

Logical fallacies



Logical Fallacies Logical fallacies have existed since the dawn of time. As defined by Bassham et al a logical fallacy " is an argument that contains a mistake in reasoning." With this definition one must keep in mind that the definition of an argument according to Bassham et al is " a claim put forward and defended by reasons." The ability to recognize logical fallacy will enable one to break down an argument. This ability is crucial to the critical thinking process. Logical fallacies can be broken in to two categories; Fallacies of relevance and Fallacies of insufficient evidence. According to the philosophypages web site, Fallacies of relevance " clearly fail to provide adequate reason for believing the truth of their conclusions." Fallacies such as; Staw Man, Appeal to Force (argumentum ad baculum), Appeal to Pity (argumentum ad misericordiam) and Appeal to Authority (argumentum ad verecundiam) are Fallacies of relevance whereas Appeal to Authority (argumentum ad verecundiam) and Weak Analogy are Fallacies of insufficient evidence. Fallaices of insufficient evidence are " fallacies in which the premises, though relevant to the conclusion, fail to provide sufficient evidence for the conclusion." (philosophypages, 2001) Fallacies such as Appeal to Force (argumentum ad baculum), Appeal to Pity (argumentum ad misericordiam) and Appeal to Authority (argumentum ad verecundiam) were " identified by medieval and renaissance logicians, whose Latin names for them have passed into common use." (philosophypages, 2001) The straw man fallacy occurs when a person on one side of an issue distorts the position of an opponent on the other side of an issue so that the issue can be easily attacked. The Nizkor Project says that " The Straw Man fallacy is committed when a person simply ignores a person's actual position and substitutes a distorted, exaggerated or misrepresented version of that

position." The straw man fallacy is widely used in society and is also sometimes very difficult to notice when this fallacy is being used. In fact most of us use this type of fallacy in our daily lives. Take for example, this seemingly innocent discussion between Bill and Jill about cleaning out a closet as written on the Nizkor Project web page. " Jill: We should clean out the closets. They are getting a bit messy. Bill: Why, we just went through those closets last year. Do we have to clean them out everyday? Jill: I never said anything about cleaning them out every day. You just want to keep all your junk forever, which is just ridiculous." Politicians are infamous for the use of the Straw Man fallacy as this fallacy diverts the attention of the audience from one topic to another at the blink of an eye. Here is another example from the Nizkor Project web page " Senator Jones says that we should not fund the attack submarine program. I disagree entirely. I can't understand why he wants to leave us defenseless like that." It is important that one understands how to recognize when the Straw Man fallacy is being used against him or her. Understanding when the Straw Man fallacy is being used, will give the critical thinker the ability to assess whether or not the argument is legitimate, allowing the critical thinker to make a more informed decision. If the Straw Man fallacy is not recognized the critical thinker may make a decision based on fallacious information. ` " The Appeal to Inappropriate Authority: Argument Ad Verecundiam. An argument commits the fallacy of the appeal to inappropriate authority (ad verecundiam) when the argument is based on an appeal to the opinion of someone who has no legitimate claim to authority to the topic being discussed. Clear examples of inappropriate appeal to authority appear in advertising " testimonials:" famous athletes endorsing products that have nothing to do with their area

of competence." (campus. murraystate) Much like the Straw Man fallacy the Inappropriate Appeal to Authority is commonly used in advertising. Turn to any channel on the television and one can find a product being endorsed by a celebrity. It is implied that the celebrity is an expert. One must question if the celebrity is truly an expert on the product he or she is endorsing. Take for instance Michael Jordan trying to sell underwear, or Joe Namath advertising panty hose. Is either of these sports figures experts on the product? Does either of these sports figures wear the product they are endorsing? Most likely not, however; their status makes the product appealing to the audience thereby increasing sales. Another classic example of the inappropriate appeal to authority is cited by Fallacyfiles. org. " One old television commercial for cough syrup began with an actor saying: I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." " Similarly, the actor Robert Young, who was best known for his television role as " Marcus Welby, M. D.", was a spokesman for decaffeinated coffee." Again the appeal to the audience is these spokespersons are famous. Neither of the actors are doctors yet they advertise and appear to endorse the product as if they were experts on the subject matter. One's ability to discard non-expert statement allows for fact-based decision making. This ability is a critical component of a successful professional career. The Weak analogy fallacy occurs when one compares two or more things with irrelevant similarities. We hear this all the time in the office when someone makes a comparison between things and someone refutes the comparison by saying " no that's like comparing apples and oranges." While apples and oranges are both fruit and they grow on a tree, their similarities stop there. The Logos website describes the Weak Analogy in the following way. " The fallacy of Weak analogy is committed when a

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conclusion is based on an insufficient, poor, or inadequate analogy. The analogy offered as evidence is faulty because it is irrelevant; the claimed similarity is superficial or unrelated to the issue at stake in the argument. Or the analogy may be relevant to some extent yet overlooks or ignores significant dissimilarities between the analogs." Like other fallacies, it is important that the critical thinker possess the ability to recognize this fallacy. Not recognizing the Weak Analogy fallacy could possibly lead to misdiagnosing the problem thus an incorrect solution to the miss-diagnosed problem. In the following quote presidential hopeful John Kerry compares the terrorists that committed the attacks of 911 and those terrorists that will do the U. S. harm in the future to the organized crime problem in the U. S. " We have to get back to the place we were, where terrorists are not the focus of our lives, but they're a nuisance," Kerry said. " As a former law-enforcement person, I know we're never going to end prostitution. We're never going to end illegal gambling. But we're going to reduce it, organized crime, to a level where it isn't on the rise. It isn't threatening people's lives every day, and fundamentally, it's something that you continue to fight, but it's not threatening the fabric of your life." (slantpoint) This analogy is weak at best because the people involved with organized crime in the U. S. are not threatening to kill thousands of innocent men, women and children just because we have differences of beliefs. As pointed out above, it is very important to become familiar with the logical fallacies that one might witness on a daily basis. The Straw Man, the Appeal to Inappropriate Authority and the Weak Analogy are a few of the fallacies that are commonly used. While these fallacies are not always used intentionally, the ability to recognize them will aid the critical thinker in making a more informed

decision. References Appeal to Misleading Authority. (n. d.). Retrieved April 17, 2006, from <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/authorit.html> Bassham, G., Irwin, W., Nardone, H., & Wallace, J. M., (2002). Critical Thinking: A Student's Introduction. (Chapter 5). Boston: McGraw-Hill. Fallacies of Relevance. (n. d.). Retrieved April 17, 2006, from <http://campus.murraystate.edu/academic/faculty/franklin.robinson/FALLACIESOFRELEVANCE.htm> Fallacies of Relevance. (n. d.). Retrieved April 17, 2006, from <http://www.philosophypages.com/lg/e06a.htm> Logic Fallacies of Weak Induction. (2004, February 26). Retrieved April 17, 2006, from http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/logic/fallacies_wi.shtml Nizkor Project. (n. d.). Fallacy: Straw Man. Retrieved April 17, 2006, from <http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/straw-man.html>