

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Philosophy 109 Logical Fallacies II

In this lesson we will continue to provide essential tools for intelligent debate by helping you identify and avoid logical fallacies. In essence, a logical fallacy is an error of reasoning. It occurs when someone adopts a position or tries to persuade someone else to adopt a position which is based on reasoning that breaks down due to poor structure. Logical fallacies can be classified as formal or informal, and some are more common than others. The most common ones have been named and defined; here we will take a walk through some more and give examples to help you understand them.

Bifurcation, also known as “either-or”, “black or white”, “all or nothing”, or “false dilemma”. This example assumes that two categories are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. That is, that something is either a member of one or the other category, but never both, or a member of some third category. Example: to assert, “You are either for me or against me”. There are other possibilities, of course; perhaps I am ambivalent or apathetic towards you, or maybe I have no cause to be either; if you are running for president of never-never-land, my lack of citizenship there means that I *cannot vote* in that election, so the assertion could not even apply.

Tu Quoque, also known as “look who's talking” or, “two wrongs make a right”, points to a similar wrong or error committed by another. This is used to change the topic or to point out that an argument is hypocritical. Instead of engaging the original argument, it responds to a critique with a different critique. Example: “The church should not condemn gay marriage because many people in the church cohabit or sleep around.” The fact that Christians are sinners who violate the 6th commandment has no bearing on the truth of God’s word about gay marriage. Physical intimacy belongs in monogamous, heterosexual marriage. All who violate this commandment (in whatever fashion) should seek and receive God’s forgiveness. The same is true for those involved in gay marriage.

Equivocation, also known as “complex question”, allows a key word or term in an argument to shift its meaning during the course of the argument. The result is that the conclusion of the argument is not concerned with the same thing as the premise(s) of the argument. Example: “Only man is rational. No woman is a man. Therefore, no woman is rational.” In this example, “man” has the meaning of “all mankind” the first time it is used, and “male” (gender) the second time it is used.

Begging the Question entails making an argument that contains or is based on an unstated or unproven assumption. Example: “Abortion is murder, since killing a baby is an act of murder.” While this statement is true, it begs the question, “Can the unborn properly be called babies?” A better way to state this would be, “Because it can be proved with simple biology that the unborn are, in every way, physiologically unique lives, it follows logically that abortion is murder, when murder is defined as the taking of an innocent life.” Another example, in the form of a loaded question, would be, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” This of course begs the question, “Do you beat your wife?”

Straw Man: mischaracterizing or misstating your opponent's position or arguing against a weaker, irrelevant portion of that position. Example: “mandatory seat belt laws could never be enforced. You can't issue citations to dead people”. This assumes all people who violate such a law will die because of their actions.

If you would like to read more about this topic, here are some good websites to visit: “yourlogicalfallacyis.com” or “commfaculty.fullerton.edu”.