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False Analogies

Fallacy Number Six

THE UNITED STATES is building a string of radar stations around the country, including installations in northern Canada. Writing to one of the New York papers in 1954, a man calls it wishful thinking to believe that a wall of radar across Canada can stop enemy bombers.[1] "Look at the Great Wall of China," he says, "look at the Maginot line." Having established his two analogies, he goes on to argue that the only defense against invaders is a preventive war; go out and hit them first!

There is no real comparison between the Great Wall of China, designed to hold against nomadic herdsmen armed with spears, the Maginot Line, designed to repel mass infantry charges, and an electronic detector of bombing planes moving at the speed of sound. About all they have in common is the word "wall." On this shaky analogy, Mr. X is willing to plunge the world into an atomic war.

On another level, analogies can be helpful. Here is a good one from Gilbert W. Chapman for the National Book Committee:

> There is no reason to make either books or education easy, any more than tennis or football is easy. Like sport, they require a certain amount of hard work and practice, and like sport, they can be both a challenge and a delight.

[1] William Tell's note: At the time Chase wrote this book, "the enemy" was

We have all seen models of the atom, with its nucleus and revolving electrons. No one has ever seen an actual atom or possibly ever will. Models like this in physics, says Dr. Percy Bridgman, are useful tools of thought, picturing the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. A working model is of course an analogy, a more precise one. In the laboratory model we multiply the theoretical dimensions by a factor large enough "to bring it to the magnitude of ordinary experience."

Bridgman's definition is applicable to analogies in general. Do they really fit the case? To compare radar stations in Canada with the Great Wall of China only befuddles the mind. No analogy, whether in physics, politics, or anywhere else, can conclusively prove anything. The best it can do is to help bring the event under discussion "to the magnitude of ordinary experience," and so widen our understanding of it. Bergen Evans underscores the danger present in all analogies when he says that "the inferring of a further degree of resemblance from an observed degree is one of the greatest pitfalls of popular thinking.[2] The fallacy comes in when we use an analogy in lieu of proof, read more into it than the facts warrant, and note only similarities while ignoring differences.

Often we unintentionally deceive ourselves in this way. But analyzing similarities and differences correctly is a prime tool of learning. Without it we could not build on experience and relate new knowledge to old. We study a strange proposition or picture or problem, and ask: "What in this new situation is like something I have seen before? What is unfamiliar?" To learn, we have to concentrate on the new and different aspects. But the analogy-monger tends to ignore the differences, and push the similarities to an unjustified extreme.

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the Soviet Union.

[2] *Natural History of Nonsense*.

A BROAD FIELD

Broadly interpreted, the field of analogy includes metaphors, folk sayings, that the practice of sympathetic magic, whether employed by primitive peoples or by modern consumers of the more exotic brands of patent medicines. It extends into education; indeed it would be impossible to bring up children without a frequent use of analogies to relate their limited first-hand experience to wider knowledge. "Yes, dear, a skunk is like a kitty but—" "No, Roger, the wings of a plane are not like the wings of a bird except for soaring—"

All human talk, even the most learned philosophical discussion, is packed with metaphors. Open a page of any book to find: "*root* of the problem," "*falling* into error," "*steps* to take," "*packed* with metaphors." But metaphors are not explicitly formulated analogies, for we use them unconsciously. Many have become cemented (there we go) into the language over the centuries, and these are seldom used to clinch (another one) our argument.

Folk sayings, many of which we shall meet in Chapter 15 as "self-evident truths," often are cast in the form of analogies. A favorite tag today is, "Where there's smoke there's fire." If a person has been accused, for example, of disloyalty[3] on a mere rumor, the absence of proof does not clear him. Neighbors shake their heads, employers turn him down. "Where there's smoke," they say, "there must be fire."

The "sympathetic magic" of primitive peoples is based on reasoning by analogy. You make a doll in the image of your enemy, transfix it with a bone arrow, and lo, following the proper incantations by the medicine man, your enemy becomes very sick indeed, at least in theory. The "doctrine of signatures" in early medicine followed a similar pattern. Powdered walnuts were administered for diseases of the brain

[3] William Tell's note: At the time Chase wrote this book, "disloyalty" referred specifically to being either a Communist or a Communist sympathizer. See Tell's note about the term "fellow traveler," in an earlier chapter.

because walnuts were convoluted like the brain. *Eyebright*, a plant marked with a spot resembling the human eye, was of course the specific for afflictions of the eye, while *celandine*, a plant with yellow juice, was confidently prescribed for jaundice.

FORMOSA EQUALS MUNICH

Our chief concern in this chapter is not with figures of speech or ceremonial rites but with consciously formulated analogies supposed to clarify current happenings. Under closer examination they may be found to do nothing of the kind; they darken rather than illumine, like the radar "wall."

In the spring of 1955, Americans were trying to understand what was going on in the Formosa Straits. Tension and fear were in the air. Would the Red Chinese attack the offshore islands? Would we retaliate if they did? Would the action kindle a new world war? Editorial writers, radio commentators, columnists, letter writers to the papers, philosophers in bars and grills, began aiming analogies in all directions. The favorite took the form: "If the U.S. backs down it will be Munich all over again!" Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, it was remembered, had let Czecho-Slovakia go to Hitler at Munich without a fight. The symbol of the surrender had become his umbrella. Senator Knowland of California used the Munich analogy with vigor:[4]

> There are still some who believe that the way to deal with an international bully is by appeasement. At Munich the world should have learned that the road to appeasement is not the road to peace. It is surrender on the installment plan.

An angry letter writer cried that Red China had consistently broken the Korean truce, so what keeps us from attacking her? The peace in our time, which Chamberlain thought he brought

[4] New York *Herald Tribune*, May 13, 1955.

home from Munich, was too high a price to pay for trying to stop World War II. If we agree to a cease-fire in the Formosa Straits, the letter writer continued, it is too high a price to pay for the "loss of all Asia and the isolation of our country in a yellow tide."

These bristling analogies about Munich — with a thin entering wedge on the end — follow the stereotype that "history teaches." Nothing in the flow of human affairs, of course, repeats itself precisely, and a truer saying is that "history is an irreversible process." The circumstances of Munich, in the middle of Europe in 1938, were vastly different from those off the China coast in 1955. For one thing, the atomic bomb had not been invented. Yet when President Eisenhower and his staff landed at the Washington airport in a rainstorm after the Geneva Conference of July 1955, they found themselves thoroughly drenched. Considerably to their astonishment no one offered them an umbrella; all umbrellas had been banned as too reminiscent of Munich!

"You say the Chinese Reds are Communists? Why, they are nothing but Agrarian Reformers." This analogy was widely accepted just before the peace-loving agrarians drove our ally Chiang Kai-shek clean off the Asiatic continent.

A lady letter writer draws a parallel between the Reds and a local marauder. The Reds, she says, stole China from Chiang, implying that China was the Generalissimo's personal possession. "Would you relinquish a claim to your property because a thief stole it from you?" she asks heatedly, apparently confusing the property laws of Montclair, New Jersey, with international power politics. If we had a world government and a world policeman the lady might have a point — but one suspects that these might alarm her even more.

Political democracy is sometimes compared to a ship, where citizens as sailors pull on the ropes with a yo ho ho together. This is a miserable parallel, for the captain of a ship is still

an absolute dictator in emergencies, with powers of life and death.

Another popular analogy concerns the thirteen American colonies in 1787. If they were able to compose their many differences, it is argued, and adopt a Constitution, why can't the quarreling nations of the world get together and adopt a World Constitution? At first hearing, the argument is persuasive. Then we remember that the American colonies had one language, one culture, on [sic] Christian religion, and one compact location. The eighty quarreling nations have no such solid foundation on which to build.

In Marquand's novel, *So Little Time*, guests at a cocktail party in 1941 are discussing the fall of France. "Just now everyone was saying that we were like France, that if we didn't wake up, we would end just like France. It makes no sense, because America was not like France. . . ." Among other major differences was a three-thousand-mile stretch of salt water, separating America from Germany.

Before World War II, many writers, including your author, often discussed the economic and social problems of America by drawing parallels with France, Britain, Germany, Sweden. Ah, Sweden, what a landmark for reformers! Now we know that those comparisons were way out of line. The U.S. in 1940 was a different organism — bigger, more self-sufficient, more productive, less experienced, racially more mixed — than the small countries of western Europe.

A writer for the *Freeman* in 1955 produced a regular blockbuster of an analogy — my favorite horrible example to date — in the debate on U.S. foreign policy. He equated a policy of co-existence with Russia, with Chamberlain's policy at Munich, with Roosevelt's at Yalta, Truman's at Potsdam, Eisenhower's cease-fire in Korea, with Mendès-France at Geneva giving up North Vietnam. Here, says this savant, "is the true measure of the morality of the coexistence policy!"

AN INSTITUTION IS NOT A PERSON

Drawing parallels between an institution and an individual is a risky business. Like the lady letter writer who equated the loss of China with a second-story man in Montclair, is the soapbox orator in London's famous Hyde Park. The speaker put the following question to his audience: "How does Winston Churchill propose to build three hundred thousand houses a year in his postwar housing program, when it took him five years to build one brick wall at his country place?"

Churchill built the wall with his own hands as a hobby, but his housing program was to be designed and financed by the British Government, and built by hundreds of thousands of craftsmen and laborers. There is no legitimate comparison, but the soapboxer probably scored a point.

Politicians of both parties have long assured us that the U.S. national debt is exactly like a mortgage on our home. Both are heavy burdens, they say, and should be paid off at the earliest possible moment. We are not told that the national debt is a source of investment and income for banks, insurance companies, trust funds, foundations, and individual holders of government bonds. We are not told that any attempt to liquidate it suddenly would wreck the U.S. financial system. We are not told that experts who manage the national debt must use very different rules from householders trying to pay off the mortgage.

Meanwhile lawyers and courts have had endless trouble with the legal fiction that a corporation is a person; that the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey is just like you and me.

A letter writer argues that "Parity is the farmer's minimum wage law. What could possibly be 'high' about wages or prices which are only 90 percent of the minimum?" The editor of the *New York Times* pounces on the analogy. The purpose of the minimum wage law, he says, is to protect workers at, or

near, the subsistence level; it is flexible, and affects only a small number of the total labor force. High, rigid price supports for farmers haven't the faintest resemblance to minimum wages. "It is because it is the antithesis of the latter that we are opposed to it." Parity may have respectable arguments in its favor, but the *Times* very properly throws out this one.

Attic inventors, when shunned by investors, have a well-rehearsed response: "Look at Fulton," they say, "look at Edison, look at Alexander Graham Bell. Everybody laughed at the first steamboat, the first phonograph, the first telephone. This little supercharger of mine is going to be even more important!" People did laugh at Fulton and Edison, true enough, and I wish my grandfather had not laughed at Alexander Graham Bell when he could have got in on the ground floor. But for every invention which survived public merriment, it is safe to say that a thousand were laughed permanently and properly out of court.

A letter writer to the New York Times remembers arguing with a woman pacifist at a dinner party. "When I asked her if she would fight if I tried to throw her baby out of the window, she turned angrily away. . . ." The lady should have done more than turn away, she should have poured the soup over his head, and the hotter the better! This is one of those gross, below-the-belt arguments, on a par with "Do you want your daughter to marry a Negro?" The issue is jerked out of context and put on a savage personal level, utterly beyond intelligent discussion.

Analogies are cardinal to human thinking. They add a depth and perspective to current experience. But they should be handled responsibly, or clarification may turn into confusion and worse. Open your newspaper to "Letters to the Editor" and it will be an off day when you do not find an example that is misleading, unjust, thoroughly fallacious, or all three.