

COMMON LOGICAL FALLACIES

Opening Questions:

- What is a logical fallacy?
- What are some of the most common fallacies that people make?
- Are there categories of logical fallacies?
- I thought that a red herring was a fish?
- Can a person find non-observable truth without using reason and logic?
- Should you accept a person's argument when it is based on a fallacy?

A fallacy is an argument or idea that is false.

So, for example in the observation realm, if I said, "God miraculously physically heals people through prayer"; all one has to do is observe religious people who have a loved one who is injured or ill to see if they are miraculously healed. When they are not, then observation and reason conclude that "prayer does not result in the physical healing of people." That is an example of informal logic and inductive reasoning. A person could not say that "prayer never physically heals someone" because they cannot observe all the healing events on the earth in the past and present. However, they can say that if prayer normally physically heals people, then we would have tons of documented evidence of that and we don't. Therefore prayer does not usually physically heal people.

Another example would be if an atheist said, "God does not exist, and only children, fools, and other simpletons believe He does. Therefore, God is a delusion concocted by mental and emotional juveniles". This fallacy is a version of the Appeal to Spite fallacy. That fallacy is an attempt to win favor for an argument by exploiting existing feelings of bitterness, spite, or schadenfreude in the opposing party (schadenfreude is the experience of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of or witnessing the troubles, failures, or humiliation of another). It is an attempt to sway the audience emotionally by associating a hate-figure or despised or disrespected person with opposition to the speaker's argument. Simply put, what does a certain group of people's or certain types of people's beliefs about God prove about God's existence? Nothing.

I have already identified and described a few of the primary fallacies that are used by non-theists to justify their rejection of the existence of God. There are many logical fallacies that we as human beings can make. However, if we

are doing a half-way decent job at trying to be better human beings, we must strive to avoid falsehood and error. If you have not been doing that, I urge you to start.

Four of the most common fallacies are *Tu Quoque*, *Sweeping or Hasty generalization*, *Anecdotal* and the *Straw Man or Red Herring*.

Tu Quoque is an invalid argument that assumes that a rival's recommendation should be discounted or dismissed because the rival does not always follow it him/herself. The Tu Quoque argument is otherwise known as the "reject due to hypocrisy argument." An example would be, "Christian's tell people to love each other, but they don't do that; therefore we should not love one another."

The Sweeping or Hasty Generalization is also known as the "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" argument. It is a fallacy of induction argument that overextends a generalization to include facts or cases that are valid exceptions to it. An example of that fallacy would be, "Since Christians have delusional beliefs we should conclude that God does not exist."

The *Anecdotal* fallacy – a form of the *Hasty Generalization* fallacy - is using personal experience or an isolated example instead of a valid argument, especially to dismiss statistics or other objectively gathered facts. An example would be, "I know that the latest poll statistics say that the Christian divorce rate is almost as high as the general U.S. population, but I know Christian spouses who will never divorce each other."

Finally, there is the *Straw Man* argument. A straw man argument is a "red herring" type argument that attempts to disprove an opponent's position by presenting it unfairly or inaccurately. I will provide examples of these fallacies shortly.

A "red herring" argument is, according to Cambridge dictionary, "a fact, idea, or subject that takes people's attention away from the central point being considered."³³

Those are probably the big four fallacies regarding the number of people committing them on a daily basis. Therefore, I urge the reader to understand them well and not to make them—to examine your thoughts especially when you are in a defensive position when talking with someone.

Logic Categories Explained³⁴

There are three major categories of fallacies - fallacies of relevance, of presumption, and of clarity. Each of those categories has subcategories.

"Fallacies of relevance have premises that do not "bear upon" the truth of the conclusions. In other words, they introduce an irrelevancy into the argument."³⁵

³³ Cambridge Dictionary, www.dictionary.cambridge.org, April 2018

³⁴ Some of the information from this section is from the book, *The Art of Argument: An Introduction to the Informal Fallacies* by Aaron Larsen and Joelle Hodge.

There are three primary categories of fallacies of relevance, and they are *Ad Fontem* arguments, appeals to emotion, and red herring arguments.

Ad Fontem fallacies criticize the SOURCE of the argument rather than the issue itself. Those who offer *Ad Fontem* fallacious arguments are trying very hard to avoid a question they do not want to address. This behavior is pronounced in the political realm, where politicians, pundits, and media people spend much time personally attacking each other (*Ad Hominem* or “against the person” argument) instead of discussing the issue or policy. (By the way, you really should pause and think about the fact that so many U.S. politicians rely upon logical fallacies to try and support their policy positions.)

The *Tu Quoque* is a type of *Ad Fontem* argument since it focuses on the personal character of individuals to avoid carefully discussing what those individuals believe or the issue they advocate. Again, this fallacy is a STAPLE of politicians as well as the major news networks in the U.S. at this time.

The fallacies of *Appeal to Emotion* do just that; they appeal to emotions instead of facts and reasons. Most fallacies appeal to our emotions to get away from reason, but there are some particularly obvious ones. An example of the fallacy of appealing to fear is, “if you don't agree with me, I am going to do this to you or your family, etc.”

The *Red Herring* fallacies are types of arguments that are irrelevant to the issue or situation. The *Straw Man* fallacy is a *Red Herring* fallacy. Another excellent example of the *Straw Man* fallacy is when people who support homosexual marriage call those who don't, "homophobes" or other such fear-based and distracting labels. All who charge their opponent with some "phobia" (fear), are attempting to characterize their opponent as irrational and thus not worth considering. The phobia fallacy is error and should be rejected and rebuked. Again, this fallacy is used probably millions of times each day in the U.S. as the LGBT folks use this fallacy regularly.

A very popular *Red Herring- Ad Hominem* fallacy that is used to bully someone emotionally is to call them "closed-minded." Or as usually happens, to be asked the question, “do you have an open mind?” People ask this question when a person believes that the person they are communicating with does not share their view on something. It is a trick to emotionally bully or shame the other person into believing their view on something. After all, who wants to have a “closed mind”?

If by “open mind” you mean will I consider believing contradictions, then no, for contradictions are false.

If by “open mind” you mean I will not reject things that are false, then no, for false things ought to be rejected.

If by “open mind” you mean I will believe spiritual or metaphysical claims that should have a manifestation in our physical realm but do not, then no, for empty claims with no evidence deserve skepticism.

³⁵ *The Art of Argument: An Introduction to the Informal Fallacies* by Aaron Larsen and Joelle Hodge.

If by “open mind” you mean I will share your belief that watermelon farmers on Pluto want us to worship watermelons, then no, for you have no reasonable evidence to prove your claim.

If, however, by “open mind” you mean I am open willing to consider new ideas while I remain open to the possibility that the ideas you are communicating to me could be true or false, reasonable or not; then yes, I have an open mind. *If a person cannot accept the possibility that an idea might be false, then their mind is not operating rightly and is not only not “open” but broken.*

A truly open minded person will critically examine all claims but will not accept them if there is no reason to believe they are correct. Furthermore, an open-minded person will not accept false views, ideas or concepts, for to accept them would be wrong and thus to be deceived.

Another of these type fallacies as a religious example would be something to the effect of, “oh, don't you know religious leader so-and-so graduated cum laude from Best Seminary, and thus you are a fool if you do not listen to him on this issue.” That is a type of the *Appeal to Snobbery* fallacy. It does not matter what school someone went to or how well they did, what matters is that reason and logic are used well to find the truth of the issue being discussed or examined.

Another *Red Herring* fallacy is the appeal to ignorance. Religious people are often guilty of this error. This argument says a belief that cannot be disproved must, therefore, be likely. If a theist uses a form of the appeal to ignorance argument to “prove” God exists (because it cannot be disproved that He does not), they err. Theists should stick to the many valid arguments for the existence of God and stay away from fallacies.

The next high-level category of logical fallacies is called *fallacies of presumption*. These fallacies contain hidden assumptions that make the arguments unreasonable.

The most popular of these fallacies is the fallacy of *begging the question*, also known as *circular reasoning*. This argument assumes the very thing that one is trying to prove. Biblicians are regularly guilty of using this fallacy. In defending a belief they got from the bible, they will say, “because the bible says so.” For example, they will say, “the bible is the word of God.” When asked what proof they offer to validate that claim, they will say, “the bible says so,” or, “Paul says so” (a Bible author), or, “the scripture says so” (“the scripture” is synonymous with “the bible”). Those arguments are false or fallacious.

Another popular fallacy among religious people is the *Is-Ought* fallacy. This fallacy argues that because something is a certain way, it ought to be that way. The religious person, when asked why they have a particular tradition that does not make sense, might answer, “we have been doing it that way for 500 years”; or, “because God thinks it is good and right and thus it should be that way.”

The next category of presumptive fallacies is the *fallacies of induction*. These fallacies use questionable assumptions about empirical data or inductive reasoning from that data.

The most popular fallacy of this group is the *Hasty Generalization*. Racism is an example of a belief whose foundation is this fallacy. It is the argument that because some (or even most) individuals with a particular physical or demographic characteristic I have experienced in my life are a certain way, then *all* people of that type are that way. When a racist encounters a decent person of the race they have animosity towards, they will filter that person out as an exception to their general racist beliefs.

The *Sweeping Generalization* is another popular fallacy among Christians. This fallacy takes a generalization that might be true and applies it to cases that are legitimate exceptions to it. An example would be, "Christians do not know well the teachings of the one they point to, so anyone who claims to 'follow Jesus' would likely also be ignorant of his teachings." It is true that the vast majority of Christians do not know the teachings of Joshua of Nazareth as found in the four gospel books. However, actual followers of Joshua do know both him and his teachings. Thus, to believe the genuine followers of Joshua of Nazareth are ignorant of his teachings (false) based on most Christians being unaware of his teachings (true) would be to make the error of sweeping or hasty generalization.

The *Anecdotal* fallacy is using personal experience or an isolated example instead of a valid argument, especially to dismiss statistics or other objectively gathered facts.

For example, let's say a young woman works for the President of the U.S. and she likes her job and wants to defend the President. She gets invited to an interview with a panel of people who are politically opposed to the President. One of the panelists brings up the crude, base, vulgar or arrogant comments the President has made. In response, the young woman who works for the President might say, "Oh, well, I can't speak to that, but I can share my personal experience with the President and tell you what a wonderful guy he has been to me." The panelist's point or argument is that the President does not have good enough character to hold that office. The fallacious response is to ignore the videos or audio tapes of the President acting in a crude, vulgar, crass or arrogant manner and instead substitute her "personal experience."

Here is another example. Let's say a woman who is pro-abortion is invited to speak to a panel of women who are anti-abortion. The anti-abortion women want to get the pro-abortion woman to admit to the fact that most abortions are performed as a form a "birth control" and not due to duress circumstances like abortion after a rape. The pro-abortion woman might respond, "well, I can only speak from my experience to say that when I was raped and became pregnant as a result, having an abortion allowed me to have my career." As you can see, her anecdote has no bearing on the fact that most abortions are performed for convenience and not due to difficult circumstances.

Experience is valuable regarding gaining an understanding of work or tasks or how things work or how people react. Therefore, older people have more experience in many things than younger people, and thus older people ought to be valued more highly regarding the expertise they bring to a task or in dealing

with people. This is especially true regarding functions that are more complex or work that has many unstable variables needing to be taken into account to achieve a particular result.

However, experience has nothing to do with determining whether something is true or false, right or wrong. Therefore, a person having experience is not a valid factor in deciding whether something is true or false, right or wrong, unless, of course, one has much experience at practicing reason and logic.

The last high-level category of logical fallacies is *fallacies of clarity*. These arguments are false because they contain elements (words, phrases, syntax) that distort or cloud their meanings. There are three subcategories of this type of fallacy – *Equivocation*, *Accent and Distinction without a Difference*.

Perhaps the most popular of the *clarity* fallacies is the *Distinction without a Difference* fallacy. This fallacy is when people make a word distinction between two things that are not different from each other. For example, someone might say, “It's not that I don't like that person, it's just that they are a creep.” This type of fallacy is the bread and butter of people who are led by their emotions and try and find “creative” ways to communicate negative things that their positive thinking philosophy says they ought not to say. In other words, people that have a predisposition to commit this fallacy often contradict themselves in spirit in the same sentence.

The previous fallacies are just a small sampling of the many fallacies that exist. I would highly recommend the book, "***The Art of the Argument: An Introduction to the Informal Fallacies***" by authors Aaron Larsen and Joelle Hodge. You can also find a good list of informal fallacies on Wiki at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies.

As I said at the beginning of this section, it is imperative that people think clearly, reason well, and know or learn how to use critical thinking skills. In fact, I would say it is the most vital life skill for human beings of all times but is extremely important for today's generation of U.S. citizens. Sadly, U.S. secondary schools do not typically require a class on critical thinking or reason and logic, and it is perhaps the worst omission the secondary schools make.

As we have seen, people destroy themselves by remaining in their cages and refusing to use reason well to find their way out of the cage. In the next chapter, we will move beyond learning about the tools one must use to know truth, to exploring what truth is. Understanding these things is an essential part of preparing to look at the successful failure.

Chapter Summary:

- Logical fallacies are incorrect reasoning methods that result in concepts or precepts or principles or beliefs that are false like saying that one plus one equals three in the mathematical domain, or like saying God is both all loving and all powerful in the God-claim domain;

- The four most common fallacies are *Tu Quoque*, *The Sweeping or Hasty Generalization*, *Anecdotal* and *Red Herring* or *Strawman* arguments. You would do well to get to know these fallacies well and avoid using them and be able to identify when someone else is committing them;
- If a person does not care to use reason and logic well in sorting out essential life questions, then they will never find the Truth about *their* life, or greater truth in general;
- It is imperative that people understand that any argument, position or belief that is based on fallacious reasoning is false and should be rejected.