustrated sex drive -- might cause both a tendency toward sexual violence and a desire for pornographic material, in which case the pornography would not be the true cause of the violence.

Examples of Post Hoc:

1. I had been doing pretty poorly this season. Then my girlfriend gave me this neon laces for my spikes and I won my next three races. Those laces must be good luck...if I keep on wearing them I can't help but win!
2. Bill purchases a new PowerMac and it works fine for months. He then buys and installs a new piece of software. The next time he starts up his Mac, it freezes. Bill concludes that the software must be the cause of the freeze.
3. Joan is scratched by a cat while visiting her friend. Two days later she comes down with a fever. Joan concludes that the cat's scratch must be the cause of her illness.
4. The Republicans pass a new tax reform law that benefits wealthly Americans. Shortly thereafter the economy takes a nose dive. The Democrats claim that the the tax reform caused the economic woes and they push to get rid of it.
5. The picture on Jim's old TV set goes out of focus. Jim goes over and strikes the TV soundly on the side and the picture goes back into focus. Jim tells his friend that hitting the TV fixed it.
6. Jane gets a rather large wart on her finger. Based on a story her father told her, she cuts a potato in half, rubs it on the wart and then buries it under the light of a full moon. Over the next month her wart shrinks and eventually vanishes. Jane writes her father to tell him how right he was about the cure.

Red Herring. This means exactly what you think it means: introducing irrelevant facts or arguments to distract from the question at hand. For example, "The opposition claims that welfare dependency leads to higher crime rates -- but how are poor people supposed to keep a roof over their heads without our help?" It is perfectly valid to ask this question as part of the broader debate, but to pose it as a response to the argument about welfare leading to crime is fallacious. (There is also an element of *ad misericordiam* in this example.)

It is not fallacious, however, to argue that benefits of one kind may justify incurring costs of another kind. In the example given, concern about providing shelter for the poor would not refute concerns about crime, but one could plausibly argue that a somewhat higher level of crime is a justifiable price given the need to alleviate poverty. This is a debatable point of view, but it is no longer a fallacious one.

The term red herring is sometimes used loosely to refer to any kind of diversionary tactic, such as presenting relatively unimportant arguments that will use up the other debaters' speaking time and distract them from more important issues. This kind of a red herring is a wonderful strategic maneuver with which every debater should be familiar.

Examples of Red Herring:

1. "We admit that this measure is popular. But we also urge you to note that there are so many bond issues on this ballot that the whole thing is getting ridiculous."
2. "Argument" for a tax cut:

   "You know, I've begun to think that there is some merit in the Republican's tax cut plan. I suggest that you come up with something like it, because If we Democrats are going to survive as a party, we have got to show that we are as tough-minded as the Republicans, since that is what the public wants."

3. "Argument" for making grad school requirements stricter:

"I think there is great merit in making the requirements stricter for the graduate students. I recommend that you support it, too. After all, we are in a budget crisis and we do not want our salaries affected."

Slippery Slope.
A slippery slope argument is not always a fallacy. A slippery slope fallacy is an argument that says adopting one policy or taking one action will lead to a series of other policies or actions also being taken, *without showing a causal connection between the advocated policy and the consequent policies*. A popular example of the slippery slope fallacy is, "If we legalize marijuana, the next thing you know we'll legalize heroin, LSD, and crack cocaine." This slippery slope is a form of *non sequitur*, because no reason has been provided for why legalization of one thing leads to legalization of another. Tobacco and alcohol are currently legal, and yet other drugs have somehow remained illegal.

There are a variety of ways to turn a slippery slope fallacy into a valid (or at least plausible) argument. All you need to do is provide some *reason* why the adoption of one policy will lead to the adoption of another. For example, you could argue that legalizing marijuana would cause more people to consider the use of mind-altering drugs acceptable, and those people will support more permissive drug policies across the board. An alternative to the slippery slope argument is simply to point out that the principles espoused by your opposition imply the acceptability of certain other policies, so if we don't like those other policies, we should question whether we really buy those principles. For instance, if the proposing team argued for legalizing marijuana by saying, "individuals should be able to do whatever they want with their own bodies," the opposition could point out that that principle would also justify legalizing a variety of other drugs -- so if we don't support legalizing other drugs, then maybe we don't really believe in that principle.

Examples of Slippery Slope:

1. "We have to stop the tuition increase! The next thing you know, they'll be charging $40,000 a semester!"
2. "The US shouldn't get involved militarily in other countries. Once the government sends in a few troops, it will then send in thousands to die."
3. "You can never give anyone a break. If you do, they'll walk all over you."
4. "We've got to stop them from banning pornography. Once they start banning one form of literature, they will never stop. Next thing you know, they will be burning all the books!"

Straw Man.
This is the fallacy of refuting a caricatured or extreme version of somebody's argument, rather than the actual argument they've made. Often this fallacy involves putting words into somebody's mouth by saying they've made arguments they haven't actually made, in which case the straw man argument is a veiled version of *argumentum ad logicam*. One example of a straw man argument would be to say, "Mr. Jones thinks that capitalism is good because everybody earns whatever wealth they have, but this is clearly false because many people just inherit their fortunes," when in fact Mr. Jones had not made the "earnings" argument and had instead argued, say, that capitalism gives most people an incentive to work and save. The fact that some arguments made for a policy are wrong does not imply that the policy itself is wrong.

In debate, strategic use of a straw man can be very effective. A carefully constructed straw man can sometimes entice an unsuspecting opponent into defending a silly argument that he would not have tried to defend otherwise. But this strategy only works if the straw man is not *too* different from the arguments your opponent has actually made, because a really outrageous straw man will be recognized as just that. The best straw man is not, in fact, a fallacy at all, but simply a logical extension or amplification of an argument your opponent has made.

Examples of Straw Man

1. Prof. Jones: "The university just cut our yearly budget by $10,000."
   Prof. Smith: "What are we going to do?"
   Prof. Brown: "I think we should eliminate one of the teaching assistant positions. That would take care of it."
   Prof. Jones: "We could reduce our scheduled raises instead."
   Prof. Brown: " I can't understand why you want to bleed us dry like that, Jones."
2. "Senator Jones says that we should not fund the attack submarine program. I disagree entirely. I can't understand why he wants to leave us defenseless like that."
3. Bill and Jill are arguing about cleaning out their closets:
   Jill: "We should clean out the closets. They are getting a bit messy."
   Bill: "Why, we just went through those closets last year. Do we have to clean them out everyday?"
   Jill: "I never said anything about cleaning them out every day. You just want too keep all your junk forever, which is just ridiculous."