

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Philosophy 108 Logical Fallacies

Essential tools for intelligent debate are to be able to identify and avoid *logical fallacies*. A logical fallacy is, in essence, an error of reasoning. It occurs when someone adopts a position, or tries to persuade someone else to adopt a position, based on reasoning that breaks down due to poor structure. Some logical fallacies are more common than others, and as such, have been named and defined. There are both *formal* and *informal* fallacies, but we will just take a walk through some logical fallacies and give examples to help you understand them.

Let's start with some of the more common ones that we deal with as Christians. The one you will experience the most is the **ad hominem** attack, from the Latin for "to the man" or "to the person", because the fallacy does not respond to the substance of the argument made, but it responds by attacking the character of the person making the argument. The ad hominem reasoning is not *always* fallacious however; for example, when it relates to the credibility of statements of fact. Questioning the trustworthiness of a witness is one valid method for helping to determine the truth of their claims. However many people often use this method to dismiss Biblical truth, and here is my favorite example:

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." (Richard Dawkins)

Besides being offensive and blasphemous, this statement actually commits a number of fallacies. But as an ad hominem attack on God, Dawkins is in essence saying you should not believe in God because He is so mean. (I always wonder why he is so angry about a God he argues does not exist or how that non-existent God can be mean?) We deal with this error all the time as Christians when we speak the truth in love about the truth claims of Scripture. For example:

Person 1: "You should not do that sinful thing. It is bad for you and others. Please stop and ask for and receive God's forgiveness."

Person 2: "You are a mean judgmental Christian! Do not talk to me anymore!"

Notice that this ad hominem attack also is self-defeating; judgmentally condemning you for being judgmental!

Let's look at other logical fallacies:

Faulty Cause (post hoc ergo propter hoc) mistakes a correlation or association for causation by assuming that because one thing follows another, it was caused by the other. For example: "A black cat crossed your path yesterday and, sure enough, you were involved in an accident later that same afternoon."

Sweeping Generalization (dicto simpliciter) assumes that what is true of the whole will also be true of every part, or that which is true in most instances will be true in *all* instances. This is also sometimes known as "stereotyping". For example: "They must be rich because they are members of the country club, and everybody who belongs to that club is rich."

Hasty Generalization draws a conclusion by referring to a small or unrepresentative sample. Often, a single example or instance is used as the basis for a broader generalization. This is similar to citing Anecdotal Evidence. For example: "All of those movie stars are really rude. I asked one for an autograph and he told me to get lost."

Faulty Analogy (either literal or figurative) assumes that because two things, events, or situations are alike in some known respects, that they are alike in other unknown respects. For example: Many Germans today shy away from German patriotism because they feel that... "German patriotism is equal to Nazism." The underlined part is the faulty analogy.

Appeal to Ignorance (argumentum ad ignorantiam) attempts to use an opponent's inability to disprove a conclusion as proof of the validity of the conclusion, i.e. "You can't prove I'm wrong, so I must be right." For example: "We can safely conclude that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy, because thus far no one has been able to prove that there is not." This is also known as one of the weakest forms of argumentation based on the silence of the evidence.