

Guides to Straight Thinking

With 13 Common Fallacies

Foreword

“That was a fine speech the Senator made!”

“I didn’t think much of it; they say he never went beyond grade school.”

What is wrong with this argument? It is a sample of the logical fallacy known as *ad hominem*, where the issue is deserted to attack the character of the person who raises it. By undermining the Senator personally, his critic hopes to discredit the theme of his speech. *Ad hominem* is one of the most common, as well as one of the most ancient, fallacies, and everyone who argues is tempted by it. The Greeks were aware of it, if not Methuselah.

I had long been wondering why we go on falling into this ancient mantrap, when arrangements were made with a group of editors of *The Reader’s Digest* for me to develop a series of articles on logical fallacies. The articles the *Digest* carried were well received, and I decided to complete the list and make them into a book, together with some background material and plenty of timely applications.

The study continues my interest in communication and semantics, which dates back to *The Tyranny of Words*, published in 1938, and containing a chapter on logic. The present book is written for people like myself who have been thrown for a loss in trying to understand formal expositions of logic -- such, for instance, as the twenty-four-page disquisition in the Fourteenth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. At the

same time we have felt a real need for sharper tools in reasoning, and have wondered what the logicians might do to aid us.

Well, there is plenty they can do, especially in the identification of fallacies like *ad hominem*. My study is for the journeyman thinker who would like to know more precisely what the Senator on the floor, the critic of the Senator, the writers of editorials, the omniscient voices on the radio, the attorney in the courtroom, the campaign orators, the copy writers of Madison Avenue, and the Moscow propaganda mill, are trying to make him believe. What is the real meaning behind the rhetoric and the sales talk?

Identifying fallacies, like crossword puzzles, can be an interesting game for active minds, but it is a good deal more than that, especially when applied to analyzing one's own mental processes. As the world becomes more complicated, and the mass media more shrill and insistent, the necessity for straight thinking increases. Homo sapiens is now in so many jams that only a vigorous use of his brains can extricate him – economic jams, racial and religious conflicts, cold wars, population problems – to say nothing of traffic jams.

Fortunately there seems to be little the matter with the human brain as an instrument of thought. Physiologists calculate it contains twelve to fifteen billion electrical connections, which makes it capable of handling very complicated matters indeed. They estimate that, to duplicate its performance, an electronic computer would have to be a block long and would need all the water of Niagara Falls to cool it. One difficulty is that emotional drives get in the way of efficient use, and some of the fallacies we will examine arise directly from this fact. Another difficulty is lack of mental exercise.

Though the brain, with its marvelous mechanisms for storing memories, will perform thousands of tasks for us without troubling our consciousness, when it comes to analyzing a problem,

conscious mental effort must go to work in a process which is always new. No electronic computer, furthermore, can ever grapple with a problem until some human mind has first cleared the ground – “taped it,” to use the electronic lingo. Computers can do problems faster than a man, *after* a man has built the problem into them.

The reader will find for reference, in the Appendix, a list of twenty-two classical fallacies developed by students of logic since Aristotle’s time. Some are highly technical, applying chiefly to the manipulation of the syllogism. Some overlap each other, some are pretty ambiguous. Authorities differ on the number and classification of fallacies. In addition to those I have selected for their usefulness today, like *ad hominem*, I have included in my study several derived from modern science. Thirteen fallacies have thus been identified for analysis, with a chapter given to each. We will also look at other examples of false reasoning in the chapters dealing with propaganda and the courtroom.

My study is not a textbook, or a competitor for the standard course in logic – though it might be of use as collateral reading. No student could pass a standard examination if it were his only source. Logic in the colleges and schools, whether “formal” or not, has become formalized. It requires far more attention to technical rules than will be found here. So do not look for the mental pinwheels which philosophers use to dazzle us and each other. The cases you will find are not puzzles, even if some can be made into games. On the contrary, I have tried to make the material as clear as possible for the busy, and sometimes uneasy, consumer of ideas.

The reader will find a large number of stories and illustrations, collected from all over. I have drawn from my own experience, and my wife, who has collaborated closely, has drawn from hers – in a recent stretch of jury duty, for instance, where she found fallacies falling like snow in January. Cases have come from books, magazines, news stories, advertising and publicity matter; from commentator and columnist, and letters

to the editor – the last a veritable gold mine. I have also borrowed stories from the books on logic which appear in the Bibliography, and hereby tender my grateful thanks to their authors.

In selecting illustrations from current politics, I shall doubtless be charged with quoting more bad logic by conservatives than by liberals. As I am constitutionally of a liberal turn of mind, the charge probably has merit. But the reader will note also a fair number of cases where New Dealers, Democrats, One Worlders, and reformers of various stripes have been caught out of bounds.

I am indebted to my friend Ernest Angell, the New York attorney, for a critical reading of the chapter on the courtroom, and to Dr. J. G. Brennan of Barnard College, Columbia University, for reviewing the whole manuscript from the point of view of a technical expert in logic. Neither is responsible for the final draft. I am grateful for efficient secretarial help by my neighbors Christine Loring and Lola Donnell.

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Logical principles . . . are inescapable, because any attempt to disregard them reduces our thoughts and words to confusion and gibberish.

MORRIS R. COHEN and ERNEST NAGEL
(in *Logic and Scientific Method*)

Man longs for causes, and the weaker minds, unable to restrain their longing, often barter, for the most sorry theoretic pottage, the truth which patient enquiry would make their own.

JOHN TYNDALL