

the **art** of
argument
an introduction to the
informal fallacies

by aaron larsen
and joelle hodge
with chris perrin





The Art of Argument

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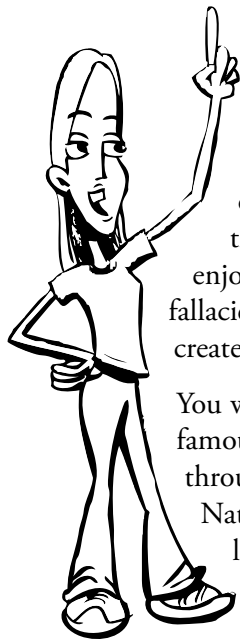
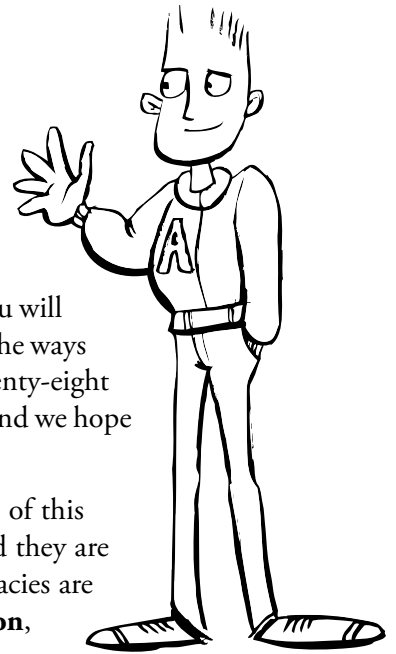
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Let's Argue!

Have you ever heard an argument from a friend that didn't seem right? Perhaps you knew that something was wrong with an argument but could not figure out just what the problem was. Well, after studying this book, you will know just what is wrong with bad arguments, and you will even learn the names for the ways that arguments can be bad. You will learn the most important "logical fallacies"—twenty-eight of them to be exact. A logical fallacy¹ is an occurrence of bad or incorrect reasoning, and we hope you will learn to sniff out bad reasoning like a hound dog.

All twenty-eight of the fallacies are listed with their definitions on the inside covers of this book. We encourage you to review them often until you have them memorized and they are part of your permanent mental framework. You will note that the twenty-eight fallacies are divided into three basic categories: **fallacies of irrelevance**, **fallacies of presumption**, and **fallacies of clarity**. Simply put, this means that when people **reason** badly they may err in one of three basic directions: they can make points that just don't relate to the issue (irrelevancy); they can make assumptions that are not justified or necessary (presumption); or they can use language that confuses and muddies the argument (clarity). As you learn to evaluate arguments, you will soon be asking yourself questions such as, "Is his point **relevant**? What does his argument **presume**? Is she being **clear**?"



While you can review all twenty-eight of the fallacies at any time (even now!) we will nonetheless proceed chapter by chapter and cover each of these fallacies in turn, providing several examples of each and giving you opportunities to sniff out fallacies in the form of written arguments (bad arguments) and in sixty-five magazine advertisements that each contain one of the twenty-eight fallacies. Yes, advertising is full of fallacies! We have created each of these advertisements ourselves, so you must know now that the products and services they advertise are imaginary. We think you will enjoy them and they will provide you with some good practice in detecting fallacies that occur in our everyday lives. Occasionally we will even ask you to create some of your own fallacies.

You will also note that this text contains a series of ongoing dialogues with the famous Greek philosopher Socrates (400 BC), who is somehow able to travel through time and talk with a couple of college students named Tiffany and Nathan. As Socrates talks with Tiffany and Nathan he will teach them about the logical fallacies (what else?) and you will have the benefit of listening in.

You will see that the book is divided into three units, six chapters, and twenty-eight fallacies. Unit 1 is about **relevance** and contains fourteen fallacies. Unit 2 is about **presumption** and contains eleven fallacies. Unit 3 is about **clarity** and contains three fallacies. At the beginning of each unit there is a page of definitions and fallacies that you will master during the unit. We recommend that you memorize these definitions early on and then deepen your understanding of them as you go. Regular practice and review will enable you to detect fallacies quickly and to reason well.

1. The word "fallacy" comes from the Latin word *fallacia*, which means "deceit," "trick," or "fraud." The Latin verb *fallo*, *fallere*, *fefelli*, *falsum* means "to deceive." From *fallacia* and *fallo* we also get our English words "fallacious" and "false." The Latin roots of "fallacy" remind us that a fallacy can be both a deception and a trick.

When you come across a word that is difficult, you will likely find it defined in the glossary at the end of the book. Many of the words that appear in **bold** in the text will also be defined in the glossary. There will also be some logical and technical terms in the glossary that you will not find in the text, but that will help you learn additional vocabulary related to the study of the informal fallacies. Studying the glossary will also serve as another way to review the fallacies and the essential content of the book.

For a fun way to review some of the fallacies, you will enjoy “Bill and Ted’s Excellent Election: A Theatrical Play Demonstrating the Common Fallacies.” You can simply read the play, but it also can be produced as a brief play that will be enjoyed by schools and homeschool co-ops. The play is included in Appendix A at the end of the book.

You will also enjoy Max Shulman’s story, “Love Is a Fallacy,” which shows how the logic you learn can be used against you—even in romantic matters. Shulman’s story is included in Appendix B.

Please note that this text will represent fallacies from many different sources. Fallacies are present on the political left and right (and in the middle) and in the arguments of people of all kinds of political, religious, and cultural viewpoints. No one “school of thought” is fallacy-free!

In the pages of *The Art of Argument*, I hope you enjoy your study of reasoning gone wrong as you learn how to make reasoning go right. Your friends and acquaintances should beware, for after you have mastered the logical fallacies, you won’t be so easily tricked.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher A. Perrin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'C'.

Christopher A. Perrin, Ph.D.
Publisher

Fight Fair! How to Make an Argument Without Starting an Argument

As you may have guessed, this is a “how-to” book, but one of a rather special sort. Its goal is to introduce the reader to the art of arguing like a philosopher. Don’t get turned off by any ideas you have about how philosophers argue before a few terms are explained. First, here are some questions to answer:

What do you think of when you hear the word “logic”?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “argument”?

*Perhaps the principal
objection to a quarrel
is that it interrupts
an argument.*

—G.K. Chesterton

What is meant by “argue”? The above subtitle (Fight Fair! . . .) is a deliberate play on two meanings of this word. In the most common, or “negative” sense, “having an argument” implies an emotional disagreement. This is not what is meant when we refer to how philosophers should argue. (Some of them have been known to slip-up, of course. As philosophers, however, they should know better.)

The Latin word *argūtus* means “clear, bright, distinct or penetrating.” The Latin noun *argūmentum* means “evidence or proof.” The Latin verb *arguō* means “to prove or reveal.” To the Latin mind, an argument was not necessarily an emotional disagreement, rather it was an attempt to reveal what was true on the basis of evidence and **reason**. In short, to argue is to provide rational reasons for or against an idea or action.

Philosophers are expected to argue in the “positive” sense. They try to convince, or persuade, others of their points of view by giving reasons to support them. From the early Greek philosophers who sought truth based on reason, to Peter’s New Testament exhortation to “be ready to give the reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15, author paraphrase) to the modern law courts where prosecutors seek to prove their cases “beyond a reasonable doubt,” there remains a tradition of respectful argumentation. Philosophers, as you shall see, are those who love wisdom and who enjoy respectfully arguing.

In fact, learning how to present your views carefully through the use of logical arguments in the positive sense is a very important skill to learn if you want to avoid arguments in the negative sense.

Obviously, there is far more to it than this. Learning how to deal with differences of opinion in a way that minimizes unnecessary conflict involves many skills, especially skills in reading, or understanding, other people. After all, the same verse in 1 Peter cautions the reader to frame his arguments with “gentleness and respect.”

If you wish to avoid emotional disagreements that are completely unnecessary, gentleness and respect are a good starting point. You must, however, also learn to follow the rules for arguing like a gentleman or a lady and a philosopher.

If you are sure your arguments are addressing the real issue in a relevant way (following the principle of **relevance**), others will be less likely to think you are trying to distract them from the main issue. They will not view your arguments as a personal affront to themselves (or others). However, if you violate the principle of relevance in your **debate** by introducing facts, issues, and concerns that distract from the main issue, others may note your efforts to dodge the issue and become frustrated with you.

If your arguments do not contain unnecessary assumptions (following the principle of **presumption**), it is likely that others will not think you are trying to trick them. On the other hand, if you make unjustified, unstated assumptions (such as assuming that only new ideas are better than old ideas, or old better than new) you may irritate others.

If your arguments contain clear language (following the principle of **clarity**), others will be less likely to misunderstand you. If you speak unclearly by using words in two different senses or by speaking with unjustified or pretended precision (especially with numbers or statistics), you will likely confuse others and hinder a respectful argument.

So, in your arguments with others, seek to stay relevant, presume nothing illegitimate, and speak clearly. That’s fighting fair and makes for enjoyable arguments with friend and foe.

A. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING:

1. How can people argue “positively”? How can people argue “negatively”?

2. How do people sometimes violate the principle of relevance when arguing?

3. How do people sometimes violate the principle of presumption when arguing?

4. How do people sometimes violate the principle of clarity when arguing?

Critical Thinking as a Way of Life

By mastering the “art of argument,” you will learn not only to argue like a philosopher, but also to think clearly like a philosopher, as well. The use of the word “philosopher” in this book does not mean someone who majors in philosophy in college or has a PhD in the subject. It is meant to be defined in its original, oldest sense, coming from a combination of two Greek words, *philos*, meaning, “loving” and *sophia*, meaning “wisdom.” In its original sense, then, the word “philosopher” means “lover of wisdom.”

A philosopher (the greatest example of which may be Socrates) is someone who takes a passionate interest in discussing the most important things in life. This includes such “deep” issues as what is “really real” (**metaphysics**) and how we know what we know (**epistemology**). On the other hand, it also includes an interest in thoughtfully evaluating others’ recommendations concerning everyday issues, such as what to believe, who to vote for, and whether or not to buy product “X.”

Evaluating the arguments of others is one of the most important and foundational skills that any person can have. This is, perhaps, more true today than it has ever been. The world bombards us with all sorts of recommendations about what to buy, what to believe, and what to do.

Politicians and advertisers often find it easy to manipulate people’s emotions, or to convince them by misleading or confusing them. After all, in this least philosophical of all periods of Western history, this has become an acceptable behavior. Just because something *is* a certain way, however, doesn’t mean it *ought* to be that way. (See the is-ought fallacy on page 142.) Just because others are doing the wrong thing doesn’t mean you should. (See the *tu quoque* fallacy on page 42.)

In addition to evaluating the arguments of others, you will sometimes find that you need to make your own recommendations to others about what to do, what to believe, and yes, perhaps even what to buy. The question is how are you going to go about it? Rather than resorting to trickery, you will probably be much more satisfied if you make your recommendations with integrity. In the field of logic, that means avoiding manipulation and deception. It means arguing like a gentleman or lady, one who “fights fair,” rather than arguing like a demagogue, one who resorts to sneaky and manipulative tricks to get the results he wants. In truth, arguing like a gentleman or lady is the first step toward learning to argue like a philosopher.

Not only is it the right thing to do, it also works. It doesn't always work as quickly as demagoguery, but in the end it will be much more effective; those you convince will be convinced for the right (logical) reasons.

It Does Not Follow: A Word About *Non Sequitur*

From one perspective, all the fallacies you will study can be grouped under the general category of faulty conclusions that “do not follow” from their premises. The Latin phrase *non sequitur* means “it does not follow.” Therefore, any argument that presents a conclusion that does not follow from its premises can be called a *non sequitur*.

For example, if we argue that since Senator Johnson is under investigation for tax evasion we cannot accept his proposal for building a new bridge, we have committed a *non sequitur*. From the fact that Senator Johnson is under investigation for tax evasion it does not follow that his proposal for bridge building is unacceptable. This kind of fallacy is called an *argumentum ad hominem* (“argument to the man”) fallacy, which is a fallacy that seeks to abuse the person making the argument instead of addressing the real issue.

Let's look at another example. If a used book seller were to say, “Never buy a new book over an old book—it is the old books that contain hard-won wisdom,” we could charge him with a *non sequitur*. It simply does not follow that just because a book is old it will contain wisdom. Nor does it follow that just because a book is new it will not contain wisdom. This fallacy, as you will learn later, is called “chronological snobbery”; it is committed when someone tries to discredit or approve of something merely by appealing to its age.

Does It Follow?

When you are presented with an argument, it is helpful to ask yourself if the conclusion truly follows from the premises. If you sense you have a *non sequitur* before you, it is good to probe further. Why doesn't the conclusion follow? Is the **premise** relevant (relevance) to the issue or conclusion presented? Does the argument or premise assume or presume (presumption) something that is hidden but unacceptable? Is the premise clear (clarity)?

By violating the principles of relevance, presumption, or clarity, all the fallacies you study will in one way or another feature conclusions that do not follow from their premises or the evidence to which they appeal. They are all versions of a *non sequitur*. As you embark on your study of the informal fallacies, this will become increasingly clear.

***Argumentum ad* What?**

You will notice that many of the fallacies have Latin names. The first one you will learn is called the *argumentum ad hominem* (argument to the man), often called the *ad hominem* fallacy for short. In fact, most of the fallacies with Latin names will be abbreviated this way, with the word *argumentum* being assumed. For example, the *argumentum ad populum* (argument to the people) may simply be called the *ad populum* fallacy.

A. DEFINE:

Define the words below by referring to the lesson you have studied and by looking them up in a good dictionary. Record the etymology (history or linguistic origin) of as many words as you can. For example, the word “etymology” comes from two Greek words: *etumos* (“the real” or “the true”) and *logos* (“reason,” “word,” or “study”).

1. Philosopher:

2. *Philos*:

3. *Sophia*:

4. Metaphysics:

5. Epistemology:

5. Socrates:

B. FURTHER RESEARCH:

Write a short essay answering both of the following questions. Use available classroom resources, Internet sites, or library resources.

1. Why do you think the authors of this book consider that Socrates may be the greatest example of a philosopher?

2. Why do you think it will be valuable to study informal logic? Why do you think British writer G.K. Chesterton said, “Perhaps the principal objection to a quarrel is that it interrupts an argument”?

Formal vs. Informal Logic

The first two lessons in this book were something of a pep talk. Now let's take some time to define logic and its two main subdivisions: **formal logic** and **informal logic**. **Logic can be defined as “the art and science of reasoning.”** While this is a course in informal logic, it is helpful to know the main characteristics of both formal and informal logic. After studying this course in informal logic, we encourage you to study our companion text, *The Discovery of Deduction*, which is on formal logic.

Formal logic is about pure reasoning in the abstract. It usually focuses on deductive reasoning; that is, it focuses on types of arguments in which the premises¹ imply a necessary conclusion. For example:

Premise 1: All birds have wings.
Premise 2: A cardinal is a bird.
Conclusion: Therefore, a cardinal has wings.

In this type of argument (often called a syllogism), the conclusion must be true (a cardinal has wings) as long as the premises are true. When the proper form is followed, we can have a valid argument that is actually nonsensical and untrue. For example:

Premise 1: All birds have horns.
Premise 2: A poodle is bird.
Conclusion: Therefore, a poodle has horns.

This argument (or syllogism) is **valid**, meaning that its form or structure is correct. If it were true that all birds have horns and that a poodle is a bird, then it must follow that a poodle has horns. However, in this argument, the premises happen to be false even though the form is correct. So, the argument is **valid in form**, but not **sound** because of the false premises.² If the premises were true, then the argument would be both valid and sound, like the first argument!

You can see that in formal logic, form is very important: that is why it is called *formal* logic.³ In fact, in the study of formal logic, a student learns very quickly to replace ordinary words, such as “all birds have wings,” with symbols, such as “all B are W” (for “all birds are wing possessors”). If the *form* of an argument is what's important in formal logic, then the *content* of the argument (what we are arguing about) is more or

1. Premise are reasons or propositions given in an argument that supports or leads to a conclusion.

2. The word “sound” in logic means that an argument is free from defect or fallacy. It is possible for an argument to be valid (having correct form or structure) but still not be sound if the premises are false.

3. Note that *forma* is Latin for “form” or “shape.”

less interchangeable. When symbols such as “B” and “W” represent **categories** such as “birds” and “wings,” this kind of formal logic is called **categorical logic**. When the symbols are joined together to form statements or propositions, as in “all B are W,” we are entering the realm of **propositional logic**. When we use propositional logic, the symbols are joined together with other symbols that replace words such as “and,” “or,” “not,” or “implies.” These connecting symbols are called **logical operators**. We use “ \wedge ” for “and” and “ \vee ” for “or” and “ \sim ” for “not.” For example, we can represent “Either a cardinal is a bird or it is not a bird” as “ $B \vee \sim B$.”

Now you have had a brief introduction to formal logic, with its subcategories of categorical and propositional logic. This course, however, focuses on informal logic. Informal logic is not so concerned with form or structure. Rather, it is concerned with arguments made using everyday, ordinary language. It also tends to emphasize *inductive* rather than *deductive* reasoning. The Latin word *deducere*, from which the English word “deduce” is derived, means “to lead down or away.” Therefore, **deductive reasoning** is reasoning that starts with premises that “lead down” to a necessary conclusion. Deductive reasoning can be described as “whole-to-part” reasoning. The Latin word *inducere*, from which the English word “induce” is derived, means “to lead” or “bring in.” **Inductive reasoning**, therefore, can be described as “part-to-whole” reasoning. We begin with particular facts and try to prove a general conclusion. Inductive reasoning involves “bringing in” certain facts to an argument in an attempt to prove a more general point. For example, I may “bring in” the facts that every bird I have seen flies in order to prove that all birds fly. In other words, inductive reasoning often works toward generalizations that are reasonably accurate. However, because the form of inductive arguments does not lead to absolute certainty, these arguments are only more or less probable. For example, does my experience of seeing birds fly prove that all birds fly? No. In fact, we know that the ostrich is a bird that can run very fast but cannot fly.

While deductive arguments, therefore, are said to be either valid or invalid, inductive arguments are said to be either strong or weak. Deductive logic addresses things that are either “black” or “white,” while inductive arguments deal in “shades of gray.”

<i>Formal Logic</i>	<i>Informal Logic</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deductive reasoning • Either valid or invalid • Certainty (given the premises) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inductive reasoning • Either strong or weak • Probability

A Word About Informal and Formal Fallacies

As you well know, this book is about the informal fallacies, also called logical fallacies. The informal fallacies are weak, poor, and fallacious arguments that occur in common language. These fallacies are not fallacious because of matters of form or structure, but because they violate principles such as relevance, presumption, and clarity. You will be studying these principles and how they are violated throughout this book. There are such things as formal fallacies, too, and they occur when an argument violates established forms that syllogisms should take. You can study these formal fallacies in *The Discovery of Deduction* or similar texts.

The most fundamental difference between informal logic and formal logic is that informal logic deals almost entirely with ordinary-language arguments. In fact, one historian of logic described informal logic as “dialectical logic.”⁴ He meant that it is the language of debate and of the interchange of ideas between people, as opposed to the logic of one man reasoning all by himself.⁵

One danger of overemphasizing formal logic at the expense of informal logic is that the study of logic can lose its “dialectic interplay,” its sense of a back-and-forth exchange between real people. Logic can be both an art and a science. That is, it can be treated in a way that focuses on the practical and artistic (logic as an art) or it can be treated in a way that is exact and academic (logic as a science). Both approaches are important; however, the first approach (logic as an art) has been neglected. That is why this book is called *The Art of Argument*; it is intended to remedy this past neglect. Its intent is to focus on things that can help and encourage you in “dialectical activities,” such as debates, mock trials, and discussions. This book focuses on everyday language arguments.

In fact, future courses of this logic series will have built-in sections designed to give you “how-to” instruction in debates and mock trials. First, though, you need to hone your critical-thinking skills by learning to critique the arguments of others. In doing this, informal logic is “where the rubber meets the road.” This book begins by studying a number of bad arguments commonly known as “fallacies.” By learning to detect bad arguments, you will learn how to avoid them yourself and how to make good arguments as well.

In the next section, you are going to eavesdrop on a conversation about some of the practical implications of good and bad reasoning. Use your imagination and picture a TV room at a typical college, where Socrates is about to engage in a rather interesting conversation.

4. C.L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970), 9.

5. According to this outlook, many ways of approaching inductive logic could actually be classified as “formal logic.” (A good example of this could be an in-depth study of scientific reasoning, using John Stuart Mill’s canons for establishing causality, as is done in Irving M. Copi’s logic curriculum, *Introduction to Logic*.) That is because inductive arguments can also be analyzed in ways that focus only on the form or structure of the argument and in ways that don’t involve the back-and-forth, interpersonal dimension of debate between people.

A. DEFINE:

1. Logic:

2. Formal Logic:

3. Informal Logic:

4. Deductive Reasoning:

5. Inductive Reasoning:

B. FURTHER RESEARCH:

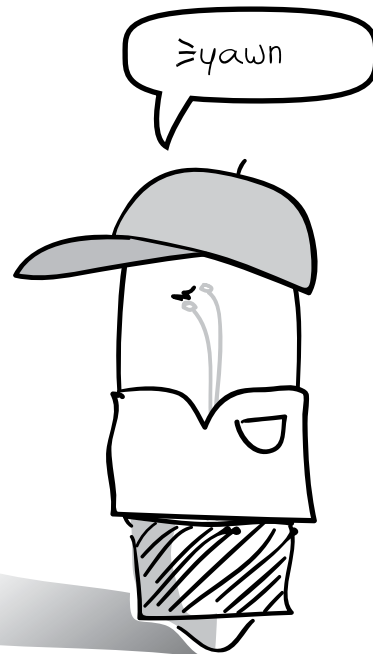
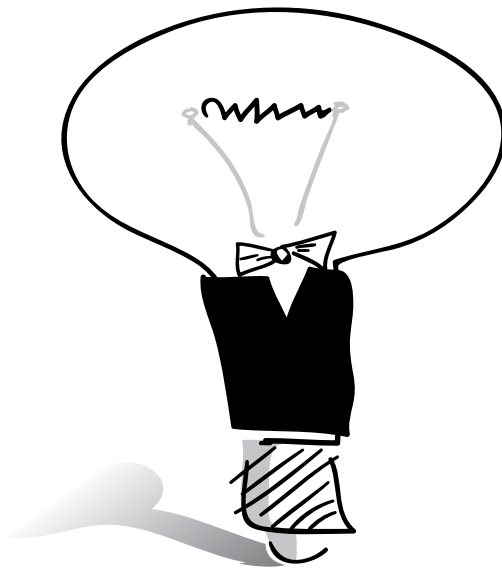
Write a short essay answering the following questions. Use available classroom resources, Internet sites, or library resources.

1. What are the main differences between deductive and inductive reasoning?

2. What do you think the benefits of studying formal logic might be?

3. What do you think the benefits of studying informal logic might be?

My good logical fellow, don't you think that you are a bit too informal? We know with absolute certainty that people who wear ball caps are children. Let's label them IM for "immature."



Dialogue on Logic . . . and Propaganda

Setting: Lobby in a college dormitory

Socrates: Excuse me, would you mind my asking what you are doing?

Tiffany: I'm watching TV. Isn't that obvious?

Socrates: Not so obvious as you might think. Your eyes, and mind, appeared to be elsewhere for a moment.

Tiffany: Oh. Well, it was just a boring commercial. I was thinking about something else while it was on.

Socrates: Boring? On the contrary; I think that commercials make some of the most interesting television these days.

Tiffany: Really? Why would you say that?

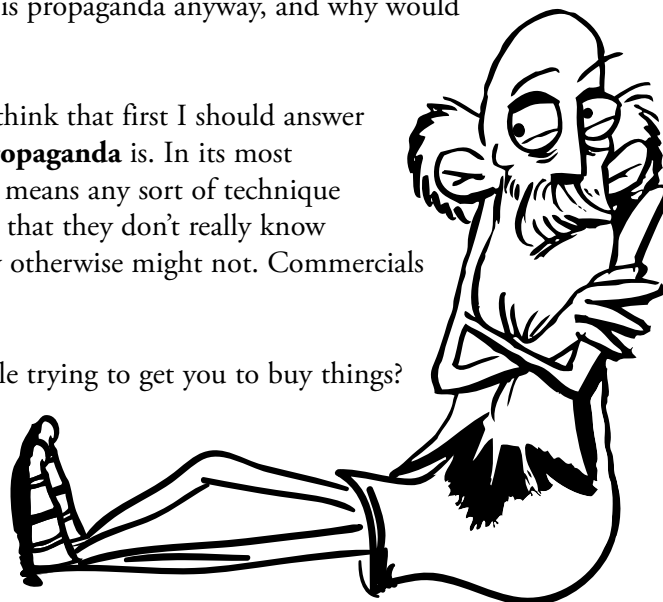
Socrates: Well, to begin with, they're often much more funny and clever than the silly sitcoms aired so often these days. But that's not my main reason. For the most part, I like them because they are so filled with propaganda.

Tiffany: Propaganda! Isn't that a bad thing? What is propaganda anyway, and why would you want to listen to it?

Socrates: Whoa, whoa! One question at a time. I think that first I should answer your second question, in which you asked what **propaganda** is. In its most basic meaning, the sense in which I am using it, it means any sort of technique that people use to get other people (usually people that they don't really know personally) to do or to believe something that they otherwise might not. Commercials often use propaganda to get people to buy things.

Tiffany: So why would you want to listen to people trying to get you to buy things? Do you like shopping?

Socrates: Not really. You can see from my outfit that I'm not exactly at the height of fashion.



Tiffany: Yeah, I was just about to ask you about that. Where do you do your shopping, at the Sears White Sale? Don't you get cold in that get-up?

Socrates: Actually, I was often made fun of in my day for absentmindedly forgetting my cloak. And, no, I did not shop at a white sale. I purchased this from the tailor back in my country.

Tiffany: What is your country? And what is your name, by the way?

Socrates: I am Socrates, and I am from ancient Athens.

Tiffany: Sure, and I am Cleopatra, Queen of Denial.

Socrates: Pleased to meet you. Mind if I call you Cleo for short?

Tiffany: No, no; my name's not Cleo. It's Tiffany.

Socrates: Then why did you say your name was Cleopatra?

Tiffany: Because you said your name was Socrates.

Socrates: My name *is* Socrates.

Tiffany: Look, I don't want to argue with you.

Socrates: But I would love to argue with you.

Tiffany: Why would anyone like to argue?

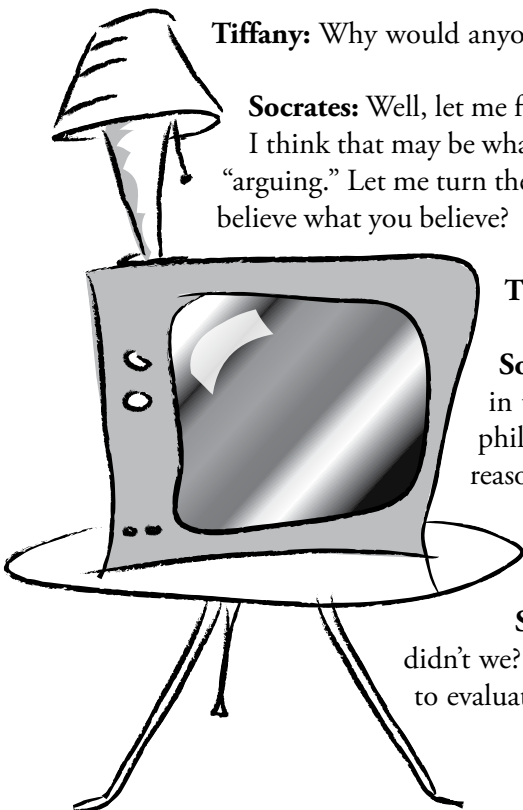
Socrates: Well, let me first explain. By "argue," I don't mean engage in petty squabbling. I think that may be what most people mean most of the time when they say the word "arguing." Let me turn the question to you. What would you do if someone asked you why you believe what you believe?

Tiffany: Well, I suppose that I would give them reasons.

Socrates: In that case, you would be making an argument, at least in the sense in which I mean it. I'm a philosopher and when we philosophers use the term "argue," we usually mean "to provide rational reasons for or against an idea or action."

Tiffany: So why would a philosopher like watching propaganda?

Socrates: Good question. We did get a bit off of the track there, didn't we? I like to watch propaganda because it provides a good opportunity to evaluate arguments. You see, whenever someone tries to get you to do



anything, they are trying to persuade. Usually, when someone is trying to persuade, they give reasons, and whenever they do, they are making an argument.

Tiffany: That's all that it takes to make an argument? You just have to give a reason for something?

Socrates: That's basically it. The reasons that you give are called the premises, and the thing for which you are giving the reasons is called the conclusion.

Tiffany: But . . . not all propaganda makes an argument. Take this one with the frogs and lizards that is trying to sell beer, for example. What kind of argument is it making?

Socrates: That is another good question. Here's an idea: Perhaps it is making an implied argument that goes something like this: "We make clever, funny commercials about frogs and lizards that entertain millions. You should buy our beer to show your appreciation for this public service."

Tiffany: That doesn't have anything at all to do with whether or not it is a good product.

Socrates: You are absolutely right once again. This brings to mind the first of the three great principles of critical thinking: relevance. Do the premises really "bear upon," or provide some support for, the conclusion? If not, the argument is just a distraction from the real issue.

Tiffany: Aren't you reading an awful lot into this commercial, though?

Socrates: Well, you're right. I was only being facetious. That commercial might be better explained as a form of "non-argumentative persuasion"—an attempt to convince you without making an open argument at all. That is something for which we need to be especially careful. After all, if someone wants to convince you to do something without giving you a single rational reason . . . Oh, but here is a perfect example of an irrelevant argument now. What reasons are they giving you to buy that soft drink?

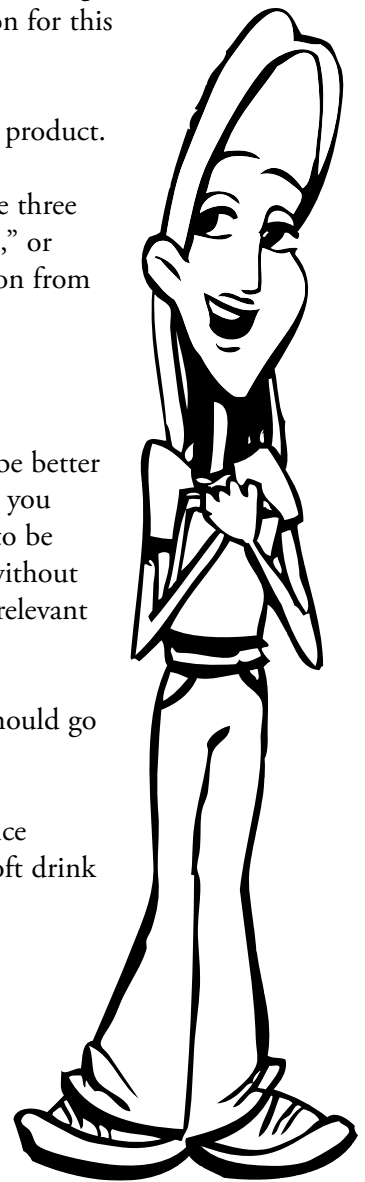
Tiffany: Well, they seem to be saying that since Grant Hill likes the soda, you should go and buy it as well.

Socrates: Exactly. That is called an argument from illegitimate authority, and since there is no good reason to accept the authority of Grant Hill on the subject of soft drink desirability, it commits a very important fallacy.

Tiffany: What, exactly, is a "fallacy"?

Socrates: A fallacy is a commonly recognized type of bad argument.

Tiffany: Commonly recognized by whom?



Socrates: Good point. Unfortunately, the study of logic isn't exactly at its highest ebb these days and these fallacies aren't as commonly recognized as they ought to be. What I really mean by "commonly recognized" is that it is commonly recognized by those who have studied philosophy or logic.

Tiffany: So what type of fallacy does that commercial make?

Socrates: It's called the appeal to illegitimate authority. It is one of many fallacies of relevance.

Tiffany: So that's why you like commercials. You like to analyze them.

Socrates: Absolutely. Every commercial contains an attempt at persuasion. In almost every case, it will be one of three types: 1) a reasonable argument; 2) a bad type of argument, called a fallacy; or, perhaps worst of all, 3) an attempt to persuade without an argument, which is called non-argumentative persuasion.

Tiffany: Somehow, I thought that all of you philosopher types just sat around and asked dumb questions, like "how do I know that I really exist?"

Socrates: Well, there are many things that I like to question, but my existence is not one of them. Do you know how I generally respond to people who ask me how they can really know they exist?

Tiffany: How is that?

Socrates: I simply ask them, "Who wants to know?"

Tiffany: Well, that settles it for me.

Socrates: As it does for me. I must be off, but something tells me we will speak more later.

A. DEFINE THE FOLLOWING TERMS:

1. Fallacy:

2. Relevance:

3. Persuasion:

4. Propaganda:

B. FURTHER RESEARCH:

Write a short essay answering each of the following questions. Use available classroom resources, Internet sites, newspapers, or magazines.

1. How would you define the principle of relevance? Socrates has given you a few ideas. Give an example of an argument that is relevant and one that is not.
2. Find three examples of non-argumentative persuasion from newspapers, magazines, or books.
3. Create your own example of non-argumentative persuasion.



Unit 1: Relevance

Definitions Summary

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE: These arguments have premises that do not “bear upon” the truth of the conclusions. In other words, they introduce an irrelevancy into the argument.

It is quite easy in a debate for someone to slip off-subject, leave behind the real issue, and begin arguing about something else. Sometimes we do this without meaning to because new subjects come up in a discussion and we want to address each subject. Sometimes, however, we start arguing about something besides the real issue because we sense that our argument for the real issue is weak. When we argue “around” the real issue we are committing a fallacy of relevance—we are veering off-topic and not staying relevant to the real issue.

There are three basic ways we “avoid the issue” and commit a fallacy of relevance: 1) We can criticize the source of an argument instead of the argument itself, 2) we can appeal to an emotion of some kind instead of addressing the real issue, and 3) we can make another argument (even a good one) but not address the issue that is at hand. The three basic groups of fallacies are listed below. You will be studying them throughout this unit.

A. *AD FONTEM* ARGUMENTS: (Arguments against the source)

This subgroup consists of arguments that focus on the source of the argument, rather than on the issue itself.

1. ***Ad Hominem Abusive:*** In this most obvious of all personal attacks, the speaker assaults his rival with a great deal of abusive language in an attempt to avoid the issue. *Ad Hominem* means “to the man” in Latin.
2. ***Ad Hominem Circumstantial:*** Somewhat more subtle, this type of argument says, or implies, that the speaker’s rival should not be trusted in making his argument because of various circumstances regarding his rival. The most common version includes an implication that a person’s argument should be discounted because of his self-interest in the matter.
3. ***Tu Quoque:*** The person committing this fallacy assumes his rival’s recommendation should be discounted because he does not always follow it himself. *Tu Quoque* means “you also” in Latin.

4. **Genetic Fallacy:** This most generic version of an *ad fontem* argument states that an idea should be discounted simply because of its source or origin. In a sense, all of the arguments in this group are genetic fallacies, but the genetic fallacy label is generally used when the source being attacked isn't a specific person, but a people group or institution.

B. APPEALS TO EMOTION:

All fallacies appeal to our emotions in some form or another, but the following fallacies do it in a particularly obvious way.

1. **Appeal to Fear (*ad baculum*):** Without making a clear causal connection, a person committing this fallacy references the potential for bad consequences to occur if the person to whom they are speaking does not agree with them. *Ad baculum* means “to the stick” in Latin.
2. **Appeal to Pity (*ad misericordiam*):** Using this type of argument, the speaker tries to convince others of his point of view by making them feel sorry for him or for other people. *Ad misericordiam* means “to pity” in Latin.
3. **Mob Appeal (*ad populum*):** To make up for a lack of solid evidence and sound reason, this tool, often used by demagogues,¹ appeals to the emotions of the crowd or to the “common man.” *Ad populum* means “to the people” in Latin.
4. **Snob Appeal:** This is an appeal to a sense of elitism or to those of “discriminating taste.”
5. **Appeal to Illegitimate Authority (*ad verecundiam*):** This is an attempt to shame the listener into agreement by citing an illegitimate authority. *Ad verecundiam* means “to shame” in Latin.
6. **Chronological Snobbery:** This is an appeal to something's age to justify either accepting or rejecting it.

C. RED HERRINGS:

This category includes types of proofs that don't necessarily play on our emotions, but are nevertheless irrelevant to the situation.

1. **Appeal to Ignorance:** This argument makes the mistake of saying that because a proposition cannot be disproved, it must, therefore, be likely.
2. **Irrelevant Goals or Functions:** This is an argument that assumes a goal or function of a certain practice or policy is either unrealistic or irrelevant. Therefore, the practice or policy is not acceptable.
3. **Irrelevant Thesis:** This type of argument may make a fairly sound case for what it is trying to prove. However, what it is trying to prove is irrelevant to the case at hand.
4. **The Straw Man Fallacy:** This is an attempt to disprove an opponent's beliefs by presenting those beliefs in an inaccurate light.

1. A demagogue is a leader who obtains power by means of impassioned appeals to the emotions and prejudices of a population.

Finding the Main Issue . . . and Asking the Right Questions

DEFINITION: Fallacies of relevance have premises that do not “bear upon” the truth of the conclusions, and therefore they introduce an irrelevancy into the argument.

Now, it is time to start a valuable project—the mastery of twenty-eight different fallacies. You will learn them so well that you will be able to recognize them in arguments, commercials, books, and conversations! The best way to remember them is to keep in mind which of the three great principles they violate. The first group of fallacies we are going to cover are the fallacies of relevance, which are those that violate the principle of relevance. We will start with a study of relevance because it is important to be able to determine the real issue in an argument and know when someone is trying to distract you from that issue. When you’re about to engage someone in an argument, the first thing you should be thinking about is the question of what is and what is not the real issue.

Fallacies of relevance have premises that, as the logician would put it, do not “bear upon” the conclusion. In other words, the premises do not have much to do with the issue at hand. While these fallacies all bring some irrelevant issue to the forefront, they sometimes can seem convincing. Usually, this is because they play upon our emotions. If we allow the speaker to get us stirred up emotionally, we are likely to miss the fact that his argument fails to provide good evidence for what he is trying to prove. Sometimes, what is being asserted in one of these fallacies is outrageous and unfair. At other times, it may be perfectly true and reasonable, yet it is still not relevant. The best response in this case is to simply say, “true, perhaps, but irrelevant.”

During the course of this book, you will learn to ask four key questions of any argument you encounter. These questions will help you detect and identify fallacies of relevance, presumption, and clarity. You should master the following questions:

First Question: What is the issue at hand?

Next Questions:

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| Relevance | → | Is the argument relevant to the issue at hand? |
| Presumption | → | Is the argument assuming something illegitimate? |
| Clarity | → | Is the argument clear? |

Dialogue on Winning an Argument . . . Sort of, While Losing a Friend

Socrates is sitting under a tree on campus when Tiffany suddenly comes up to him.

Tiffany: Socrates! Boy am I glad to see you. Oooh . . . I'm so mad!

Socrates: Not at me, I hope. Perhaps I should make good my escape before it is too late.

Tiffany: No, no, not at you! I'm mad at my friend Mary. She's so argumentative.

Socrates: So Mary is quite contrary?

Tiffany: Yes, but it's not just that she likes to argue, but *how* she likes to argue.

Socrates: How is that?

Tiffany: She always makes me feel like I have absolutely no business having any views at all. When the issue of welfare reform comes up, she implies that I couldn't possibly know what I'm talking about, since I've never been poor. When the issue of race comes up, she says that I couldn't possibly have anything useful to add, since I'm a member of the dominant ethnic group. Once, we were talking about abortion, and she told my boyfriend he shouldn't be allowed to comment because he's a man!

Socrates: So, how does this make you feel?

Tiffany: Well, I guess sometimes it makes me feel a little intimidated and off-balance.

Socrates: Does it make you want to exploring the issue further with her?

Tiffany: Certainly not! It makes me feel as though I don't want to talk with her at all.

Socrates: But does it help her win arguments?

Tiffany: Well . . . sort of. I guess that depends on what you mean by winning.

Socrates: Well, how would you define the term "winning"?



Tiffany: Hmm . . . I've never really thought about what it means to win an argument before. What do you think it means? Oh, here's my boyfriend, Nate. Nate, meet my good friend, Socrates!

Nate: Pleased to meet you.

Socrates: The pleasure is all mine.

Nate: I overheard your conversation. Suppose you tell us what your definition of victory in argument is.

Socrates: Why, certainly. There are different ways of looking at this, I suppose. Let's try on a couple for size and see how they fit, shall we?

Tiffany: Sure.

Socrates: First, let's start by comparing arguments to battles. Do you know what the traditional definition of victory in battle is?

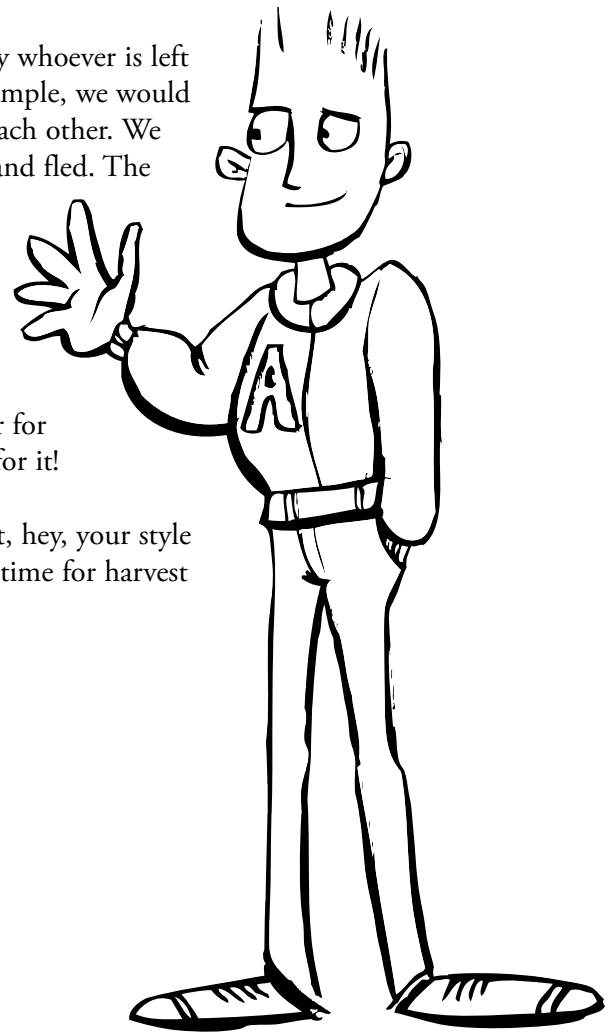
Tiffany: No. What is it?

Socrates: Traditionally, victory in battle is said to be won by whoever is left in command of the battlefield afterward. In my day, for example, we would all line up in a big, long shield wall and charge straight at each other. We did this until one group proved weaker, or lost their nerve and fled. The winner would lose very few men and the loser would take enormous casualties.

Nate: That sounds like a stupid way to wage war. Why didn't you just hunker down behind your city walls, or make use of all those steep mountains and thick forests to wage a never ending guerilla war like America did in its war for independence? The Greek terrain would have been perfect for it!

Socrates: Well, yes, I guess it was a little unsubtle of us, but, hey, your style of waging warfare would have made it hard to get home in time for harvest season.

Tiffany: *Touché.*



Socrates: Anyway, as I was saying, the losers would humiliate themselves by having to ask for permission to bury their dead. That's the difference between defeat and victory: whether or not you maintain control of the battlefield. So the next question is, "Does your friend Contrary Mary consistently find herself in command of the battlefield?" If that is so, then she obviously wins arguments.

Nate: I don't know about that. While I guess whoever has control of the battlefield has won a technical victory, I don't know whether that is really always the best measure. One could win a "Pyrrhic victory," for example.

Socrates: A "Pyrrhic victory"? I don't believe that I'm familiar with that term.

Nate: Well, it comes from a famous general who lived after your time. His name was Pyrrhus of Epirus, and he was known as the finest tactician of his age. He beat the Romans twice, at least technically, but lost so many men that he had to withdraw to friendlier territory. In fact, when his generals tried to congratulate him on his victory, he is reported to have said, "Another such victory and I shall be finished." When Mary cows and intimidates others into backing down, she may be displaying her command of argumentative techniques, but is she really succeeding in getting others to appreciate her point of view?

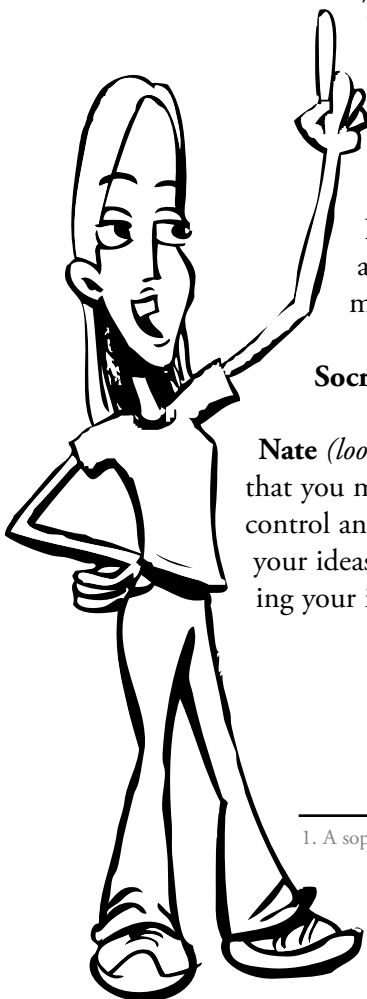
Tiffany: Yeah, that makes me wonder what the purpose of arguing for your ideas with people is in the first place. If it's to "maintain control of the battlefield," then sure, any old sophism¹ will do. But if it's to actually convince others that you are right in your ideas, then you have to fight fair.

Nate: The whole warfare analogy just doesn't fit here, anyway. After all, "all's fair in love and war," but I certainly think that Mary's argumentative tactics are unfair.

Socrates: But, then, is all really fair in both war and love?

Nate (*looking sheepishly at Tiffany*): OK, I guess all isn't really fair in love, now that you mention it. But, look, my point is that while the goal in warfare is to control and coerce others, the goal of arguing is to convince others to accept your ideas of their own free will by presenting to them good reasons for accepting your ideas.

1. A sophism is a plausible but fallacious argument. This kind of argumentation is called sophistry.



Socrates: Spoken like a true philosopher! I'm beginning to like this friend of yours, Tiffany. That was precisely the point to which I was hoping to bring this little dialectical exercise. So that brings us back to your friend Contrary Mary's approach. If the goal is to get others to want to change their minds and accept a new point of view, does she succeed?

Tiffany: Certainly not! It makes my resistance to her ideas stiffen.

Socrates: Which brings us back full circle to the question of how arguing with Mary makes you feel. Her argument fails at a rhetorical level, because it alienates her audience. It makes them not want to listen. But that isn't even the worst of it. It also fails on a logical level. Can you think of the great principle of critical thinking that we talked about the other day that her arguing approach violates?

Tiffany: That's easy. It fails the test of relevance. Just because Nate is a man, that doesn't mean his argument about whether or not a fetus is a person is wrong. When she tried to shove Nate's argument aside just because he is a man, she was really just putting up a smokescreen to hide behind.

Socrates: Absolutely! In fact, in all three of the examples you mentioned, she was committing the *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy.

Nate: *Ad hominem* . . . doesn't that mean "to the man" in Latin?

Socrates: Precisely! The *ad hominem* fallacies are a group of fallacies that are committed when the arguer distracts his listeners from what should be the main issue by attacking, or deflecting attention to, his opponent and avoiding the real issue. In the *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy, someone tries to say that someone with whom they disagree should be ignored because of the circumstances surrounding them.

Nate: But aren't there times when the **credibility** of the messenger matters?

Socrates: Well, yes, there are such times. But the general rule is that you are to avoid making your argument center around the man, and stick to the issue. After all, attacking the person rather than tackling the issue is a good way to "win" the argument and lose a friend.

Nate: Sounds like sage advice to me. We need to get going now, but it's been great getting to talk to you!

Socrates: The feeling is mutual, I assure you.

Chapter 1

The *Ad Fontem* Arguments (Arguments Against the Source)

CHAPTER

1

DEFINITION: A subgroup of the fallacies of relevance, these arguments distract by focusing attention on the source of the argument, rather than on the issue itself.

Due to the large number of relevance fallacies, they are divided into subgroups. We will start with the subgroup of *ad fontem* arguments (sometimes referred to as “personal attacks”) because they are some of the easier ones to spot.

The Latin phrase *ad fontem* can be translated as “to the source.” (Literally, it means “to the fountain,” or “the source of a stream.”) Distracting your audience’s attention to the source of an argument, and away from the real issue, is a very common debater’s trick. Most of these fallacies can also be referred to as *ad hominem* arguments or “personal attacks.” However, not all of these arguments are aimed at a specific person. Therefore, it is important to recognize these sorts of fallacies regardless of whether they are aimed at one specific person, a group of people, or even a broader set of ideas.

Vocabulary:

- *Ad Fontem* Arguments
- *Ad Hominem*
- *Ad Hominem* Abusive
- *Ad Hominem* Circumstantial
- *Tu Quoque*
- Genetic Fallacy

Ad hominem can be translated as either “to the man” or “against the man.” In either case, it refers to arguments that distract from the issue at hand by attacking one of the parties that are arguing. A speaker may be self-interested, not completely informed, or even a downright bad person, but that does not change the fact that his argument needs to be weighed on its own merits. Most of the time, an *ad hominem* argument is in some way unfair to whom it attacks. After all, an *ad hominem* argument is one of the “dirtiest” tricks in the debater’s book. However, even if it is perfectly fair and accurate, it is still irrelevant. There are several different types of *ad fontem* arguments, but in this book we will cover just four.

Fallacy 1:

Ad Hominem Abusive

DEFINITION: Arguments that attempt to avoid the issue by insulting an opponent with abusive language.

The *ad hominem* abusive fallacy is easy to spot. You likely have this fallacy on your hands whenever a speaker talks about his opponent, saying bad things about him that have nothing to do with his opponent's argument.

Ad hominem means “to the man” in Latin. When a person commits this fallacy, he criticizes his opponent—the man himself—but not his opponent's argument. People committing this fallacy often make use of name-calling or other emotional language that reduces the possibility of rational debate and discussion.

In most cases, in order to avoid committing this fallacy, you must disregard who your opponent is and instead focus on his argument. For example, your opponent could be a convicted thief and still have a good argument for what computer to buy, what movie to see, or what policies will ensure public safety. In other words, even people with significant personal flaws can make good arguments. Simply pointing out a flaw in someone does not make his or her argument bad—“bad people” can make good arguments. In fact, if we are honest, we must admit that we have our own flaws, but hopefully we can make good arguments despite them.

Consider the following examples of the *ad hominem* abusive fallacy.

Example 1

Mr. Johnson is a drunk and has been convicted multiple times for driving under the influence of alcohol. Why would we consider his recommendation to install a stoplight at this intersection?

Example 2

Sharon, you are a lazy slacker. No one is going to listen to your advice on how to study for the exam.

Mr. Johnson may have been convicted for DUI (driving under the influence), but does this have anything to do with the argument he is proposing? Rather than dismissing his argument because of his flaws, let's hear the argument and judge it on its own merits. Sharon may be habitually late turning in homework, but what is her argument for how to study? It could be excellent. Regarding her character flaw, we can respond, “It may be true, but it's irrelevant.”

We must keep in mind, however, that occasionally a personal flaw actually may be very relevant to an argument, especially in cases in which personal integrity and character matter. For example, we might justly criticize the character of a convicted felon who was running a campaign to become our town's sheriff.



Ad Hominem Abusive

Genus (general class): An argument to the source.

Difference (specific trait): An argument involving obviously abusive language aimed at a rival.

Throughout this book we will include a key point box after each fallacy that restates the fallacy using different words. The box will also distinguish between the genus and difference of each fallacy. The **genus** represents the general class of fallacy (such as *ad fontem* fallacies) and the **difference** represents the specific example (such as *ad hominem* abusive) from that class. This approach will help you deepen your understanding of each *class* of fallacy and the *specific* examples contained in each class. It will also aid you in memorizing the key aspects of each fallacy in a class, which will help you to detect and identify fallacies accurately.


Ad Hominem Abusive

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Ad Fontem Arguments | Arguments that distract by focusing on the source of the
(*Arguments against the source*) | argument rather than the issue itself.

Ad Hominem Abusive | *Ad hominem* arguments that insult or abuse an opponent.

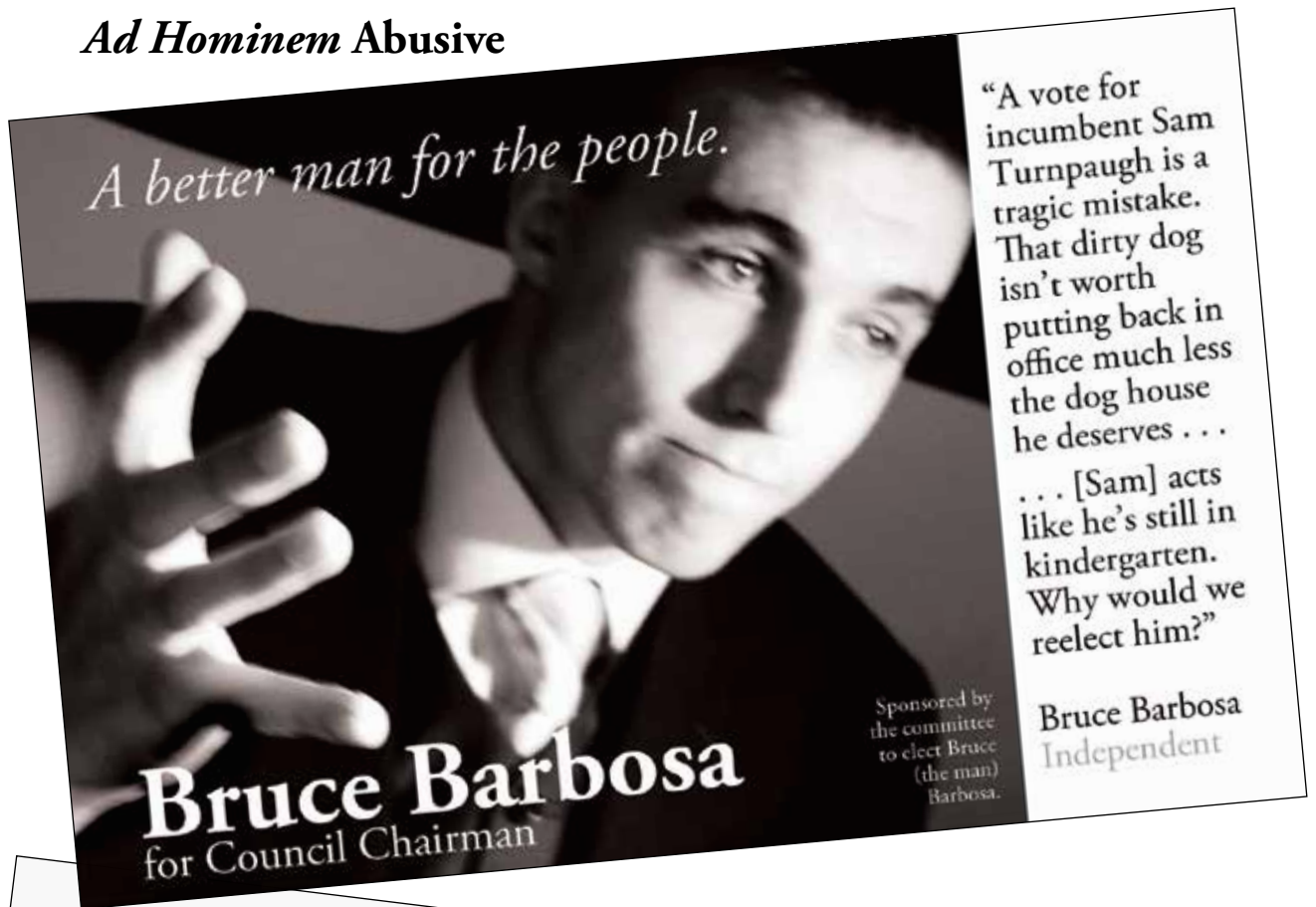
Do you really want a computer
that is named after a fruit?



Buy a computer you'll use, not eat.
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Ad Hominem Abusive



A black and white photograph of a man in a suit and tie, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His right hand is raised, palm facing forward, in a gesture of emphasis or warning.

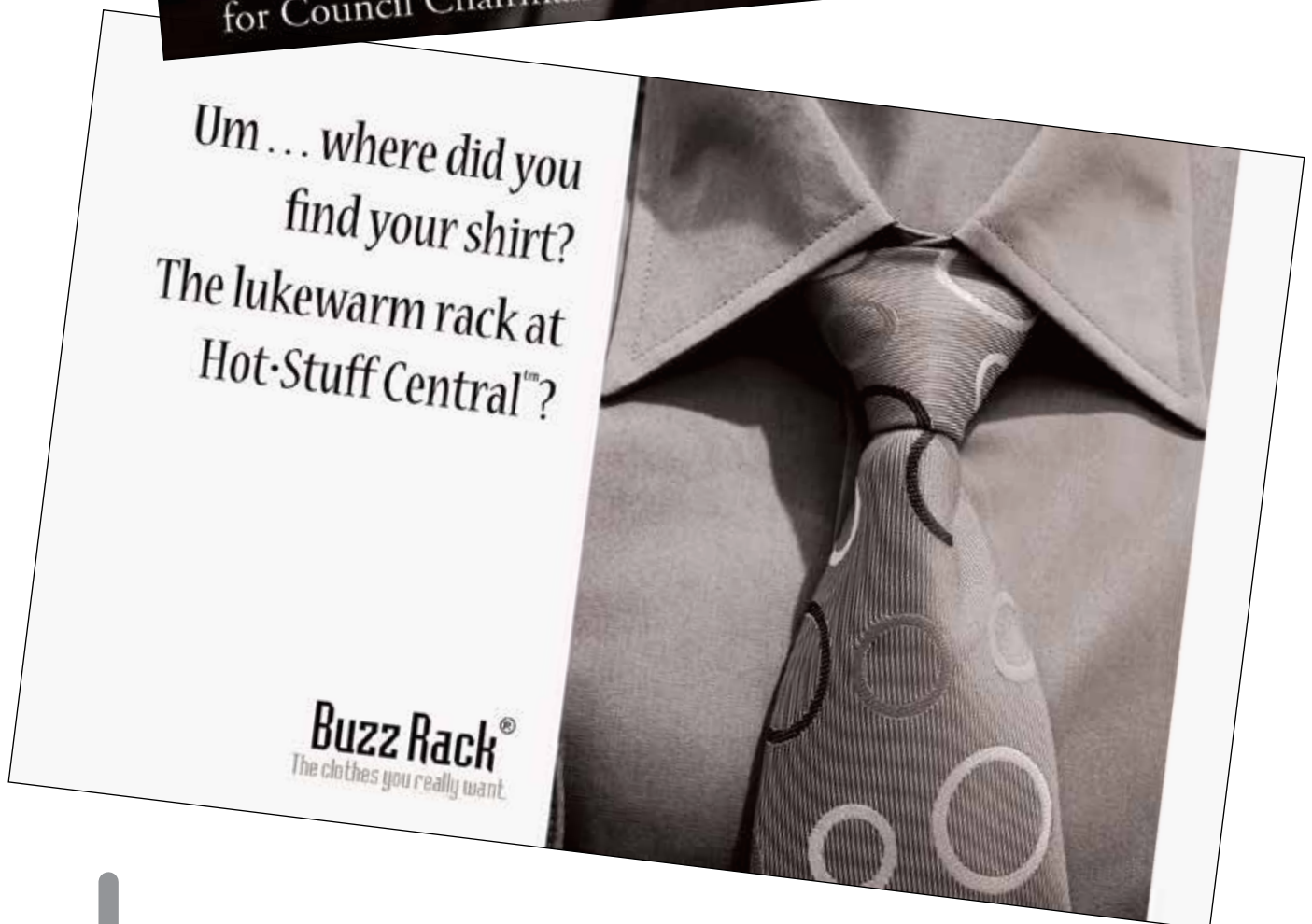
A better man for the people.

Bruce Barbosa
for Council Chairman

Sponsored by
the committee
to elect Bruce
(the man)
Barbosa.

“A vote for incumbent Sam Turnpaugh is a tragic mistake. That dirty dog isn’t worth putting back in office much less the dog house he deserves . . .
. . . [Sam] acts like he’s still in kindergarten. Why would we reelect him?”

Bruce Barbosa
Independent



A close-up photograph of a light-colored dress shirt and a patterned necktie. The tie features a repeating pattern of circles and crescent moons.

Um . . . where did you
find your shirt?
The lukewarm rack at
Hot·Stuff Central™?

Buzz Rack®
The clothes you really want.

Fallacy Discussion on *Ad Hominem* Abusive

Socrates: Hello again, student philosophers! From time to time, I'm going to address you with some questions. While you won't be able to discuss your ideas with me, you can practice with each other the way that Tiffany and I do. Here's your first assignment: compare the following two arguments, which address the controversial issue of the credibility of President George W. Bush as commander-in-chief of the war with Iraq.

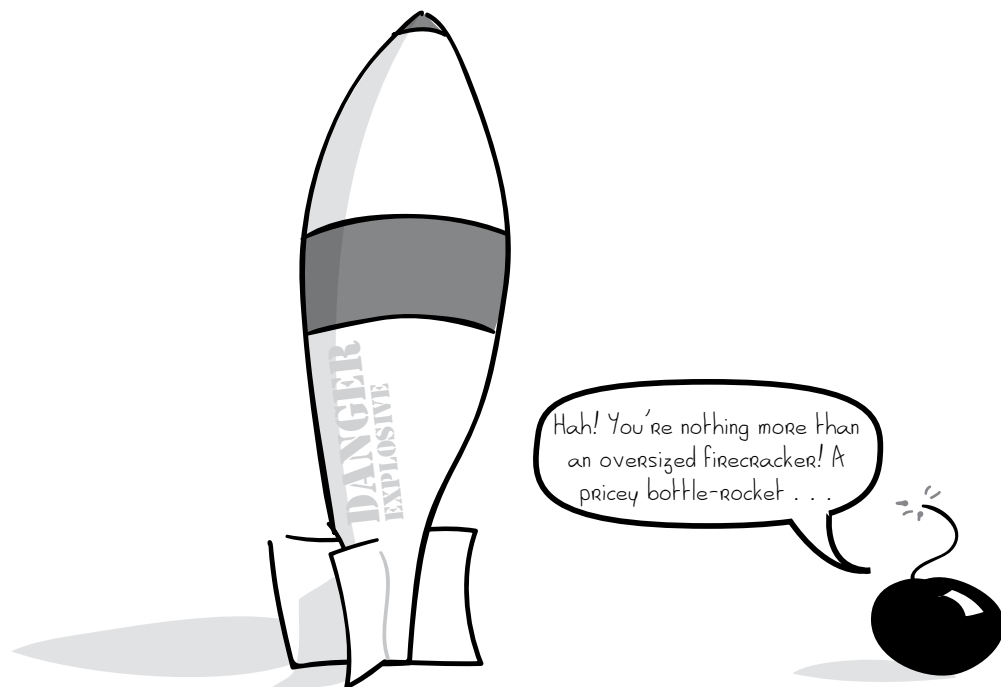
1. George Bush is a habitual liar. Surely you must see that it was useless to expect him to properly lead us into the war in Iraq or manage the war properly, since he is utterly untrustworthy.

2. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush told us that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that it could use against the United States. As it turned out, this was false—Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction. There are certainly grounds for questioning whether Bush properly led the United States into this war.

Which one of the statements above do you think commits the fallacy of *ad hominem* abusive? Explain why and then compare your answer with one on the next page.



Socrates: If you reasoned that the first example committed the fallacy of *ad hominem* abusive, then you were right! In both of the previous examples, the speaker is intending to show that the past behavior of President Bush may be evidence for the argument that Bush is untrustworthy. The second example, however, focuses on real evidence rather than simply making a general charge that Bush is a “habitual liar.” If you followed the events leading up to the Iraq war, you know that Bush’s claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction has become a highly controversial issue, in which there are many disagreements about the facts and the interpretations of those facts. While the argument given in the second example may not give conclusive proof that Bush improperly led the United States into the Iraq war (for there were several other reasons that Bush urged the invasion of Iraq, and Bush may have been reporting the facts as they truly appeared to be at the time), it is at least a reasonable position, with one piece of supporting evidence given. The first example not only contains unnecessary emotional language, but also places its emphasis on a personal attack, rather than on the issue of whether or not Bush properly led the United States to war. Emotive language and personal attacks are great for propaganda and browbeating those with whom one disagrees, but they are not useful for really solving problems and conflicts.



Fallacy 2:

Ad Hominem Circumstantial

DEFINITION: Arguments that try to discredit an opponent because of his background, affiliations, or self-interest in the matter at hand.

The *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy does not abuse the personal character of an opponent as the *ad hominem* abusive fallacy does. Instead, it criticizes something about the circumstances of an opponent—things such as the opponent’s place of birth, educational background, job experience, family, friends, and the associations and organizations to which he belongs. For example, does it make sense to reject a person’s argument because she is from the northern part of the country? Should we reject the argument of a person because he did not attend college or because he did attend college?

Consider the following examples of the *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy.

Example 1

You can’t accept her argument against abortion—she is a Catholic and the Catholic Church opposes abortion.

Example 2

You can’t accept his argument favoring legalized abortion—he is a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, which supports legalized abortion.

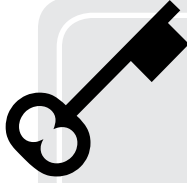
Example 3

That is a typical argument from someone who was raised in a wealthy family—of course you want to reduce taxes for the rich!

Example 4

He worked for thirty years as a prison guard—that’s why he wants the government to build ten more prisons we can’t afford.

Whether someone is a Catholic or a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, as in examples 1 and 2, should not be a cause for rejecting that person’s argument about abortion. The argument itself needs to be heard and stand or fall on its own merits. Notice that in examples 3 and 4, the critic seems to think that the person whose argument is in question is seeking his own personal benefit. In other words, the man raised in a wealthy family is accused of making an argument to reduce taxes for the wealthy only because he and his wealthy family members would benefit from such a reduction. The prison guard seems to be accused of supporting the construction of more prisons only because it would benefit other prison guards such as himself. In these cases, we would do well to separate the argument from any benefits that may come to the person arguing. Simply because you are interested in, and will benefit from, the thing for which you argue does not automatically discredit your argument. These people may have strong arguments, so let’s hear them.



Ad Hominem Circumstantial

Genus (general class): An argument to the source.

Difference (specific trait): An argument directed against the circumstances of the speaker's rival. (Not necessarily or obviously abusive.)

Ad Hominem Circumstantial

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Ad Fontem Arguments | Arguments that distract by focusing on the source of the argument rather than the issue itself.

Ad Hominem Circumstantial | *Ad hominem* arguments that try to discredit an opponent because of his situation.



Ad Hominem Circumstantial

A cell phone designed by teens for teens.
Not made by the big companies your parents work at.

Fill it with loads of games, MP3 files, instant messaging, funky cool ring tones (and not those dorky one's that Betty uses), also maybe put on it something that will help with homework. Yeah, I like that!



Hmmmm, let's put this phone on a hinge of sorts. That way when you stick it inside your bookbag it won't dial the CD store without you knowing it. Oh, and maybe we should be able to slap the phone shut when the call is over. I like that!

The case should be hard. That and well protected 'cause when I'm shredding it up on my platter I don't want to bust my new Horizontal phone - no way! Good stuff!

How 'bout a scripting language so that when school gets lame I can program my own games?!

Give me a display thing-a-ma-bob that tells me who's calling so I can "forget" to answer it when it's my Probation officer.

Dude, the camera thing rocks! That way I can photograph the shirt I want at the store and use it for santa's wish list - especially when santa got me that pink shirt last year, ack!



visit us online!

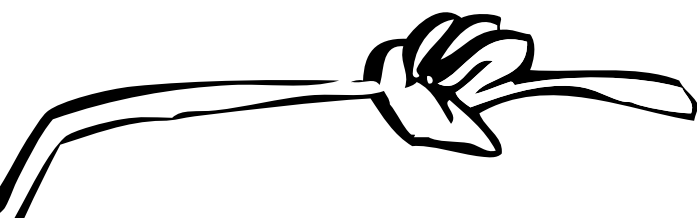
Fallacy Discussion on *Ad Hominem* Circumstantial

Socrates: Here’s another exercise for you to try: discuss whether or not the following argument is an example of an *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacy.

One should never trust a military man who wants an increase in military spending, since it is in his interest to use that money to create a larger military. The only reason why he wants to have a large military is because it makes him more important!

How do you think this argument might or might not be fair and relevant? Is a fallacy being committed?

An answer appears on the next page, but don’t look until you’ve thought about it yourself and written down your own answer.

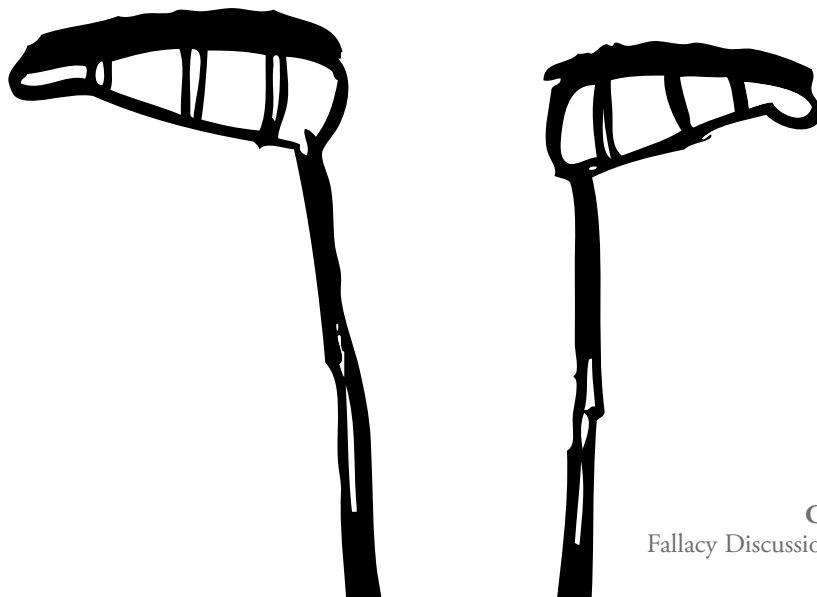




Socrates: If you answered that the example was, indeed, committing a fallacy, you were right! This sort of approach is actually quite common in the public sphere. When listening to arguments relating to politics and policy, one frequently hears a speaker attempting to refute his opponent's argument on the grounds that his opponent has some sort of self-interest involved. This line of argument fails on more than one level.

First, it unfairly imputes motives to the person involved. Because of this, it fails as an explanation for why the person is making the argument that he is making. Remember that it is always a tricky business to judge someone else's motives because no one can judge the heart. After all, it could be that the military man involved has dedicated his life to the military precisely because he has always been convinced of its vital importance from the beginning. (Thus there could be a "common cause" for both his being in the military and his thinking that we need a larger one.)

Of course, even if his motives for wanting a larger military are entirely noble, it still doesn't necessarily follow that a larger one would be better. However, explaining the speaker's motives for advocating a course of action is never the main point of an argument at all! That's why these sort of arguments are so misplaced; even to allow ourselves to be drawn into the tricky quagmire of ascertaining someone else's motivations is allowing ourselves to be drawn into the wrong debate. The best response is to return to our old standard response to all fallacies of relevance: "true or not, it's irrelevant."



Fallacy 3:

Tu Quoque

DEFINITION: Arguments that assume that a rival's recommendation should be discounted because the rival does not always follow it himself.

In Latin, *tu quoque* means “you too” or “you also.” The person committing this fallacy accuses his opponent of having the same flaw that his opponent is pointing out in his argument. In effect, he says to his opponent, “But you also (*tu quoque*) do the same thing you are arguing against!” Take, for example, the classic case of an old man with a cigarette saying to a younger man, “Don’t smoke. It’s a filthy habit and will shorten your life.” The younger man may reply, “But you are a smoker yourself. You can’t argue that I shouldn’t smoke!”

As you can see, the *tu quoque* fallacy charges a person with a kind of inconsistency regarding the argument being made. That inconsistency is often made out to be a character flaw.

Consider the following examples of the *tu quoque* fallacy.

Example 1

John: Slow down, you are going 10 mph over the speed limit.

Mark: You’re telling me to drive more slowly, but you’re the one with four speeding tickets this year! I may drive over the speed limit sometimes, but I don’t drive nearly as fast as you do.

Example 2

Former Governor: The new governor should propose a balanced budget that won’t increase our state deficit.

Governor: Last year, my predecessor spent \$100 million more than the government collected, thereby adding another \$100 million to our state debt. My budget is far more realistic and should only increase the debt by \$15 million. This is a responsible budget. It is ridiculous that my predecessor should dare to offer any criticism of this budget given his previous spending policies.

Note that in each case above, the speaker is pointing out a flaw in his opponent—a flaw of inconsistency—while at the same time comparing himself favorably to the opponent. It is as if the speaker is saying, “I may have a problem, but look how much worse you are. You, too, have a flaw, and a worse one than I do, so your argument doesn’t count.” In truth, John and the former governor may have strong arguments, despite their own flaws. The old man with the cigarette may have a strong argument for not smoking precisely *because* he has smoked for years. John, with four speeding tickets,

may have learned a lesson or two about speeding that Mark should heed. The personal flaws of these people are not relevant to the argument they are making. Judge the argument, not the person making it.

As well, people with flaws and inconsistencies do sometimes change their views over time. In other words, just because someone had flaws and made mistakes in the past, does not necessarily mean that the flaws are still present or that the same mistakes continue. People often learn from their mistakes and change their views. For instance, the economist John Maynard Keynes was once asked by a reporter why he changed his view about regulating money during the Great Depression. He replied, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”¹

1. Keynes’ reply to a criticism during the Great Depression of having changed his position on monetary policy, as quoted in Alfred L. Malabre’s *Lost Prophets: An Insider’s History of the Modern Economists* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1995), 220.



***Tu Quoque* Fallacy**

Genus (general class): An argument to the source.

Difference (specific trait): An argument centered entirely on the inconsistencies exhibited by the speaker’s rival.



Tu Quoque

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Ad Fontem Arguments | Arguments that distract by focusing on the source of the
(*Arguments Against the Source*) argument rather than the issue itself.

Tu Quoque | Arguments that claim that because the opposing speaker is flawed, his argument can't be true: "We might be bad, but they're worse, so go with us instead."

**Kids go crazy over
Sugar Dump!**

And Moms, just remember, we don't have as much sugar as Sugar-Bombs® does and we cost less!

Binner Cereals

Only 128 grams of sugar per serving

SUGAR DUMP

SAVE 25¢
Buy up to 6 boxes with this coupon. Not valid with any other offer. Good at participating grocery stores. Valid through 03/31/14. Coupon value = \$0.00001

Binner Cereals
SUGAR DUMP

The advertisement features a brown cereal box for 'Sugar Dump' cereal. The box has 'Binner Cereals' written in a script font at the top. Below that, 'SUGAR DUMP' is written in large, bold, black letters with a white outline. A heart-shaped badge on the right side of the box says 'Only 128 grams of sugar per serving'. At the bottom of the box, there is a white bowl filled with the cereal. A coupon is attached to the bottom right of the box, which says 'SAVE 25¢' and includes terms and conditions. The coupon also features a small image of the cereal box and bowl.

Fallacy Discussion on *Tu Quoque*

Socrates: There is nothing like a *tu quoque* fallacy to start a good quarrel or to distract from the issue at hand. Consider the following dialogues and discuss how they are examples of a *tu quoque* fallacy. Further explanation of these examples is provided on the next page.

Ann: Susan, you wore my new red sweater last night without asking me if you could! You can't wear it anymore.

Susan: How can you say that? Just last week you wore my sweatshirt to the gym without asking!

Socrates: The following is a political example of a *tu quoque* fallacy.

Republican Senator: Now that you Democrats are in control of the House and Senate, your party is spending the American people's money left and right on stimulating the economy and big government social programs!

Democratic Senator: You should remember back a few years to the spending that your party did on the war! You have no ground to stand on if you are accusing us of being big spenders.

Socrates: Here is a third example on an issue many students encounter.

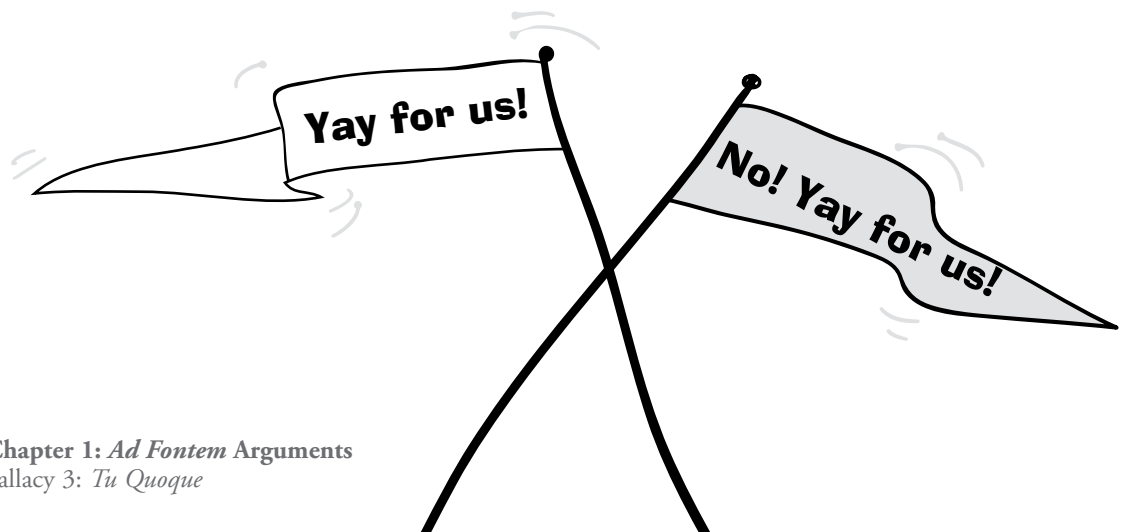
Father: I know that you love cartooning, but it is tough to make a living selling artwork for comics. Perhaps you could consider a college major that would use many of your talents but would still provide you with marketable skills so that you can get a job that will support you.

Son: Dad, I know you studied writing in college and wanted to be a novelist, but that's not what you're doing now. I don't see why I shouldn't get the chance to try to follow my dreams just because it didn't work out for you!

Socrates: These examples all commit the *tu quoque* fallacy, though they are quite different in character. Considering the first example, you can see how a *tu quoque* fallacy is very commonly found in small quarrels.

In the political example, it may be good to point out when there are inconsistencies in a political party or in a politician. It is wise to consider whether it is a sign of changing a position to fit popular opinions or of having a double standard when one is promoting one's own agenda. However, the past actions of a party or politician do not necessarily bear on the issue at hand, and it is important to keep your eye on the real issue. It is also likely that these arguments are being made to try to persuade voters to support one party or another. The Democrat's response does not address the issue of whether Congress is spending money wisely, but distracts the other side by causing the Republican to defend past actions rather than focusing on the issues at hand.

In the third example, the son commits a *tu quoque* fallacy by choosing to ignore advice on the grounds that his father chose to do something similar and failing when he was his son's age, rather than considering the wisdom that his father may have gained through his decisions. We can probably assume that the father has his son's best interests at heart and is lovingly trying to direct him. The son may well end up being successful at a comic career, but is certainly committing a fallacy by dismissing his father's advice by saying "you too," or *tu quoque*.



Fallacy 4:

Genetic Fallacy

DEFINITION: Arguments that state that an idea should be discounted simply because of its source or origin.

A genetic fallacy is the *ad fontem* fallacy that is most clearly an attack on the “fountain” (*fontem*) or source of an argument. The genetic fallacy ignores the argument it opposes and instead focuses on the source from which the argument came.

The word “genetic” comes from the Greek word *genesis*, which means “beginning.” A person committing this fallacy thinks that if she can point out and discredit where the argument began, she can discredit the argument itself. That is almost like saying that because a computer was made in Mexico, it must be bad.

Consider the following examples of the genetic fallacy.

Example 1

Did you know that Greg believes in life in outer space? I think it started with that movie he watched last year about aliens. He believes in extraterrestrial life because of a Hollywood film!

Example 2

Of course Julie argues that car companies should build their cars to stricter standards of safety. Her brother works for the Automobile Safety Commission. His entire life is dedicated to car safety!

Greg may have become interested in the possibility of extraterrestrial life as a result of watching a movie on the subject. The movie may have presented some interesting evidence for the possibility of extraterrestrial life, but that has nothing to do with whether his argument is a good one or not. Let’s hear Greg’s argument for life in outer space and judge it, not its source. It is no surprise that Julie might be interested in car safety because of her brother’s work and influence. Even if her argument does come from her brother, that is no reason to dismiss it. Her argument may be quite good regardless of where it came from, so judge it on its own merits.

Example 3

What causes belief in God? The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud proposed that sometimes when people do not have a good experience or relationship with their own fathers, they wish for and imagine a God who is a great, cosmic father figure who offers the things they missed in their relationships with their own fathers. Freud called this “wish projection,” and his argument was that if belief in God was simply created out of people’s wishes, God must not exist.

While this theory might have some validity in explaining the nature of people’s perceptions of God, it actually does not bear on the issue of whether God exists or not. Many people may believe in God’s existence for reasons other than a wish for a cosmic father figure. You can quickly see that a theist could also fall into the same fallacy by arguing that atheists don’t believe in God only because of their desire to be free from any divine accountability—so they can live their lives without the worry or threat of the judgment of God (or gods). While it may be true that some atheists adopt atheism for this reason, it does not bear on the issue of whether there is a God or not. Many atheists do not believe in the existence of God (or gods) for reasons other than a desire to be free from divine accountability.

Note that the genetic fallacy is the least “personal” of all the *ad fontem* fallacies. The *ad hominem* abusive and *ad hominem* circumstantial fallacies both touch on the man (*hominem*). The *tu quoque* fallacy also features a flaw (of inconsistency) in one’s opponent, which makes it a personal fallacy as well. The genetic fallacy, however, focuses on the source of a person’s argument, making it a less personal attack. We might even call the genetic fallacy an *impersonal* attack. For instance, in example 1, it was the movie that Greg saw that led him to believe in extraterrestrial life, rather than a personal flaw in Greg himself. As with all the *ad fontem* fallacies, we can legitimately say of the attack on the source for Greg’s argument that it is true, perhaps, but irrelevant—it is true that the movie gave rise to Greg’s position, but that is irrelevant to the validity of his argument. Judge the argument, not its source.



Genetic Fallacy

Genus: An argument to the source.

Difference: An argument that isn’t directed at an individual person: an “impersonal attack.”



Genetic Fallacy

FALLACIES OF RELEVANCE | Arguments that are really distractions from the main point.

Ad Fontem Arguments | Arguments that distract by focusing on the source of the argument rather than on the issue itself.
(Arguments against the source)

Genetic Fallacy | *Ad fontem* argument that distracts by focusing attention on an **impersonal** source of an opposing argument.



Genetic Fallacy



A
comfortable shoe
born out of
design-by-
committee?

We didn't
think so.

NatuaShu
comfort & care for your corns



Chapter 1 Review

A. DEFINE: Include English translations for Latin terms.

1. *Ad Fontem* Arguments:

2. *Ad Hominem* Abusive:

3. *Ad Hominem* Circumstantial:

4. *Tu Quoque*:

5. Genetic Fallacy:

B. IDENTIFICATION:

Which *ad fontem* argument is being described in each instance below?

1. An argument directed against the circumstances of the speaker's rival.

2. An argument implementing obviously abusive language.

3. An argument centered entirely on the inconsistencies exhibited by the speaker's rival.

4. An argument that isn't directed at a person; an impersonal attack.

C. APPLICATION:

Find or write two examples of an *ad fontem* argument. You may use Internet sites, books, newspapers, or magazines as resources.