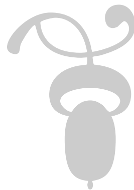
Nonsense:

A Handbook of Logical Fallacies

Robert J. Gula



Axios Press

Axios Press
PO Box 118
Mount Jackson, VA 22842

888·542·9467 press@axiosinstitute.org

NONSENSE: A HANDBOOK OF LOGICAL FALLACIES © 2002 by Axios Institute. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations used in critical articles and reviews.

First published by Stein and Day in 1979.
In the Stein and Day edition, the work principally consisted of a handbook of verbal logic, but also contained some introductory and other material of a more popular and ephemeral nature, developed by the author at the request of the publisher. This edition contains everything germane to the author's original concept of a timeless handbook of verbal logic.

BOOK AND COVER DESIGN BY NICHOLAS VITTUM

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 00-111842
ISBN: 0966190858

Contents

Foreword vii

One: Everyday Nonsense 1
Two: Emotional Language 4
Three: Emotional Language: Propaganda 15
Four: Emotional Language: Suggestion 21
Five: Logical Fallacies 31
Six: Irrelevance 37
Seven: Diversion 54
Eight: Ambiguity and Incorrect Inference 63
Nine: Confusion and Incorrect Inference 75
Ten: Confusion of Cause and Effect 90
Eleven: Oversimplification 98
Twelve: Erroneous Comparison and Contrast 107
Thirteen: Evasion 115
Fourteen: More on Arguments 122
Fifteen: More on Semantics 129
Sixteen: More on the Syllogism 140
Seventeen: Final Notes 155

Summary of Fallacies and Nonsense 159
Bibliography 165
Index 169

CHAPTER
Eleven

Oversimplification

> "My friends," says he, "what is this which we now behold as being spread before us? Refreshment. Do we need refreshment, my friends? Because we are but mortal, because we are but sinful, because we are but of the earth, because we are not of the air. Can we fly, my friends? We cannot. Why can we not fly, my friends?"
>
> Mr. Snagsby, presuming on the success of his last point, ventures to observe in a cheerful and rather knowing tone, "No wings."
>
> —Dickens, Bleak House, XIX

The tendency to oversimplify is common; probably all of us have yielded to it at one time or another. We oversimplify when we seek a quick, easy solution to a complex problem, when we don't want to be bothered with the ramifications of an issue, and when we respond glibly and hastily. Several of the items mentioned in the chapters on propaganda, on emotionalism, and on confusion were examples of oversimplification. The following discussion identifies some additional types.

Accident. The fallacy of accident is committed when a general rule is applied to a situation in which it was not intended to apply. This fallacy suggests that there are no exceptions to a general rule or principle. It acknowledges the letter of the law

but ignores the spirit of that law. For instance, it is night; the fog is heavy, and the roads are wet. Mrs. Borden tells her husband to drive more slowly. "What do you mean," he replies. "The speed limit is fifty-five: I'm not going over the speed limit." Mr. Borden here is using the fallacy of accident. He is ignoring the fact that the particular road conditions make the 55 mph speed limit inapplicable. Those who cite the commandment Thou shalt not kill to condemn warfare or capital punishment or euthanasia or abortion are judged by their opponents to commit this fallacy.

The complex question. A complex question occurs when an issue is posed that has several ramifications but whose ramifications are either ignored or not recognized: "Should we accept the proposal, yes or no?" There may be some parts of the proposal that are desirable but others that are undesirable. The complex question often includes two or more separate questions under the guise of one question: "Are you still cheating?" This question actually entails two separate questions: "Are you cheating now? Have you ever cheated?" Failure to recognize a complex question leads to all sorts of confusion in discussing an issue. Sometimes the complex question appears as a statement. Note the following resolution for a debate: Resolved: That Congress should veto the inflationary budget proposed by the President. Lurking behind this resolution are two separate resolutions: (1) that the budget proposed by the President is inflationary; (2) that the Congress should veto the budget.

The excluded middle. This is sometimes called the either . . . or fallacy or the black and white fallacy. "Either you support my proposal or you don't." Actually, we may support part of the proposal but not all of it. "Either we give criminals complete freedom or we give the police unlimited authority." There are degrees of freedom and degrees of police authority that the speaker is ignoring. We do not have to give criminals complete freedom nor do we have to give the police unlimited authority. This all-or-nothing fallacy reduces a situation to extremes.

Slogans often employ this fallacy: America—Love It or Leave It. When Guns Are Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Have Guns.

Pigeonholing. If we choose to, we can put our own slant upon almost any event. Some of us oversimplify a complex issue by stripping the issue of its complexities and by forcing that issue into some convenient general category. For instance, at a local university, Professor Reardon has published several scholarly articles in the past few years. A colleague remarks, "Reardon's always publishing. He must be a very frustrated person: I guess he's got to publish to keep himself occupied. There's something obsessive about the way he works. Poor guy . . . beautiful example of sublimation." At the same university is Professor Salers, who has never published. The same colleague remarks, "Salers never writes. I guess he just has nothing to say. He probably couldn't get published if he wanted to. Furthermore, he seems pretty lazy." You can't win: Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

One of the prime manifestations of oversimplification is jumping to conclusions. I remember once, having returned from a commercial laundromat, finding a pair of women's panties among my own laundered clothes. The panties had obviously been accidentally left behind by the person who had previously used the drier, and I had simply emptied the contents of the drier into my laundry bag. Well, I threw the panties into the wastebasket. A few minutes later, the thought occurred to me: What would someone think, seeing these panties in my wastebasket?

The fallacy of the beard. What constitutes a beard? One whisker? No. Two whiskers? No. Three whiskers? No. Does the presence of one additional whisker make any difference? No. Obviously, there is no one place you can draw the line between having a beard and not having a beard. A person commits the fallacy of the beard when he argues that there is no distinction between two phenomena because there is no distinct point of demarcation between the two phenomena.

This is a variation of the black-and-white fallacy. It manifests itself in different ways. (1) When a person says that one more won't make any difference. A school administrator says to a teacher, "Surely you can take one more student. One more isn't going to make any difference." Suppose that a few days later the administrator makes a similar plea . . . and another one a few days after that. Now, it may be true that one more student will not make much of a difference, but there does come the point when the classroom is filled or when the class size is unmanageable. (2) When a person says that if A happens, then B will happen, and then C, and then D. "There's no drawing the line." This is the old domino theory. "If we allow City Hall to change the zoning regulations and permit a market on Winter Street, the next thing you know there'll be a McDonald's and we'll have traffic mess and there'll be kids hanging around all the time making nuisances of themselves. And then they'll try to put in some chain store, and then there'll be a shopping mall, and before you know it none of us will be able to live on Winter Street." (3) When a person uses the absence of clear-cut distinctions to rationalize inaction. Labor and management are disputing wages: "What is a fair wage? $2.00?" "No." "$2.01?" "No." "$2.02?" "No." If management then argues that, since one additional cent isn't going to make any difference, they might as well discontinue haggling over pennies and stay with the status quo, then the management would be committing the fallacy of the beard.

Absolutes. People often indiscriminately use absolutes in their utterances: every, everyone, everything, all, always, never, no one, nothing. Rarely are these absolute terms justified. "No one likes the new tax proposal." "Everyone is dissatisfied with the mayor's proposal." In these statements no one and everyone really mean most people or perhaps even more precisely most people that I have talked with. Be leery of any statement that uses absolute terms.

The false mean. This is sometimes called the fallacy of compromise. Now, there are times when compromise is necessary. But it is not always a desirable solution. Sometimes an extreme position is warranted. A doctor tells a patient who is now smoking two packs of cigarettes a day that he should stop smoking completely. "I'll tell you what, doctor," remarks the patient. "I'll cut down to a half a pack a day." The patient's proposed compromise may help, but the doctor's original suggestion is better. One school administrator feels that all students should be required to take mathematics; another feels that no students should be required to take math. A compromise that only half the students be required to take math or that all students be required to take math for only two instead of four years is unacceptable if, in fact, there is something intrinsically important about a four-year math program. A desirable solution does not always lie in compromise.

Circular definition. This fallacy is sometimes called a question-begging definition. You define a word so narrowly that it has to mean what you want it to mean: "You are a miser. As far as I am concerned, a miser is someone who is so tight that he won't take his wife to Europe on vacation. You won't take me to Europe this summer. You say that it's too expensive. That proves it: you're just a miser." The statement may be true according to the wife's definition, but only according to her definition. The husband is still not necessarily a miser according to the more universally accepted definition of the word.

Fallacy of the fall. "Ever since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, man has been an imperfect being. Why try to improve the state of affairs? Man will just revert to his naturally corrupt instincts." The fallacy of the fall is an offshoot of the fallacies of equivocation and of accident. It is usually a type of rationalization for a person who doesn't want to be bothered or who doesn't want to take some decisive action. Example: There are two assistants in an office, Gail and Jim. Jim constantly arrives late to the office. One day, Gail complains. The boss remarks,

"Oh Gail, don't be too hard on Jim. No one is perfect." Then, if the boss should remark that Gail too has her faults, he would be committing the tu quoque fallacy.

Fallacy of reversion. "Why bother to repair the roads! They'll only fall into disrepair next winter and we'll just have to repair them all over again." This is another type of rationalization. People use this fallacy when they argue that it's a waste of time to do something because things will revert to their present state. Of course, this fallacy ignores that the present state, if it is not tended to, may get even worse.

Fallacy of time. "I agree that Mary has been hurt. But don't worry about it; she'll get over it. Time cures all wounds." "So the people in the suburbs are irate because we've reduced garbage collection. They'll get over it in time. Time will take care of everything." The problem here is that there is some truth to statements such as these. Time does have a way of tempering grievances. Still it is irresponsible to rationalize taking no action by leaving matters up to time.

Fallacy of the worse evil, or the resort to Pollyanna. "So you broke your leg. Cheer up! Just think, you might have lost an eye instead." "So you wrecked the car; at least you didn't hurt yourself." "So you lost your job; at least your wife is still working." Such appeals are fallacious because they ask you to consider what might have been while depreciating what actually is.

Pollyanna is a novel by Eleanor Porter. The heroine, Pollyanna, is an excessively optimistic—comically optimistic—and naïve creature who could suffer no ill without finding some good in it.

Fallacy of determination. "Don't make excuses. If you really wanted to get here on time, you would have done so." "If you really wanted to lose weight, then you'd find a way to do so." "Where there's a will, there's a way." This fallacy suggests that anything is possible. If something that you would like to happen hasn't happened, the reason that it hasn't happened is

that you haven't wanted it to happen strongly enough, i.e., you haven't tried hard enough to make it happen. The reason it hasn't happened is that you haven't been determined enough to make it happen. After all, claims this type of oversimplification, everything is possible if you just put your mind to it.

Fallacy of idealism. "You're approaching the problem all wrong. Don't threaten the students. Don't make a rule that says cheating is illegal and punishable by expulsion. Instead, meet with them and get them to realize that cheating in the long run will hurt only themselves. Then you won't need rules." "We can make it a much better world here if we just go about it the right way." "We shouldn't be thinking about the alcoholics. We should be thinking about the causes of alcoholism. If we can root out the causes of alcoholism, then we'll have really solved our problem." This type of glibness is used by those whose experience is limited and often by those whose lives have been sheltered. It is well-intentioned but hopelessly impractical. A more sensible approach to a complex problem is the one offered by Henry Peter Brougham on the subject of parliamentary reform. It is quoted by Jeremy Bentham in his Handbook of Political Fallacies:

> Looking at the House of Commons . . . my object would be to find out its chief defects and to attempt the remedy of these one by one. To propose no system, no great project, nothing which pretended even to the name of a plan, but to introduce in a temperate and conciliatory manner . . . one or two separate bills.

Fallacy of tacit agreement, or argumentum ad quietem. "No one is complaining; therefore, they all agree." The fact that you heard no dissent means neither that there is no dissent nor that the people are content. In a public meeting people may be reluctant to speak up for a variety of reasons. They may be shy; they may be afraid to make fools of themselves; they may be intimidated by other members of the group or by the

presence of people in authority; they may be frustrated from previous unsuccessful efforts at speaking up; they may be temporarily awed by previous arguments and not know how to answer those arguments; they may not have sufficient facts to justify their beliefs; they may be unwilling to call attention to themselves.

The false dilemma. Many dilemmas reflect oversimplified thinking. Two extremes are presented as if they were the only alternatives when, in fact, there are actually several alternatives between the two extremes. The formula for a dilemma is:

> If X is the case, then Y will occur.
> If A is the case, then B will occur.
> We have to choose between X or A.
> Therefore, Y or B will occur.

> If the students are honest, then we don't need an honor code.
> If the students are dishonest, then the honor code won't work.
> Students are either honest or dishonest.
> Therefore, either we don't need an honor code or an honor code won't work.
> Therefore, it's a waste of time to institute an honor code.

There are three ways of rebutting a dilemma. Sometimes all three will work, sometimes two of the three will work, and sometimes only one will work.

First, you can go between the horns. The either . . . or statement presents the horns of the dilemma, i.e., the alternatives. You show that reducing the argument to an either . . . or statement is inaccurate; you show that the two alternatives cited are not the only alternatives. In the above dilemma, you show that students are not either honest or dishonest but that there are degrees of honesty and dishonesty. "Therefore, we do not have to choose between X and Y."

Second, you can grab one of the horns. You take one of the if statements and show that it is not true. "If the students are honest, then we do need an honor code. It will encourage the honest students to exert a positive influence over the dishonest students." Or, "Your statement is not accurate. You can't talk about the students as if they were all alike. Some are honest and others are dishonest. An honor code will keep honest those who are now honest."

Third, you can present a counter-dilemma. You show that the components of the present dilemma can yield an entirely different conclusion:

If X is the case, then B will not occur.
If A is the case, then Y will not occur.
We have to choose between X or A.
Therefore, B or Y will not occur.

If the students are honest, then an honor code will work.
If the students are dishonest, then we need an honor code.
The students are either honest or dishonest.
Therefore, either an honor code will work or we need an honor code.
Therefore, we should institute an honor code.

The counter-dilemma does not prove that the dilemma is invalid. It merely illustrates that there is another way of looking at the situation.