

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Fallacies in Ordinary Language: Weak Analogy, Straw Man and Red Herring

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Abstract:

On many occasions, arguments are presented and they often seem to be the truth when in reality they are not. It therefore calls upon the listener or reader to use logical reasoning in order to judge the validity or invalidity of the presented argument or idea. Some arguments are presented with the intention to mislead while others are presented from a genuine perspective without the arguer realizing the invalidity of their argument or opinion. Those arguments that are invalid are termed as being fallacious. A fallacy is a certain kind of defect in an argument.

Keywords: Logic, argument, fallacy, analogy, straw man, red herring

1. Introduction

Logic is a science that seeks to evaluate the validity of arguments. This science is important as it not only helps one to evaluate another person's argument but it also guides us in making arguments of our own. This should result in confidence when we criticize other arguments or present our own. Logic is essential for effective reasoning so that one sees things as they are, not as how one thinks they are.

An argument refers to a group of statements one of which is claimed to follow or originate from others as evidence or premises. All arguments may be placed into two broad categories: those in which the conclusion draws from the premises and those in which the conclusion does not draw from the premises. Therefore, there are good and bad arguments respectively. A fallacy is a false idea, one meant to deceive, one that does not satisfy the conditions of valid inference. It is erroneous, a trickery or a mistaken idea.

Hurley (1985: 100) observes that fallacies may also be categorized as formal or informal and gives the examples below. A formal fallacy may be identified through mere inspection of the form of structure or argument.

- All tigers are animals.
- All mammals are animals.
- Therefore, all tigers are mammals.

This argument has the following form: All A are B. All C are B. Therefore, all A are C. The fact that A, B and C stand respectively for 'tigers,' 'animals,' and 'mammals' is irrelevant in detecting the fallacy. If the letters C and B are interchanged, the form becomes valid.

This argument is invalid or fallacious since not animals are mammals: mammals have mammary glands, are warm blooded and have a spinal column.

Informal fallacies are those that can be detected only through analysis of the content of the argument. Example:

- All factories are plants.
- All plants are things that contain chlorophyll.
- Therefore, all factories are things that contain chlorophyll.

The argument above has the following form: All A are B. All B are C. All A are C. The form is valid but the argument is invalid because it has true premises and a false conclusion.

A premise refers to evidence given to support a position, a stand or an idea; it could also be taken as a position stated or assumed as a basis of argument or inference. Therefore for one to be able to identify a fallacy, they must first identify the (P) premise(s) and the (C) conclusion. For instance:

Catherine most likely will not be going to the concert tonight since her car has a dead battery and she has no other means of transportation.

In using logical reasoning, the above could be presented as follows:

- (P) Catherine's car has a dead battery.
- (P) She has no other means of transport.
- (C) Catherine will most likely not attend the concert tonight.

Arguments may be *deductive* or *inductive*. Deductive arguments are those arguments whose conclusion(s) draw of necessity from the premises while inductive arguments are those arguments whose conclusion(s) are probably from the premises.

Hurley (1985) observes that in ordinary language, some fallacies are not mistakes, are not easily recognized nor clear cut. This could be because a fallacious mode of argument may be mixed with another and the strands of argument may have to be disentangled. Also, some arguments may not be presented in complete form so the evidence could be obscured. Because of their use in ordinary language, the fallacies discussed below are not so easy to detect. Sometimes they occur in long texts requiring close critical attention.

2. Weak Analogy

It is referred to as such since its basis is inductive argument- its conclusions do not necessarily originate from the premises. An argument from analogy has the following structure:

Entity A has attributes a, b, c & z

Entity B has attributes a, b & c

Therefore, entity B probably has attribute z also.

Example of weak analogy:

Harper's new car is bright blue, has leather upholstery and gets excellent gas mileage. Crowley's new car is also bright blue and has leather upholstery. Therefore, it probably gets excellent gas mileage too.

Because the colour of a car and the choice of upholstery have nothing to do with fuel consumption, this argument is not only weak but fallacious.

The following example also by Hurley (1985) is another weak analogy. This is because the conclusion does not of necessity follow from the premises.

Some strains of cattle are more desirable than others, and the more desirable strains may be produced by eugenic practices such as selective breeding. Similarly in man the more desirable strains may be produced by eugenic practices such as selective breeding.

Though man and animals are mammals, the analogy is weak since while animals can be owned and are kept for human consumption, the same cannot be said for man. The two categories cannot be compared in the same manner.

Additionally, arguments from analogy should be analysed for equivocation: deception or ambiguity. The term could probably have more than one interpretation. Because of this, the conclusion may appear to follow from the premises when in actual sense it doesn't. Such is a fallacy of equivocation.

3. Straw Man

Gula (2006:79) argues that when you take something your opponent has said, exaggerate or distort it, and then attack what you have exaggerated or distorted, you have created a straw man. He further notes that by extending an opponent's ideas, a straw man can be created. Example: 'You are advocating A; the next thing, you'll be advocating B, and then C, and then D.' Then you show how terrible or foolish or impractical D is. Of course your opponent never suggested D, but the audience may have forgotten that fact. This is what we usually experience with politicians. They will either seek to totally distort an opponent's position or stretch it so that it becomes weak.

Tallise and Aikin (2006) argued that apart from misrepresenting an opponent's position, one could also create a fabrication, which they referred to as 'hollow man.' This is a situation where the viewpoint and the opponent expressing it do not exist, or that the arguer has never encountered. Such arguments frequently take the vague phrasing such as: 'Some say,' 'Someone out there thinks,' or similar weasel words. A non-existent argument may blossom into a broad movement rather than an individual or organization.

A weak argument is combined with an *ad hominem*- nut picking; this refers to seeking out extremely fringe non representative statements of individuals from members of an opposing group and parading these as evidence of that entire group's incompetence or irrationality.

A straw man can also be created by switching the opponent's real argument or by simply putting words into his mouth. You can either imply or state that he said something that he in fact never said, or that his words meant something that he never intended for them to mean. The following example given by Hurley (1985:150) is an example of an argument that has been extended to distort the exact point on animal rights:

'There is a lot of discussion these days about the rights of animals. For example it is argued that chickens and cows have a right not to be kept in tiny cages that prevent them from moving around and cause them to fatten more quickly on less food. But if chickens and cows are acknowledged as having rights, it won't be long before a case is made for fish and insects. And then we'll be giving rights to plants and bacteria. Rivers, lakes and mountains will follow close behind. In the end the concept of rights will have become completely meaningless.'

From the example above, it is clear that the speaker has stretched the issue of animal rights too far so that the audience sees the whole issue as meaningless and one that does not need to occupy their time.

4. Red Herring

Gula (2006:74) notes that to divert hounds from pursuing a scent, a herring would be dragged across their path, this would distract the hounds from their original goal. A red herring is a detail or remark inserted into a discussion either intentionally or unintentionally, that sidetracks the discussion. Gula further argues that the red herring is invariably irrelevant and is often emotionally charged. Participants in the discussion go after the red herring and forget what they were talking about; in fact, they may never get back to their original topic.

This is a clue that leads in the wrong direction. It is also known as: beside the point, misdirection, changing the subject, irrelevant thesis, clouding the issue or ignorance of refutation. It is an attempt to misdirect an argument to another

issue to which the person doing the misdirection can better respond. It is the deliberate diversion of attention with the intention of trying to abandon the original argument. Example:

- A: It is morally wrong to cheat on your spouse? Why on earth would one do that?
- B: But what exactly is morality?
- A: It is a code of conduct shared by cultures.
- B: But who writes this code?
- B has successfully derailed the conversation to a discussion on morality.

Another example: A teacher catches a student cheating in a test. The student in response says, 'I know I've made a mistake. But think of my parents. They are going to kill me.'

The student appeals to the teacher's pity thereby distracting the teacher from the issue at hand. A suspected criminal may appeal to a judge's pity by introducing something unrelated to the crime allegedly committed with the hope of earning their freedom. The judge has to be alert so that he is not drawn to issues unrelated, especially because they may have an emotional appeal, so as to deliver fair judgement.

Even in literary works, red herrings are used to create suspense. In Dan Brown's novel *Da Vinci Code*, the character Bishop Aringarosa is presented in such a way that readers suspect him to be the mastermind behind the whole conspiracy in the church. It was later revealed that he was innocent Bishop Aringarosa distracts the readers' attention from the real bad person and thus adds to the mystery of the story. 'Aringarosa' is Italian and in English it

Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *Sherlock Holmes: Hound of the Baskervilles* has its readers thrown off the real murderer when an escaped convict is introduced in the story. In the end the mystery is resolved by the unexpected confession of 'Beryl' that her husband 'Stapleton' was the real culprit behind the mystery of the killer 'hound.' The escaped convict was a red herring introduced to divert attention of the police, and as a technic added to the twists and turns.

5. Conclusion

Fallacies are a part of our lives. We ought to be alert to people who speak in absolutes, generalizations, especially those not supported, or extreme examples. We must equally be alert to those who use emotional language. We must be alert not to confuse opinion, attitude, personal bias, speculation, personal assurance or unsupported generalization with hard factual evidence. Conclusions ought to be drawn from evidence adduced. Fallacies appear in many forms which have not been exhausted in this article.

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