
Good and Bad Arguments

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I. Philosophical Arguments

In one sense of the term, people argue all of the time. They disagree, they fight, they get mad at one another. In another sense of the term, however, people do not argue nearly enough. Much of what people say when they disagree with each other is simply the repeated assertion that the other person is wrong. They do not always offer reasons for thinking their assertions are true. Philosophers define an argument in the following way:

Argument =_{df} a set of statements that includes: (a) a conclusion, which is the main point the argument is trying to establish; and (b) the premises, which are reasons given in support of the conclusion.

There are two main requirements an argument must satisfy if it is going to count as a good argument:

- (i) The premises must be true.
- (ii) The premises must support the conclusion.

In other words, the evidence or reasons you present must be accurate, and they must provide reason for thinking the conclusion is true. Corresponding to the two requirements for a good argument are two ways an argument can fail:

- (i) If the premises are false.
- (ii) If the premises fail to support the conclusion.

Suppose a prosecuting attorney were to make the following argument in a court of law:

1. The victim was shot twice with a .44 revolver.
2. The defendant bought a .44 revolver three days before the shooting.
3. The defendant and the victim had a nasty breakup the week before the shooting.
4. The defendant suspected that the victim had been cheating on him.

5. Friends and neighbors can testify to the defendant's expressions of jealousy and rage the week before the shooting.
6. During the three days leading up to the shooting, the defendant was seen shooting his .44 revolver at a target with the victim's name written across it.
7. The defendant's car was seen parked outside the victim's house the two nights before the shooting.
8. The defendant's fingerprints were found on the murder weapon.
9. Therefore, the defendant is guilty of murdering the victim.

Is this a good argument? If the evidence presented by the prosecution is reliable—i.e., if all of the information in the premises is accurate—would the jury have good reason to think the conclusion is true (i.e., to believe that the defendant is guilty)? It certainly seems so.

Suppose, however, that the information in the premises was fraught with inaccuracies. Suppose that the ballistics lab mistakenly identified the murder weapon as a .44 revolver when in fact it was a .357. Suppose that the car seen parked outside the victim's house was not really the defendant's car after all. Suppose also that the fingerprint evidence and the testimony from friends and neighbors was also completely false. In such circumstances, we would obviously not think of the argument as providing good reasons to believe the conclusion. So, the premises of a good argument must be true.

One of the first things you should look for when examining someone else's argument is whether you think the premises of the argument are true. If you see some dubious premises, argue against them. False premises, however, are not the only source of weak spots in an argument.

To see the importance of the second requirement for a good argument, consider the following argument from another prosecuting attorney:

1. The defendant has scars on his face and lots of tattoos on his arms.
2. Most bank robbers have scars on their faces and tattoos on their arms.
3. The defendant is a high-school dropout.
4. Most bank robbers are high-school dropouts.
5. The defendant owns several handguns.
6. Most bank robbers own several handguns.
7. The defendant has what most people would describe as a “mean-looking face.”
8. Most bank robbers have what most people would describe as “mean-looking faces.”
9. Therefore, the defendant robbed the bank.

Suppose—just for the sake of argument—that all of the premises are true. Suppose there really are statistics showing that bank robbers typically have scars and tattoos and are high-school dropouts. We can even suppose that most people, if shown a mug shot of the defendant, would indeed reply that he had a mean-looking face. Do these premises give us any reason to believe the conclusion? Obviously not. This example shows the importance of the second requirement for a good argument. You can say all sorts of true things and yet never establish the truth of your conclusion. Your evidence or reasons may not be relevant to your conclusion or there may be missing steps in your argument that keep the inference you present from counting as evidence for your conclusion.

It is important to know that arguments can completely fail even if their premises are 100% true. This means that, if you want to disagree with someone, you do not necessarily need to disagree with every single statement that comes out of their mouth.

You may want to express agreement with their premises but deny that their conclusion follows from them. Consider the following hypothetical argument from a medical expert:

1. Currently, when human fetuses from abortions are killed, their tissues are sold to scientific laboratories that use them in scientific research.
2. If researchers in the biomedical sciences were allowed to perform experiments on aborted fetuses *before* the fetuses were killed, scientists would learn more information about human development and make more important discoveries about the control and treatment of disease than ever before.
3. Scientists are limited in what they can learn by experimenting only upon non-human animals. Rats and humans don't always respond in the same way to the same medical treatments.
4. If scientists were allowed to experiment upon human fetuses, they would be able to learn exactly how certain medical treatment options would affect human beings.
5. Fetuses from abortions are killed anyway. It would be more beneficial to get some scientific use out of them before tossing them into the garbage or selling their dead tissues to laboratories.
6. Therefore, the U.S. should allow biomedical researchers to perform experiments upon living human fetuses that have been slated for abortion. The fetuses would then be killed after the experiments were completed.

Suppose you wanted to argue against the medical expert who is putting forward this argument. It doesn't look like attacking the premises would be a very good idea. They all seem to be true. Premise (1) simply states a known fact about aborted fetus tissue, which you can verify by consulting any appropriate authority in the medical community. The other premises seem to be true as well. I'm sure scientists would learn a lot if they were to experiment on human fetuses. There also seem to be no doubt that they would

learn more that is medically useful from using human fetuses than they would from using lab rats.

However, that doesn't mean the conclusion is true. In my opinion, the policy proposed in the conclusion is horribly wrong. None of the facts compiled in the premises show that it is morally permissible to treat human fetuses like lab rats. While I agree that all of the premises are true, I do not think they answer the moral question, which is what is most important in a case like this.

Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with me on the biomedical issue in question, I'm sure you can see how this example illustrates the fact that someone can agree with another person's premises and yet reject that person's conclusion. The accuracy of the facts in the premises is never the whole story in an argument. There is always the further question of whether the premises give us any reason to believe the conclusion is true.

II. Common Fallacies

Plato once said, "Arguments, like men, are often pretenders." There are some ways of arguing that pretend to be good but do not, in fact, establish their conclusions. Mistaken forms of reasoning are known as 'fallacies.' Fallacious arguments do not provide any reason for thinking their conclusions are true. Some of these logical errors are common enough to have earned their own labels. It is useful to be acquainted with common fallacies not only because you can learn to avoid them yourself but also because you can learn to point out fallacies in other people's arguments. This can be very useful in debate. This section surveys some of the most common types of fallacies.

A. Appeal to Inappropriate Authority

About once a year, the magazines *Time* and *Life* each publish an issue on God. They interview a wide variety of people and ask them about their beliefs on religion.

Invariably, there is a Nobel Prize-winning theoretical physicist (never an experimental physicist) who is among the interviewees. Many people in our society treat the views of theoretical physicists on life's ultimate questions as being quite authoritative. (It is now starting to be common for molecular biologists who work on the human genome to be given this same kind of overweening respect, but few other scientists in contemporary society enjoy this kind of cultural cachet.) Those who treat the religious views of Nobel Prize-winning physicists as being more authoritative than those of the average person commit the following fallacy:

Appeal to Inappropriate Authority =_{df} fallacy committed when a conclusion in one area of human inquiry is supported by appealing to the authority of someone whose authority or expertise lies in an independent and unrelated area of human inquiry.

In short, expertise in physics does not translate into expertise in religion. No one would ever dream of calling on an expert accountant to perform brain surgery simply because that person was a really great accountant. Expertise in accounting is one thing. Expertise in brain surgery is another.

There's nothing wrong with appeals to authority *per se*. If the person whose opinion you are seeking really is an expert on the subject matter you're inquiring about, you commit no fallacy in relying upon his or her opinion. There is no fallacy involved in trusting your tax accountant's opinion about your taxes. It is only when the person's area of expertise has nothing to do with the issue in question that a fallacy is committed.

We can all recognize when someone has fallaciously appealed to an inappropriate authority, regardless of where we may stand on the issue in question. Fallacies can be made by any party to a debate.

B. *False Dilemma*

Politicians want to make it easy for voters to see who they should vote for and what issues they should support. In order to make it clear what the right choice for voters is, they often portray political issues in an overly simplistic light. For example, a liberal politician who supports a tax increase referendum to pay for social services might say:

1. There are two options with this tax increase referendum: (a) being in favor of caring for the poor and elderly in our community, and (b) not caring what happens to our city's poor and elderly population.
2. It is morally wrong to be callous and uncaring in the face of human suffering—especially when you have the resources to do something about it and those who are suffering do not have the resources to help themselves.
3. Therefore, you should cast your vote in favor of caring for the poor and elderly.

Politicians who offer this kind of argument commit the fallacy of false dilemma:

False Dilemma =_{df} fallacy committed when:

- (i) a decision is portrayed as being a choice two (or more) options;
- (ii) all but one of the options presented is obviously bad; but
- (iii) there are, in fact, more options than are represented.

The logical form of the argument above is:

1. The only options are *A* and *B*.
2. *B* is obviously not the right option.
3. Therefore, *A* is the right option.

The fallacy comes in thinking that options *A* and *B* are the only options. The hypothetical liberal politician says that the only two options are caring about the poor and elderly (by voting in favor of the referendum) or not caring about the poor and elderly (by voting against it). However, it is obviously possible for someone to oppose the referendum and still to care about the poor and elderly. Someone might oppose the referendum because he or she is in favor of a different plan to alleviate the suffering of the poor and elderly. Or someone might be head of a private, non-profit organization that helps the poor and elderly but that would be prevented from doing so because of new provisions in the referendum. There are a variety of ways that someone could still care about the poor and elderly and yet be opposed to the referendum. Therefore, the two options described by the politician are not the only options.

If there is some issue where *A* and *B* really are the only options, there is nothing wrong with concluding that *A* is the right choice on the basis of reasons offered against *B*. Similar considerations apply when more than two options are represented in the first premise of the argument:

1. The only options are *A*, *B* and *C*.
2. *B* and *C* are obviously not the right options.
3. Therefore, *A* is the right option.

If *A*, *B* and *C* really are the only options and *B* and *C* really are obviously not the right ones, then you would be justified in concluding that *A* must be the right one. The fallacy of false dilemma would be committed in this kind of case if *A*, *B* and *C* are not the only options.

Not only are fallacies religiously neutral (cf. the previous section), they are also politically neutral. We are all capable of seeing that the above argument above commits a fallacy, regardless of whether we are liberal or conservative. (Liberal readers whose feelings were hurt by the example in this section may feel better after reading the next section.)

C. *Straw Man*

Several years ago Rush Limbaugh coined a new term: Femi-Nazi. He (stipulatively, of course) defined 'Femi-Nazi' as a person dedicated to seeing the total number of abortions performed in America each year increase. Rush (who, by his own estimation, is right 97.9% of the time^[1]) then proceeded to argue that the Femi-Nazi position was morally wrong. Even though the term 'Femi-Nazi' was not defined as 'militant feminist,' it certainly brought to many people's minds images of militant feminist activists (whatever those are). Rush used these connotations to his advantage, even though, strictly speaking, they are not part of the term's definition. He acted as if his attacks the Femi-Nazi movement were also somehow attacks on the feminist movement, which is strongly pro-choice.

How many people in America do you suppose are true Femi-Nazis? These are not people whose explicitly stated goals have the *unintentional* consequence of increasing the number of abortions per year. They are people whose conscious purpose in life is to increase the number of abortions. I don't think there are any sane people who are Femi-Nazis. Rush Limbaugh has committed the straw man fallacy:

Straw Man =_{df} the fallacy of attacking a position that one's opponent does not really hold and thinking that one has thereby attacked the opponent's position.

People who commit the straw man fallacy succeed in hitting their targets. The problem, however, is their choice of target. The targets they attack are not what their opponents actually believe. They are misrepresentations of their opponents that are easier to knock down than their opponent's real positions. The fallacy takes its name from the fact that the person who commits it is not attacking a real person. They are only attacking a straw person that has been created (by the fallacy-maker) for the sole purpose of having something easy to shoot at.

Someone who commits the straw man fallacy is like the guy who sets up a plastic deer target in his yard, shoots at it, and then brags to his friend that he shot a ten-point buck. In one sense, it is true that he shot a ten-point buck—if the plastic target indeed has ten points on it. However, this guy is not entitled to strut around like he accomplished something significant. He hit his target, but it was not a significant target to hit.

It is useful to know the straw man fallacy because almost every time you find yourself discussing a controversial subject with other people, those who disagree with you will misrepresent your position and will attack the misrepresentation rather than your actual position. Here is an example of what I'm talking about:

NIGEL: I believe that some kinds of sexual lifestyles are morally wrong.

BASIL: So, you're saying it's OK for rednecks to beat up gay people?

NIGEL: No, I'm not saying that at all. All people in our society should be protected from having unwanted violence inflicted upon them. I'm just saying I think their chosen lifestyles are immoral.

BASIL: What makes you think it's OK for you to force your morality on everyone else?

NIGEL: I haven't said anything about forcing my morality on anybody. All I did was give my opinion about a certain moral issue. I didn't use any force or even the threat of force to coerce others to agree with me.

BASIL: But you are saying that you don't think gay people should have the same rights as straight people, right?

NIGEL: No. I think all people in a democratic society should have the same rights. That means that people should have the right to pursue lifestyles that others think are immoral. I haven't said anything about depriving people of their rights or inflicting violence upon them. I'm only giving my opinion about the morality of their behavior.

Basil, as I've represented him, is repeatedly committing the straw man fallacy. It's obviously wrong to openly support rednecks who beat up gay people. If that were Nigel's position, it would be easy to defeat Nigel in debate. However, that's not what Nigel believes. The same thing is true for all of the other ways Basil tries to represent Nigel's view.

When a controversial subject is being discussed, most people have an extremely difficult time remaining emotionally calm enough to be fair to their interlocutors. The sort of thing we see Basil doing is much more typical. If you are discussing a philosophical topic with friends, or if you are making a proposal to your colleagues at work, or if you are talking about politics or religion with family members, you should expect that those who strongly disagree with you are going to misrepresent your position. Many people do not realize their views are being misrepresented by their opponents and they wind up making the mistake of defending a straw man. In other words, because they are not expecting to be misrepresented, they get trapped into defending the misrepresentation rather than their considered opinion. If you are prepared for this to happen and keep a watchful eye for misrepresentations of your views, you will be more likely to succeed in arguing your case. Point out to your philosophical opponents that they have misrepresented your views and force them to argue with your real views.

D. Slippery Slope

A perfectly acceptable way to refute a certain position or proposal is to show that it would have obviously false, absurd or otherwise unacceptable consequences. However, there is a problem with arguing in this fashion when there is no good reason to think that the position in question really would lead to the terrible consequences that are cited. For example:

GUN OWNER: If we let bleeding-heart liberals ban the sale of automatic assault weapons, the next thing you know, they'll be banning handguns. And

then they will coming after the hunting rifles and shotguns of law-abiding sportsmen. The proposal to ban automatic weapons is the first step toward the complete disarmament of the America people. If people can't take up arms and defend themselves, they will be completely defenseless against any future terrorist attacks. Therefore, the liberal proposal to ban automatic weapons is bad.

This gun owner commits the slippery slope fallacy.

Slippery Slope =_{df} fallacy committed when:

- (i) someone argues against a certain proposal by claiming that it will set off a chain reaction that will ultimately end in disaster; but
- (ii) there is no good reason to believe that such a chain reaction will (or is likely to) occur.

Keep in mind that some slopes really are slippery. You don't want to take even a single step onto a truly slippery slope because you might slide all of the way down and into the gutter. There is nothing fallacious about cautioning someone about venturing onto a genuinely slippery slope.

The slippery slope fallacy is committed when the slope in question isn't really slippery after all. There is no reason to think that banning automatic weapons is the first step toward the disarmament of America. So, the gun owner's argument fails to support his conclusion. (I trust that any sportsmen who are currently gritting their teeth and cussing under their breath can still see my general point, even if they disagree with the specifics of my example.)

E. Ad Hominem

When people disagree, things sometimes get personal. One way an argument can become personal is when the arguer begins to attack the person giving the argument rather than the argument itself. For example:

BILL CLINTON: Large oil companies should not be allowed to drill for oil in the Alaskan wilderness. Report after report has demonstrated that drilling always has radically detrimental effects on the air, water and wildlife in the surrounding environment. There is no such thing as a “surgical” drilling operation that can extract oil without inflicting severe environmental damage.

CRITIC: Consider the source of this argument. It’s a man who spent his days as President chasing that Lewinsky girl around the White House and who tried to weasel his way out of the scandal by drawing hair-splitting distinctions about what the meaning of the word “is” is. Consequently, his argument about oil drilling can be completely dismissed.

The critic in this exchange has committed the *ad hominem* fallacy. ‘*Ad hominem*’ is a Latin phrase meaning “against the person.”

Ad Hominem =_{df} fallacy committed when someone erroneously attacks the person giving an argument rather than the argument itself.

Clinton’s White House exploits are completely irrelevant to the question of whether large oil companies should be allowed to drill in the Alaskan wilderness. The real issue is whether the reasons Clinton gave are accurate and whether they provide good reason for believing his conclusion. The critic errs in focusing on the person making the argument rather than on what was said in the argument.

Sometimes, however, it can be very important to consider the character and circumstances of the person giving an argument. In such a case, no fallacy is committed. For example:

SPOKESPERSON: According to a recent report issued by the environmental watch-dog agency, Our Wilderness, no significant environmental damage would result if multi-national oil company EzzonMogul were to begin drilling in the Alaskan wilderness. The report claims that the area where EzzonMogul proposes to drill does not contain any endangered species and is not considered to house an especially delicate ecosystem. The report also notes that recent technology has made it possible for oil companies to set up smaller, quieter drilling sites that have reduced levels of potentially harmful emissions. Those concerned about the future of the majestic Alaskan wilderness can rest assured that a new era of environmentally responsible drilling is here.

ENVIRONMENTALIST: The “environmental watch-dog agency” cited by the spokesperson was founded by EzzonMogul and is supported by contributions from all of the major oil companies. Its board of directors is composed of former CEOs from large oil companies. They chose a tree-hugger name for their agency (“Our Wilderness”) to conceal its true nature and origin. Because of the strong personal and financial ties that Our Wilderness has to the oil industry, its credibility as an environmental watch-dog agency is called into question. Because the oil companies that fund the agency have clear financial interests in having the agency issue certain kinds of reports, it would be unwise to give much credence to these reports.

When someone stands to gain financially from saying x , regardless of whether x is true, we should be reluctant to accept their statements at face value.

It is important to note that everything the report said may very well be true. Simply pointing out a reason for being skeptical about its claims does not mean that they are false. If there were independent environmental agencies—whose boards of directors were composed of both liberals and conservatives and who did not stand to gain financially by anything they said—that agreed with the information given by the report

that was cited, then we might have a very good reason for thinking that what it said was true. Without that kind of objective information, however, we should probably be skeptical about its claims.

F. False Cause

The 1990s witnessed an unprecedented growth in the nation's stock market. Economic growth remained at record levels. Scores of people became millionaires overnight through the new medium of e-business. All of this happened while Bill Clinton was in the White House. Unsurprisingly, he took much of the credit. However, I've never heard anyone—including Slick Willy himself—say exactly what he did to spur the economy on to such wonderful heights. The only “argument” I ever heard in the media went something like this:

1. After Bill Clinton became President, the economy enjoyed unprecedented growth and success.
2. Therefore, Bill Clinton's Presidency was the cause of this economic growth and success.

This argument commits the following fallacy:

False Cause =_{df} fallacy committed when someone concludes that one event is caused by another simply because the one event follows the other.

If—unbeknownst to me—Clinton's shrewd economic policies really deserve most of the credit for the economic growth of the 1990s, then a perfectly valid argument in support of this conclusion could be constructed. However, from the mere fact that event *A* precedes event *B*, it does not follow that *A* caused *B*. More information is required to support this claim.

III. Conclusion

Think about the following questions:

- (a) What can you conclude about my views on gun control from the fact that I argued that the gun owner above committed the slippery slope fallacy?
Can you conclude that I am in favor of gun control?
- (b) What are you justified in concluding about my views on abortion from the fact that I argued above the Rush Limbaugh committed the straw man fallacy?
Can you conclude that I am pro-choice?

You will understand the nature of logic only when you can correctly answer questions like these.^[ii]

Endnotes

^[i] *The Way Things Ought to Be*, p. 43.

^[ii] The correct answer is that you are not warranted in concluding *anything* about my views from the mere fact that I pointed out fallacies in the arguments above. The only thing I did was to show how the sample arguments do not support their conclusions. But just because I think that a certain argument in favor of one conclusion fails, that doesn't mean I think the conclusion is false. I might believe that *another argument* in favor of that *same conclusion* does succeed in providing solid evidence for it. I might, for example, be pro-life but think that Rush's way of defending the pro-life position is not a very good one. On the other hand, I might be pro-choice and think that *no argument* against the pro-choice position succeeds. The fact is that you cannot tell one way or the other until you receive further information from me.

Of course, in ordinary life it is usually the case that if someone is attacking a certain argument, it is because that person disagrees with the conclusion. But it does not

have to be that way. You may want to criticize some of the arguments offered by those on your side of an issue in an effort to make the arguments in favor of your side better than they have been before. Lousy arguments in favor of one position can sometimes make that position look so bad that the opposition does not even need to lift a finger in criticism. If you care deeply about some issue, you should not be satisfied with any old half-baked argument offered in favor of your position. You should want only the very best argument available to be marshaled on its behalf. This means that you may need to point out fallacies not only in the arguments of your opponents but also in the arguments of your fellow party members or associates.

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