6 | More Fallacies

As promised in the last chapter, it's time to dig a bit deeper into the subject of fallacies, especially since they are likely to be rife in an election season and there is quite a lot to learn from understanding what is going wrong critical-thinking-wise when someone commits a fallacy.

Before diving in, however, I need to point out something Kevin deLaplante from the Critical Thinker Academy warned about when he was a guest on the original Critical Voter podcast during the 2012 election. In our discussion, he stressed that genuine campaign rhetoric, like the kind you hear during debates or in political speeches and ads, should not necessarily be judged by the standards of pure logic or argumentation designed to uncover greater truths.

Scientists and scholars, including philosophers and logicians, have the luxury of engaging in dialogues of various types (including conversations, exchanges over research articles, and even debates) where all participants share a common goal of answering some question or getting to some truth. This means they might be ready to forgo argumentation from emotion and other forms of manipulative rhetoric, especially if using such techniques moved everyone further from that truth.

Now to cut politicians a little slack, I think it's fair to say that even philosophers and scientists are not beyond using the tools of

persuasion (including manipulative ones up to and including bullying) to achieve victory, even at the expense of potential enlightenment. Scholars, after all, are human beings, and here in the real world getting your ideas across, not to mention getting the biggest office in your academic department, takes more than just appeals to logic and to the better nature of your colleagues.

So when it comes time to evaluate persuasive speech against standards such as the use of fallacies, we need to remember that presidential candidates engaging in debate, for example, are not working together on a scholarly project, leveraging an adversarial system to answer a common question. Rather, they are engaging in a type of performance designed to accomplish other goals, such as inspiring their political base, reaching out to undecided voters, and not making an error that will be used against them in the next TV ad. So judging them by the same standard we would use to judge a Socratic dialog would itself represent fallacious thinking on our part.

In fact, it would represent what's called a *category error*, one in which standards relevant to one category of things are applied to something that does not fit into that category. For example, since murder is defined as the intentional killing of another person, then someone might be tempted to conclude that every soldier that kills others in combat must be a murderer. But this would be a category error since, at least for most of us, soldiers doing their military duty fall into a different category than the guy bumping off his wife for her insurance money.

Category errors are variants on the composition fallacy we talked about during the last chapter's discussion of what fallacies can do to arguments. This is the fallacy where you mistakenly assign attributes of one member of a group to the group as a whole, such as Joe is a member of the Democratic Party and Joe is left-handed, therefore Democrats are all Lefties.

That last example also includes another fallacy called *equivocation*, which involves using a word that has more than one definition, in this case "Leftie," to intentionally mislead.

Since we seem to have moved right into the thick of things, let's talk about equivocation-related fallacies a bit more. The vagaries of language are such that how words are defined and the way sentences are grammatically structured can be the source of significant confusion that creates openings for fallacious arguments.

The fact that one word can apply to many different things is one of the great pleasures of language (one of my favorite illustrations of this pleasure is the word "caper," which can mean a carefully planned crime, a pickled peppercorn, or a prancing walk). But the existence of multiple definitions for the same word creates *ambiguity*, which is simply the confusion that arises when it's unclear which definition of a word is being applied in a particular situation.

Unlike "ambiguity," the word "amphiboly" hasn't entered everyday language. But amphiboly is simply the confusion that arises from the fact that a phrase, sentence, or text passage can be read in more than one way depending on what grammar rules, including punctuation, are applied. Grammar maven Lynne Truss wrote a 2003 book with a title illustrating this phenomenon called *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, a phrase that, depending on how it is punctuated, means the cuddly panda bear on the cover either likes to eat bamboo or just finished dinner in a restaurant and then opened fire on the patrons before fleeing the crime scene.

Our humor would be pretty bereft if language was so tightly systematized that every word and sentence had only one possible interpretation. For instance, consider the word ambiguity and sentence amphiboly in this joke: "A Buddhist monk walks up to a hotdog stand and says, 'Make me one with everything.'"

But lack of clarity can be exploited not only by comics but also by those hoping to hide or obscure the truth. For instance, consider

the famous example of President Bill Clinton trying to defend himself against claims that he lied before a grand jury by arguing over ambiguity related to the word "is."

Without going into details of the tawdry original charges regarding an affair with an intern, by arguing over "what 'is' is," the president was trying to draw a distinction between "is" defined as "exists" vs. his preferred definition of "exists right now." So according to Clinton and his attorneys, his denial was "true" since, at the time of his grand jury questioning, the affair had occurred in the past. As you might guess, many others, including those who prosecuted and impeached him, did not agree with this interpretation and even supporters of the president could never quite bring themselves to embrace Clinton's "what 'is' is" ambiguity argument when defending him against those who wanted him tossed from office.

Moving along, here's a fallacy you are sure to encounter during the next political debate you watch (especially at the presidential level): *argumentation from authority*. For example, in discussions about proposals to fix the economy, candidates are likely to bring up how their ideas are supported by one, six, ten, or more reports, each presumably written by experts.

Now such appeals to authority do not necessarily rise to the level of a fallacy, especially if these reports exist, were written by experts, and actually say what the candidates claim they say.

But an appeal to authority does become fallacious when, for example, the authority being appealed to is respected in one field but is commenting on a subject outside of his or her expertise. For instance, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist has tremendous authority—in the field of physics. But if he decides to make pronouncements regarding political matters such as war and peace or what constitutes a fair tax code or national health-care system, those pronouncements should be taken no more seriously (although certainly no less seriously) than those made by any other really smart person.

Also, even if an authority is speaking within his or her field of expertise, if his or her opinions represent a dramatic break from consensus within that field, then you are committing a fallacy if you don't alert your audience to that fact. This doesn't mean that your expert's maverick opinion might not be correct. Many great breakthroughs, after all, come from people willing to buck consensus. But if you want to avoid committing an authority-related fallacy, you need to clearly identify that your authority is a bold and independent thinker, not a representative of mainstream thought.

An argument from authority is part of a group of fallacies you've been introduced to before, which travel under the term "red herrings." These are fallacious arguments designed to distract the audience from what it should be thinking about and they represent the type of fallacy you probably see most frequently in both presidential and vice presidential debates.

For example, during the 2012 vice presidential debate, sitting VP Joe Biden clearly did not want to answer the first question about a brewing controversy regarding the administration's handling of an attack on the American embassy in Libya. So in his 346-word response, he mentioned the killing of Osama bin Laden (which his boss should be praised for), wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (which Obama should be praised for ending), and tracking terrorists to the gates of Hell, but never seemed to get around to responding to what was being asked of him before the clock ran out.

Red herrings are rife in time-bound debates, especially since they give candidate's the chance to use the allotted time to go on about something they'd prefer to talk about rather than answer a difficult question. For example, during the same election year in which Biden was talking about tracking terrorists to Hell, presidential candidate Mitt Romney avoided answering a debate question regarding his stance on gun-control laws by bringing the subject to safer territory, including the need for better schools and

the importance of two-parent families (which caused one Facebook wag—my brother in fact—to question whether or not more marriages might lead to more gun violence).

Such red herrings are so common in today's political arguments that I need to highlight a subtle but important distinction you need to keep in mind.

As those examples you just read illustrate, candidates want to use debates *not* to actually mix it up with their rivals or answer questions put to them by the moderator or audience members but rather to insert key talking points and zingers they have prepared in advance into the conversation. But as tempting as it would be to categorize all such non-responses as red-herring fallacies, assuming that any attempt to change the subject or shift the agenda of a conversation to be fallacious is another category error.

That's because not all such shifts are of the "don't look at the man behind the curtain" variety. In fact, many times they are reasonable ways of avoiding questions that themselves represent fallacies.

For instance, *loaded questions* usually represent a kind of *false choice* or *false dilemma*, where someone is given a narrow set of options to pick from, any one of which would make them look bad.

Continuing with examples from the 2012 election season, in that same debate where candidate Romney was reframing a gun-control question into something about schools and marriage, he also asked his Democratic rival how much the Obama administration had cut permits and licenses to drill for natural gas on federal land. Since any direct answer to such a question, which would have to come in the form of a percentage, would establish the accusation's key point (that the Obama administration had cut rather than increased the availability of such permits), the president's decision to avoid giving a "straight" answer to such a question is perfectly reasonable and should not be considered a fallacy.

The type of "gotcha" journalism that all candidates are repeatedly subjected to also represents situations where not giving a direct response simply means not falling into the trap a reporter has set by answering a no-win question while the television cameras are rolling.

In recent years, for example, it's become standard practice during the primary season for journalists to grill Republican candidates regarding their thoughts about human evolution. More likely than not, reporters asking such questions are not looking to trigger a nationwide conversation over genetics or theology. Rather, they are hoping to trap the candidate into saying something that will get them into trouble with their conservative base or embarrass them with the public at large. Given this, avoiding a direct response is not only *not* fallacious; it represents a perfectly logical and valid way of handling a difficult rhetorical situation.

Genuine red herrings can be distinguished from simple subject changing when they are used to avoid a genuine issue, especially when they appeal to something other than logic in order to do so.

For instance, many appeals to bad emotion such as bigotry, fear, hatred, ridicule, and spite represent red herrings, as does questioning the motives of your opponent or engaging in some other type of *ad hominem attack*. Ad hominem translates as "to the man" and involves an assault on the character, history, or behavior of the arguer as a way of avoiding his or her argument. This is a favorite technique for TV talk-show hosts who never tire of dragging skeletons out of the closet of those they don't agree with (and whose challenges they'd rather not answer).

And speaking of TV talk shows, it's time to get to my favorite red-herring fallacy of all: a*rgumentation from outrage*. This is one where the arguer bursts into fury at the merest mention of any issue or person he or she dislikes or any question he or she would like to avoid. The purpose of such (usually feigned) outrage is to raise the emotional temperature so high that rational discourse cannot continue, presuming it ever started in the first place.

We've also seen this technique used by politicians, not just the media. While I don't want to draw too many more examples from one election season, the performance of Vice President Joe Biden in the one and (thank goodness) only vice presidential debate of 2012 was such an over-the-top use of argumentation from outrage (one which left Biden's shouting, interrupting, and eye rolling the only thing anyone remembers from the encounter) that I am currently lobbying for a video of his performance to replace the definition for this technique in all fallacy directories from now on.

All of these examples should highlight something that's been mentioned before: that the common fallacies you are most likely to encounter do not commit the sin of breaking the formal rules of logic (such as our old invalid friend "All dogs are animals. Francine is a dog. Therefore all dogs are Francine"). Not that politicians and others don't ever present arguments that, if boiled down to a formal structure, would prove to be invalid. It's just that, in most cases, content-related fallacies such as red herrings and faulty generalizations mean that even if arguments are technically valid (i.e., they don't commit a formal logical fallacy), they are still unsound as a result of committing one or more informal fallacies.

Now I mentioned two groups of actors on the political stage that can be found guilty of using these informal and even formal fallacies on a regular basis: politicians and the media. But there is another party even guiltier of committing each and every one of the fallacies on the longest lists you can find on a daily basis: we the people.

After all, it is we who love to see candidates squirm under the spotlight, which is why we don't mind if journalists engage in fallacious questioning or act in other illogical or unprofessional ways to serve us up a moment where we can squeal with glee as a candidate we don't like gets like caught in a rhetorical trap or savor a moment of outrage when we see the same thing being pulled on the candidate we prefer.

It's also we voters who fall for negative TV ads made up of cut-and-pasted snippets featuring flubs the candidates made during a debate, only to turn around and lambaste these same candidates for "playing it safe" during those debates by giving stock responses vs. engaging in genuinely spontaneous dialog.

From the earliest days of Internet debate (anyone else out there remember Usenet?), supporters of particular candidates, parties, or causes have used each and every fallacy ever created to promote their cause and condemn their enemies, a process that has only expanded now that almost every political Web site contains a comment section where people can post their critiques, opinions, and tirades anonymously.

In addition to all of the common fallacies we've been talking about, these open forums are where you get the chance to see some of the more colorful but obscure ones in action, such as the *perfect solution fallacy*, also called a *nirvana* or *utopia fallacy*, which declares that if a proposed solution does not create heaven on Earth, then it is the wrong one. Totalitarians are particularly fond of combining this fallacy with the *double standard*, insisting that democracies be judged by their flaws (i.e., how they have failed to create perfect societies) combined with an insistence (often delivered using argumentation from outrage) that their own brutal regimes be judged solely on their theoretical goals of creating such perfection.

Online forums are where I also regularly encounter one of my favorite named fallacies called *no true Scotsman*. This one is based on the story of a Scotsman who reads on page one of his newspaper about a brutal murder in London and declares "no Scotsman would ever do such a thing" and then turns the page to read about an even more brutal murder that took place in Edinburgh and declares "no *true* Scotsman would do such a thing." If you want to see this fallacy in action, just tune into the comments section of a major news site, which will be filled with

true Scotsmen the minute an act of violence occurs within any national, ethnic, or religious community.

One of the reasons why the Internet is filled with so many lists of fallacies is that, since the beginning of online debate, partisans have routinely tried to "educate" readers as to the nature of fallacies, primarily to demonstrate how guilty their opponents are of using them. And while anything that promotes the teaching of critical-thinking subjects, including fallacies, should be welcomed, think for a moment of how many principles of critical thinking such self-serving condemnations violate.

First, there is an implied accusation that one's opponents are not making any legitimate points but are simply engaging in fallacious argumentation. While such accusations *might* be true, it's been my experience that such partisans are far stricter with regard to scrutinizing their opponent's arguments for fallacies than their own or those of supporters.

Second, since a complex argument or set of arguments might include one or more errors, including this or that named fallacy, it's too easy to hold a fallacy you've discovered up high and declare your opponent's entire position to be illegitimate, as opposed to having simply found a flaw in it. In other words, this represents the same pouncing on your opponent's weakest points vs. taking on his or her strongest ones that the principle of charity says we should never do, at least if we want to be true critical thinkers.

Finally, identifying your opponent's fallacies by name is kind of pretentious, especially if you use their Latin handles, and usually just serves to convince your audience that you're a dweeb rather than right. So rather than call opponents out on this or that named fallacy, you should simply use the valid, sound, and persuasive arguments you now know how to construct to smash your opponent's fallacious ones without anyone needing to know what's going on behind the scenes.

And with that, I'd like to move onto another important subject: math.

Wait! Come back!

And don't panic, for the next chapter will not be looking at mathematics *per se* but will rather focus on the of power of numbers to convince as well as deceive those not armed with the tools of critical thinking you are now so busily learning.