

3.5 Detecting and Avoiding Fallacies

Fallacies can be incredibly difficult to identify. For one, the mistakes in reasoning that people make seldom fall cleanly into ONE SINGLE type of fallacy. For instance, someone might say something which resembles BOTH the **red herring** AND **missing the point** fallacies, but which cannot definitively be labeled as either one. For instance,

“You say that there are too many shootings lately, and the more gun sales there are, the more homicides occur, so you want more gun control. But, I say you’re wrong. Let’s just have heavily armed patrols in every school, and mall, and office building. Now, THAT would solve the problem.”

Is this person trying to derail the conversation with a **red herring**, or are they simply **missing the point** of their opponent’s argument? It’s difficult to say. Perhaps BOTH of these things are occurring simultaneously.

Furthermore, detecting fallacies when they occur takes both vigilance and awareness. Part of that awareness will hopefully be instilled in you (the student) by taking this class, and by **learning** about the various fallacies. But, detecting them still requires something more. We must be ALERT so that we are not taken in by fallacious reasoning. In this section, we will learn about the sources of logical fallacies, and also learn a few tips on how to be ever-vigilant against erroneous reasoning.

1. Detecting Fallacies: Three Sources of Fallacious Reasoning: Here are a few reasons why people commit logical fallacies.

(a) They Do It On Purpose: Sometimes, people will mis-represent the facts, or state their case in a certain skewed way INTENTIONALLY. They do this because they want to get their way, or win the debate or argument, or because they stand to gain something by convincing the other person to agree.

It is UNPLEASANT to be losing an argument with someone. Sometimes, you just REALLY WANT them to see things your way. But, you get tired or upset in your effort to convince them. In these situations, it can be tempting to lash out at the other person in order to “get back” at them for the unpleasantness they are causing, or maybe just to get them to shut up. For instance:

ERNIE: “We’ve been arguing for 10 minutes. Why can’t you just see things my way?”

BERT: “Because you’re dumb.”

Above, an “**Argument Against the Person (abusive)**” fallacy is being committed. Bert has gained the upper-hand in the argument, but only because he has become abusive; NOT because he appealed to any relevant REASONS. But, now imagine that the next part of the argument goes like this:

ERNIE: <Cries uncontrollably> “That was mean!”

BERT: “Okay! Okay! You win! You can bring your rubber duckie to the dinner table! Just please stop crying.”

It is often easy to gain sympathy or win someone over by making a show of your pain. Here, an “**Appeal to Pity**” is being made by Ernie. He “won” the debate, but not by appealing to any actual REASONS.

Above, what the speakers stand to gain is getting the other person to agree, or see things their way. There are other things that people stand to gain by getting you to accept their reasoning. For instance, salespeople stand to gain your **money** by getting you to agree. For instance,

“You’ll look really great in this car. Imagine yourself behind the wheel. This is a really beautiful model of car, and the price is unbeatable. You could take it home today.”

Suppressed evidence: “Also, the mechanics have stated that this car has no more than a few months of life left in it before it needs some major engine work.”

And so on, and so on... We could come up with similar stories for nearly all of the fallacies we have covered, using everyday examples to show how people often **intentionally** engage in fallacious reasoning to get their way.

*Note that this does not mean that we are often **irrational** on purpose. It is not as if most of us sit there thinking, “I’m going to say something irrational now so I can get my way.” What is NOT often intentional is knowingly committing a logical fallacy. But, what IS often intentional is that we say something we know to be a bit skewed or mean or irrelevant because we want something from the other person.*

(b) Mental Carelessness/Easily Controlled By Emotions: Most of the time, irrationality simply results from our lack of being vigilant. When we are tired, or in a hurry, or upset, or just not really focusing clearly on the words that are being spoken, it is easy for us to allow mental errors to slip past us; and especially when emotions are involved.

This happens pretty much all the time, but some great examples occur during prime time television shows, when advertisers realize their viewers are winding down at the end of the day and are just passively absorbing everything they're watching without being critical or alert. For instance:

"Vitamin Drink! A healthy alternative."

This claim is missing a key premise. It **begs the question**, "Alternative to WHAT?" If this question is not answered, then the claim is meaningless. For instance, eating fried chicken for every meal is a healthy alternative... to drinking a glass of bleach.

Or:

"Buy our potato chips. They're all-natural."

Here, the advertiser may be leading us to commit the fallacy of **amphiboly**, because we understand "natural" to mean things like fresh-grown, vine-ripened tomatoes and lush, garden-grown lettuce (especially when they're showing people picking and preparing those things!). But, "natural" is a vague word. After all, arsenic is natural (if, by "natural", we just mean "is found in nature"). Cancer is also natural (if, by "natural", we simply mean "occurs in nature"). So, under some interpretation of the word "natural", even terrible ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup, yellow #5 food dye, and preservatives like butylated hydroxyanisole could be considered "natural". There may also be **suppressed evidence** here. It is quite possible that all of those ingredients ARE in the potato chips being advertised, and they are purposely not mentioning that fact.

- (c) World Tinted by Worldview/Pre-Suppositions: All of us have a history. We all grew up being told things by teachers, parents, pastors, friends, and so on. Everything that has ever happened to us to some extent **COLORS** our view of the world, so that each person sees things in a different way or interprets things in a different way than everyone else (in much the same way that a pair of glasses tinted green or red would make the world look tinted).

The context or framework within which we interpret or situate the world around us is called our **worldview**. And attached to each worldview is a whole collection of **assumptions** and **pre-suppositions**. But, these assumptions and pre-suppositions about how the world is, or how it works, can get us into trouble: (1) For one, they may cause us to misinterpret information because our worldview makes us more likely to see things in a certain light, regardless of whether that light is true or not.

For instance, a person with a paranoid outlook on the world might say:

"I can't find my keys. THEY did it! The people who are spying on me! They must want me to be late for something, so they hid my keys!"

This person has a tendency to interpret all incoming information in light of his paranoia. Unfortunately, because this paranoia tints his perspective of the world, it may in fact lead him to be mistaken about the true cause of things nearly all the time (so, here, we have an example of the **false cause** fallacy). Or consider this example of someone with a very powerfully spiritual worldview:

"I don't remember leaving this lamp on. It must be my sweet James, God rest his soul, come back from the grave to bring me a peaceful light."

Here again, because the speaker is pre-disposed to see the world through spiritually-tinted glasses, she tends to interpret events in this light whenever possible. But, this may in fact lead her to false conclusions. Here again we have an example of the **false cause** fallacy.

If our worldview is hateful, we may really WANT to be able to view the group that we hate in a negative light, and this causes us to be too eager to jump to conclusions about their horribleness. Consider this racist:

"See, another woman is pulled over on the side of the road over there. That's the second I've seen this month. What did I tell you!? Women are all terrible drivers!"

Here, we have a clear **hasty generalization**. We may also have **suppressed evidence** (for instance, if the speaker has seen dozens of men pulled over that month, but fails to mention it). Because the speaker is sexist, this sexism skews their entire perception of reality, and causes them to misinterpret information in such a way that it reinforces their existing racist beliefs.

(2) Now, it should be clear that one's worldview can have a great affect on our beliefs, and cause us to be susceptible to interpreting the facts in a way that the facts do not support. This alone is already important. But, it is also important that we understand how our worldview affects our beliefs for another reason: Because the assumptions and pre-suppositions that we bring with us MAY NOT BE ONES THAT OTHER PEOPLE SHARE. As such, when trying to convince someone of something, it will never do to cite reasons that YOU find obvious if your opponent does NOT find them to be obvious.

2. Avoiding Fallacies: In light of the above concerns, the next question is: What do we do now? The biggest step toward avoiding irrationality and fallacious reasoning is to LOOK FOR IT. Here are some signs that you may be engaging in fallacious reasoning; many of these were pointed out in the video of Michael Huemer during the first week of the semester:

- The policies/views you endorse are those you would benefit most from.
- You become angry when someone disagrees with you.
- You have strong opinions about a topic without gathering sufficient evidence for both sides of the issue.
- When (if) you begin gathering evidence for some issue, your beliefs do not change at all.
- You believe that everyone who holds the opposite view is evil, stupid, etc. (It is unlikely that 50% or more of the population are evil, idiotic, etc.)

Here are some situations when you are most likely to reach conclusions irrationally:

- You are tired.
- You are not paying attention.
- There is a lot at stake (personal gain or loss).
- The issue is something you hold very dear, or are very emotionally invested in.
- You fail to ever question your own assumptions and pre-suppositions (i.e., you assume that all aspects of your “worldview” are correct without question, or even worse, you assume that they are correct without good REASONS for this assumption).

Being aware of (1) the **warning signs** of irrationality, and (2) the **typical situations** in which irrationality occurs will go a long way toward preventing irrational belief and fallacious reasoning. What is more, now that you have completed the unit on informal fallacies (3) knowing these examples of **common fallacies** will help you to recognize fallacious reasoning when it occurs.

Note: Do homework for section 3.5 at this time.