

# Examples of logical or rhetorical fallacies to avoid

At times, when discussing or arguing with other people, we may be guilty of committing a logical or a rhetorical fallacy. No one is perfect and we may all be guilty of such at times. A fallacy is simply incorrect reasoning leading to an invalid argument or statement in relation to logic or rhetoric. There are different kinds of fallacies, but I wanted to share the most common ones that we may encounter. What I have typed here are my own examples along with the definitions I provide in the first sentence. These examples are from my own experiences. I have not directly borrowed them from anywhere else. If you find something similar online, it must be purely coincidental.

## **Appeal to Authority (or Argument from Authority)**

When someone solely appeals to an expert, or some other authority, in support of the argument being made. Bob goes to a pharmacy and meets John where they start discussing dairy allergies and sensibilities. While conversing, John notes that dairy is not necessary for health, but Bob insists that it is. John explains why it is not essential to health by unpacking the latest data on Nutrition Science and by explaining the viewpoints by renown Nutrition scientists. Bob persists by claiming that his doctor said dairy is necessary to obtain calcium and, while becoming emotional, he insists that John is off on this one since his doctor must know better.

This is an argument from authority. Simply because Bob's doctor is a medical doctor does not mean that he cannot be wrong. Furthermore, a lot of medical doctors may not be trained at all in Food and Nutrition Science. Dairy may in fact not be essential to health (except for toddlers) since dozens of indigenous peoples from around the world do not have access to dairy at all and yet easily get plenty of bioavailable calcium from animal or fish bones (bone broths). Ancient diets also used bone broths, and the Innuits and the Eskimos certainly did not have access to dairy from animals. Also, vegans may even get some 15-25 % of calcium from some collard greens, bok choy, and kale.

However, note that an argument from authority only applies when someone's sole argument is based on an authority's say, or when the supposed authority is not really a qualified authority. It does not apply when an informed person joins elaborated, persuasive arguments to a reference of an authoritative source. Otherwise, every time students, researchers, scholars or scientists cite references or quote authorities in their field of study, they are committing this fallacy—which would not bear any sense!

## **Begging the question**

Circular reasoning in which the conclusion is included in the premise (based on assumptions). Bob tries to defend the validity of the inspiration of the Bible simply by quoting 2 Tim. 3.16. John, whether a believer or an atheist, questions Bob's reasoning since the same could be said about some other religious book out there (e.g. the Qur'an says so in Surah Az-Zumar [39:1-5]). Bob insists that the Bible says so, therefore it is true. This is begging the question. 2 Tim. 3.16 should be joined to a fuller explanation that shows the reliability and validity of the overall Bible's extraordinary claims. This, however, can become tedious, lengthy, and a can of worms. But it is the nature of the discussion.

## **Texas sharpshooter**

Picking and choosing data points to suit an argument, or finding a pattern to fit a presupposition. Bob cherry-picks supposed "contradictions" in the Bible to disprove the Bible's possible validity. John tries to show Bob that there are, indeed, differences in the synoptic books in the Bible (e.g. Samuel/Kings vs Chronicles and the Synoptic Gospels), but that these can reasonably be defended as the product of different agendas by the authors in order to clarify points in books that preceded them about the same pericopes. Bob does not seem to pay much attention to authorship or contextual issues that could clarify these "contradictions." Some textual differences might be *legitimate* contradictions that can be reasonably explained with the best academic scholarship, while some other textual differences might only be *apparent* "contradictions." Since Bob is cherry-picking the data, he seems to be mishandling the contradictions or differences with the sole purpose of attacking the Bible instead of trying to understand them better in an objective and attentive manner.

## **Ambiguity**

Using double meanings or ambiguities in order to misrepresent a particular viewpoint. Bob, who is a creationist, claims that he doesn't believe in evolution against John, who is also a creationist, but does believe in some kind of evolution (but, might not be necessarily Darwinian evolution). Then, Bob claims against John that John cannot be both an evolutionist and a creationist and that he is, therefore, not a real believer. This is a misunderstanding on Bob's part since there is ambiguity in the word "evolution." In fact, evolution is a very loaded ambiguity, and it must be defined and clarified by both Bob and John before starting to dispute the validity of evolution, whatever each one actually has in mind. But in this case, Bob is making the inappropriate accusatory remark against John.

## **Burden of proof**

The burden of proof is thrown on the person trying to defend a well-known, accepted viewpoint instead of the person trying to make a new claim or viewpoint that has not been widely accepted. In other words, Bob is going against a mainstream, or a consensus, viewpoint, and John responds to Bob attempting to show him the contrary or to simply question him. But Bob might fall into the fallacy of claiming that the burden of proof is on John, when in fact the burden of proof should be on Bob himself and not John. That is, the burden of proof should always be on the person trying to go against the consensus; but someone making this fallacy would be claiming the opposite: that the burden of proof is on the individuals inside the consensus. To do this is a "burden of proof" fallacy.

### **Loaded question**

Asking a question that has an assumption built into it that might not be correct so that it cannot be answered without appearing guilty. Bob questions John about something horrible John seems to believe, but John does not actually believe such a thing. Bob is asking a loaded question to John. Thus, John must reframe or readjust the question before answering. Otherwise, it will appear as if John is guilty in reference to what the question assumed about John to be true when asked by Bob.

### **Special pleading**

Moving the goalposts or making up exceptions when a claim is shown to be false. So, if Bob is debating others with whom he disagrees, and every time his opponents show him hard evidence against Bob's claims, Bob tries to distract his opponents by arguing about other relevant or irrelevant issues, and resorts to pleading them to listen while trying to push forward his overall viewpoint. In this case, Bob is special pleading because he does not quite stay on track with the issue that initiated the debate. Bob is trying to push forward his viewpoint, but he does not seem to be honest about the possibility that he may simply be wrong.

### **Ad hominem**

Attacking your opponent's personal character, actions or behaviors in an attempt to undermine an opposing argument. Bob disagrees with John (and others), and he then resorts to attacking the opposing person's character or behavior instead of discussing the data or the issue at hand. This is a very common fallacy practiced by emotional individuals or otherwise reasonable persons that become emotional and unreasonable.

### **Black or white**

Only two points of view are presented as if there cannot be a third, or more, genuine alternatives. Bob insists that it's *either this or that* and then leaves it at that point. But there might actually be third or more legitimate viewpoints, and Bob should be opened to consider them if he does not want to commit this kind of fallacy. This fallacy seems to be the same as the: “*either-or* fallacy”—i.e., “either this or that.” Bob should, instead, practice some critical thinking which would prompt caution even if Bob is not aware of other viewpoints. But this issue is really about insisting that it's *either this or that*.

### **False cause**

Concluding that one issue or element is the cause of another, when in fact they might only be correlated. Bob claims that he must stop consuming fats in order to avoid gaining weight. John tries to explain to Bob that it does not work this way and fats by themselves do not necessarily cause weight gain. (There are a variety of fats such as saturated, monounsaturated, polyunsaturated; omega 3, 6, 7, 9; long-chain, medium-chain and short-chain fatty acids, and they do not all cause cholesterol to rise). Bob insists that consuming fats equals more fat stored under the adipose tissue. In reality, this is a correlation, not direct causation. The variety of fats consumed are correlated to the types of sugars, carbs and proteins consumed, and the type of gut flora or microbiota one has in the intestines—not to mention that exercise and sleep are additional factors as well. Weight gain is actually better situated with carbs and sugars in combination with certain kinds of fats and proteins, rather than the fats by themselves.

### **Strawman**

Misrepresenting someone's arguments in order to make it easier to undermine. Bob does not quite represent the arguments or the viewpoint that John is defending, and subsequently, Bob is attacking a misrepresentation of John's arguments instead of the actual viewpoint that John is articulating.