

## On the Fallacies V

The second class of fallacies is made up of those that depend upon the subject matter rather than the language of argument. These are also called material fallacies, and they may stem from the obscurity or complexity of the subject matter, or from some deficiency on the part of the person making the argument—superficiality, prejudice, lack of discernment, etc. These are often more dangerous than the non-linguistic fallacies.

### 1. Fallacies of accident.

This fallacy consists in confusing what is accidental or superficial in a thing, with what is essential or basic. Say you go to a NASCAR race (I can't think of any reason to do so, but it will suffice for an example). A red car places first, while the green car places last. If you conclude that red race cars are faster than green ones, you have committed the fallacy of accident. Now it might be the case that the red cars in a particular race *are* faster, but this has nothing to do with their color.

It's hard to imagine anyone reasoning in such a shallow fashion, but many prejudices of race, color, and nationality have no deeper foundation. Men with blond hair and blue eyes are more heroic than those with dark hair and dark eyes, red hair means a fiery temperament, to be French is to be frivolous. While it might be true that this or that man with red hair has a bad temper, it is not true that the temper is a result of his hair color.

### 2. Confusion of the unqualified and the qualified (also called in some textbooks *argumentum secundum quid*).

This fallacy infers without warrant from what is true absolutely and without qualification to what is true under some special circumstance or qualification (or conversely). Sophists use this trick to prove that contraries are true simultaneously. "You see this dime as round, but I see it as elliptical. Therefore it is both round and elliptical." Either characterization is true, provided it is qualified: it is round or elliptical *depending* upon the point of view.

Rules or laws which are generally applicable may not be so under special circumstances. Thus, some Christians make the serious blunder of pacifism by interpreting the 5th Commandment as: "Thou shalt not kill under any circumstances whatsoever, even in self-defense." This would be as absurd as interpreting the 8th Commandment as, "I must give this loaded gun to this drunken man, because it belongs to him, and I may not keep what is not mine." Again, it is wrong to stick a knife in a person, though not if you are a surgeon performing an operation.

What is permitted under special circumstances may not always be right. It is not immoral for a soldier to destroy a house which is serving to give cover to the enemy. But it could be immoral for him to destroy it just because he is angry, and wants to take his anger out on civilians. It is very reasonable to push off as fast as possible from the sinking Titanic, but not at the expense of women and children.

Problems of moral conduct are seldom clear-cut absolutes, so the careful reasoner will look to the circumstances.

### 3. Fallacies of beside the point (*argumentum ignoratio elenchi*).

Arguments which prove something other than the point in question are fallacies beside the

point or of irrelevant conclusion.

We need waste no time on the person who takes refuge in stubborn and deliberate irrationality. Abraham Lincoln once said, "If a man will stand up and assert and repeat and reassert that two and two do not make four, I know nothing in argument that can stop him."

Sometimes this takes the simple form of slanting the discussion in a new direction, because we are uncomfortable with the way the argument is going. This is called a "red herring," dating from the time when one could take hounds off the trail of a fox by dragging some red herring across the trail, the hounds then following the fish.

This is also the tactic of raising up a "straw man." For example, I heard a clergyman in a tight spot begin to rail against slavery. The resounding destruction of the argument for slavery had nothing to do with the argument at hand, but it did give the illusion of strength to his position.

The unscrupulous lawyer with a weak case might abuse the plaintiff, or seek out and flatter the jury's prejudices, or distract the court with histrionics or humor—anything to divert attention from the evidence in point. The representatives of the Soviet Union employed this frequently, so that when questioned about the occupation of Hungary, they would respond by attacking the U.S. on the way it treated the native peoples of North America. One famous case had the Soviet premier take his shoe off and start pounding the table.

In a complicated issue where there are many subordinate factors, the question may be evaded by dodging from point to point. When one point is proved, the answer comes, "Yes, but you haven't proved *that* point." And while *that* point is being proved, the opponent is thinking up a third difficulty.

There are situations, again, where neither disputant pays attention to what the other is arguing. While one line of argument is being advanced, the opponent is thinking about the blockbuster he is going to drop when his turn comes around. Such wrangles are better called parallel monologues than true arguments.

The fallacies of beside the point will be continued in the next insert.