

THIRTY-TWO COMMON FALLACIES EXPLAINED

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Introduction

If you watch TV, engage in debate, logic, or politics you have encountered the fallacies of:

- **Bandwagon** - "Everybody is doing it".
- **Ad Hominum** - "Attack the person instead of the argument".
- **Celebrity** - "The person is famous, it must be true".

If you have studied how magicians ply their trade, you may be familiar with:

- **Sleight** - The use of dexterity or cunning, esp. to deceive.
- **Feint** - Make a deceptive or distracting movement.
- **Misdirection** - To direct wrongly.
- **Deception** - To cause to believe what is not true; mislead.

Fallacious systems of reasoning pervade marketing, advertising and sales. "Get Rich Quick", phone card & real estate scams, pyramid schemes, chain letters, the list goes on. Because fallacy is common, you might want to recognize them.

There is no world as vulnerable to fallacy as the religious world. Because there is no direct measure of whether a statement is factual, best practices of reasoning are replaced by "logical drift". Those who are political or religious should be aware of their vulnerability to, and exportation of, fallacy.

The film, "Roshomon", by the Japanese director Akira Kurisawa, is an excellent study in fallacy.

List of Fallacies



BLACK-AND-WHITE

Classifying a middle point between extremes as one of the extremes.

Example: "You are either a conservative or a liberal"



AD BACULUM

Using force to gain acceptance of the argument.

Example: "Convert or Perish"



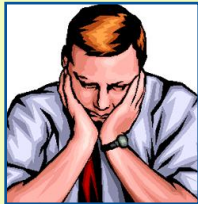
AD HOMINEM

Attacking the person instead of their argument.
Example: "John is inferior, he has blue eyes"



AD IGNORANTIAM

Arguing something is true because it hasn't been proven false.
Example: "Aliens exist since no one has proven they don't."



AD MISERICORDIAM

Appealing to pity to make a point.
Example: "If you send me to rehab, I'll lose my job!"



AD PERSONAM

Appealing to weaknesses.
Example: "ya wanna be in the club don't ya?"



AD POPULUM

Appealing to mob instinct instead of logic.
Example: "The mob scene in Frankenstein"



AD VERECUNDIAM

Appealing to authority, traditions, fame or institutions, to make a point.
Example: "That's the way we've always done it..."

ACCENT OR AMBIGUITY

Arguing to conclusions from undue accent upon certain words.

Example: He said outright, "lies!"

ACCIDENT

Applying a general rule to an instance.

Example: "That spotted horse is male; therefore all spotted horses must be male"

BEGGING THE QUESTION.

Assuming the conclusion or part of the conclusion in the premises of an argument, circular reasoning.

Example: "Aristocracy is the best form of government because good government has aristocratic leadership."

ILL-POSED OR LOADED QUESTION.

Asking a question wherein a "Yes" or a "No" will incriminate the respondent.

Example: "When did you stop beating your wife?"

COMPOSITION.

Arguing that what is true of the parts is also true of the whole.

Example: "Molecules wiggle, therefore people fidget."

DIVISION.

Arguing that what is true of the whole is true of its parts.

Example: "People breathe, therefore molecules breathe."

CONVERSE ACCIDENT

Generalizing from atypical or exceptional instances.

Example: "Everyone should inject insulin."

EQUIVOCATION.

An argument in which a word is used with one meaning in one part of the argument and with another meaning in another part.

Example: "The end of a thing is its perfection, death is the end of life, and hence death is the perfection of life".

NON CAUSA PRO CAUSA.

Believing that something is the cause when it is not.

Example: "My little dance causes it to rain."

FALSE CAUSE

Example: "A black cat ran across my path. Ten minutes later, I was hit by a truck. Therefore, the cat's running across my path was the cause of my being hit by a truck."

IRRELEVANT PURPOSE

Arguing on the basis that something has not fulfilled its purpose, when that was not its intended purpose.

'IS' TO 'OUGHT.'

Arguing from premises that have only descriptive statements (is) to a conclusion that contains an ought, or a should.

FALLACY OF LIMITED OPTIONS

The error of insisting without evidence that all options have been exhausted or are mutually exclusive.

MISLEADING CONTEXT

Arguing by misrepresenting, distorting, omitting or quoting something out of context.

RED HERRING

Ignoring criticism of an argument by changing attention to another subject.

SLANTING

Deliberately minimizing or maximizing certain points to the exclusion of others to hide evidence

SPECIAL PLEADING

Accepting an idea applied to an opponent's argument but rejecting it when applied to one's own.

STRAW MAN

Presenting an opponent's position in a weak or misrepresented version so that it can be easily refuted.

THE BEARD

Arguing that minor differences don't make a difference

TU QUOQUE (you also).

Showing that a person's views are inconsistent with what he previously believed and therefore:

- (1) he is not to be trusted, and/or
- (2) his new view is to be rejected.

GAMBLER'S

Ten coin tosses of heads imply the next one will be heads.

PRAGMATIC

Arguing that something is true because it has positive effects.

ANTHROPOMORPHIC

Attributing human thoughts, feelings or traits upon events or objects that do not possess them.

ASCERTAINMENT

"Finding more of what you were looking for".

Arises when an old problem is studied with a new tool yielding more detail, making the problem look more prevalent.