

## On the Fallacies VIII

- f. **Begging the question.** From the Latin phrase *petitio principii*, this fallacy means “taking the beginning or principle for granted.” The thing to be proved, that is, is proved by itself. Cardinal Newman illustrated this with this example: “How do you know it?” “Because he told me.” “How does he know it?” “Because I told him.” This is also called arguing in a circle.

Now it is rare to find someone so obliging as to put their premises and conclusions so closely and neatly together. The fallacy is usually concealed over a long piece of exposition—which can be a whole book or even an entire philosophical system.

Often the fallacy is introduced with a verbal tranquilizer such as, “Everyone admits that...,” or, “It is generally accepted that...,” or, “As every schoolboy knows...”

Many a vicious circle starts with a question-begging or circular definition. We can define good art as that which is morally inspiring, and then denounce as inartistic whatever offends our moral sensitivities. Sometimes the circle is so short that it is no more than a tautology, the repetition of the same thing in different words. The following are fallacious if they were thought to explain anything: “He is a bishop because he exercises episcopal functions.” “Since the substance is toxic, it is therefore poisonous.”

The adjectives by which we qualify a name may impose a point of view which would normally demand some kind of justification. They are then called “question-begging epithets.” “Boondoggling proposals,” “police-state methods,” “lunatic ideas,” “radical left-wingers,” “right-wing fanatics,” are just a few examples of these.

- g. **Fallacy of the consequent (*non-sequitur*, “it does not follow”).** This fallacy consists in regarding the antecedent and the consequent of a conditional proposition as interchangeable. Thus, the proposition, “If you are a thief, you work at night” would be regarded as the equivalent to “If you work at night, you are a thief.” Here’s a good one from a history textbook: “In the year 1868, diplomatic relations were broken between Greece and Turkey. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the same year gold was discovered in the Transvaal.”
- h. **Fallacy of the false cause.** This fallacy assigns the wrong cause to an effect. The unusual weather in Europe which followed the First World War was blamed by many on the tremendous amount of cannon fire in that war. The fallacy seems to be repeating itself regarding global warming.

A persistent (and very old) fallacy is the astrologer’s connecting of human events to the various conjunctions of the heavenly bodies.

A narrower version of the fallacy infers a causal connection from a mere sequence in time. This is called the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*

(“after this, therefore on account of this”). A man furiously beating his drum in the Congo during a solar eclipse is quite convinced that since the sun always comes back, his drum must be responsible. Medical testimonies often display this fallacy: “After swallowing six bottles of Aunt Betty’s Cold-Be-Gone, I haven’t had a cold in six years.”

Superstitions are also a fertile source of this fallacy. To break a mirror, to throw your hat on the bed, to have a black cat cross your path, will inevitably be followed by a piece of “bad luck,” provided you wait long enough.

- i. **Fallacy of the complex question.** This fallacy consists in putting into a single question things that may require different answers. “So, are you still a heavy drinker?” A simple yes-or-no answer would be misleading.

One variant of this fallacy is the false problem. Charles II of England once asked the members of the Royal Society as to why a dead fish caused an overflow when placed in a full bowl of water, whereas a live fish did not. Descartes once inquired at what point his soul was attached to his body.

Another variant of the complex question is “void for uncertainty”—as might be said in a law court. “Do you have the right views on compost heaps?”

The complex question is answered in general by pointing out the existence of a concealed multiplicity of questions, and by making explicit the various separate questions, which only then become susceptible to simple answers.

- j. **Stereotype thinking.** In 1922, Walter Lippmann published a book called *Public Opinion* in which he called attention to the manner in which stereotypes, or “pictures in the head,” affect our way of thinking. He pointed out that from our experience with a few individuals we can be inclined to build up a picture which stands for an entire group. This can also be classified as a fallacy of accident. As a number of notorious gangsters have been Italian, it is shoddy thought to think of all Italians as gangsters; or, going to the other extreme and picture them all as dreamy artists.

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This concludes the series on the fallacies. May we think more clearly and love the truth.