

Critique of being logical

Philosophy



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Being Logical: A Guide to Good Thinking by D. Q. McInerney is an introduction to the science and art of thinking and living logically. The 129-page guide was published in 2005 by Random House Trade Paperbacks and can be purchased for around ten dollars. The author D. Q. McInerney is currently a professor at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Lincoln, Nebraska and has written a variety of pieces on religious philosophy to include Philosophical Psychology, and an article on the use of contraception. In the words of McInerney, “ Logic is the very backbone of true education” (McInerney, 2005, p. x). Yet in the Preface, he goes on to say “ To my mind, logic is the missing piece of the American educational system, the subject that informs every other subject from English to history to science and math” (McInerney, 2005, p. ix). In his book McInerney attempts to guide his readers through the process of seeing the world and evaluating their circumstances in an objective and critical manner. Ultimately he aims to instill an intrinsic need for truth gained through logic that his readers will utilize in everyday life.

Being logical consists of five sections, the first three serve as a foundation for logical thinking. They consist of Preparing the Mind for Logic, The Basic Principles of logic and Argument – the Language of Logic. The last two sections, The Sources of Illogical Thinking and The Principal Forms of Illogical Thinking put the foundations of logic into action by pointing out errors that one may make while attempting sound logic. The last two sections, specifically section five synthesizes the material previously covered in the book by defining the ways in which reasoning can go awry.

McInerney wrote of 28 principal forms of illogical thinking. The eleven most notable forms of illogical thinking can be grouped by their basic causes: a

basic misinterpretation of language and arrival at a conclusion through illogical processes, a lack of critical thinking or attention to the matter at hand, and finally, purposefully misleading and manipulative argumentation. Undistributed middle, begging the question and inability to disprove does not prove all occur when one misinterprets the language of an argument or comes to a conclusion through an illogical process.

According to McInerney Undistributed middle occurs when one falsely attributes traits to the conclusion based on a term or statement in the premise that is not universal or always true. For example, many elite marathon runners are Kenyan. Aallyah is Kenyan therefore she is an elite marathoner. Similar to undistributed middle, begging the question is when a statement seems like an argument that proves the conclusion when in truth the assertion is simply stated twice in different words. There is not actually any supporting evidence to prove the assertion.

For example, because Jimmy goes to the gym on a regular basis, Jimmy has good physical fitness. Another form of illogical thinking is the assertion that the inability to disprove something in effect proves it. For example, just because one cannot disprove the existence of a higher power or God, does not prove that God exists. It is a matter that has not been proven or disproven therefore it is simply a matter of faith or opinion not at all based in logical fact. Abusing tradition, democratic fallacy and abuses of expertise all stem from lack of critical thinking, attention to the matter at hand or weak-minded group think.

Sometimes tradition is followed simply because it is the way things have always been regardless of its logical merit or usefulness. Conversely, a sound

tradition is often abandoned simply for the sake of innovation. Both of these failures in logic are forms of using and abusing tradition. The quality of a tradition should be judged on its merit and effectiveness not simply its longevity. The Democratic Fallacy occurs when a conclusion or opinion is held as true simply because the majority believes it. For example, society used to believe that the world was flat and the sun revolved around the earth, which is obviously a false assertion.

The use of an expert opinion can be very powerful in an argument as long as the expert backs up his or her opinion with fact and concrete rational. If one asserts that a specific conclusion is true simply based on the fact that an expert says so, they are not in essence proving their assertion at all because they aren't making an argument, they are simply making a statement. If a lawyer in a murder trial placed an expert witness on the stand, and simply asked them "in your expert opinion, did the defendant committed the offence" they would be abusing expertise and not actually presenting any argument at all.

If the lawyer asked the expert to explain the evidence and why it leads to the conclusion, then he or she would be presenting a good argument. In section five McNerny points out that it is essential to be aware of purposefully misleading and manipulative argumentation when attempting to logically analyze a situation. Ad hominem, red herring, straw man, false dilemma and simplistic reasoning are all ways in which one can manipulate an audience incorrectly. Ad hominem and red herring are both forms of false reasoning in which one plays on the emotions of the audience to manipulate them.

The ad hominem fallacy is when one responds to the individual making an argument, using information irrelevant to the argument to gain emotional control over the audience and sway them against the opponent. If one is discussing a topic with someone they dislike and rather than analyzing the others argument, they simply attack the other personally, the attacking individual is guilty of the Ad Hominem Fallacy. The opinion of the audience can be changed solely on their emotional response to the individual making the argument not on the logic of their position.

The red herring fallacy is much like the ad hominem fallacy in that they both divert the audience's attention from the actual issue being argued. In this fallacy, one interjects inflammatory information aimed at distracting and swaying a specific audience base solely on their emotions. This ploy is seen constantly in debates for political office. The paradox between public approval of the death penalty and disapproval of abortion is one that is seen frequently in political debate. In this example the opinion of specific majorities seem to be swayed more by emotional and religious appeals than consistent logic.

One may play to the emotional image of an innocent baby being murdered, saying that humans cannot play God per say and that it isn't our right to choose. While in the latter instance they can play on the image of an evil murderous criminal needing to be punished for his or her actions, and completely disregard the original assertion that it is not right for humans to play God. Straw man, false dilemma and simplistic reasoning are all ways in which one can manipulate their audience not by emotional appeals but by somehow falsifying a specific aspect of the situation being analyzed.

Straw Man Fallacy is when one purposefully misinterprets another's argument in order to weaken it. If one realized that they were wrong, yet pretended to misinterpret the other person's argument to evade admitting that their argument is inferior they would be committing the Straw Man Fallacy. A false dilemma occurs when one analyzes a question or situation on the false pretext that there are only two options when, in fact, there are many possibilities. A historic example of a false dilemma can be seen in the political and social drama surrounding the United States decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

According to a Pew Research Center poll in 2003 over 71 percent of Americans were proponents of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Keeter, 2007). This sentiment was furthered by emotional patriotism brought on by September 11th, which led to the attitude of "you are either for us or against us". Although many Americans viewed the situation as a dilemma, there were many other options at the government's disposal that could have utilized other forms of national power and influence. Simplistic reasoning is the act of simplifying a complex situation or reality so much that its true meaning is altered and the truth is lost.

Parents often use simplistic reasoning when answering their children's complex questions about life. Often when a child asks where they came from, a parent will respond with a myriad of simplistic stories. These responses are completely untrue but the parent wants to protect the child from the truth that they feel is inappropriate and may also think the child won't understand the complexities of procreation. Simplistic reasoning in this

instance may be justified, however when it is used to manipulate or shelter adult audiences it is a gross misrepresentation of the truth.

In section five, McInerney succeeds at highlighting the many ways in which attempted logic can fail. He defines each form of illogical thinking with brevity and in terms any reader can understand. Awareness of these possible mistakes will assuredly help readers follow more logical thought processes and avoid illogical thinking. The first three chapters of the book however, are not as helpful or pertinent. McInerney starts out by explaining the close relationship between language and logic, stating that they are in fact “inseparable” (McInerney, 2005, p. 3).

Conscious thought is indeed dictated by language. One can have feelings and emotions without language but when one realizes an actual cognitive thought, they think it in words. McInerney states that the “concrete expression of logical reasoning is the argument” (McInerney, 2005, p. 47). Thus he spends a great deal of time detailing and defining the basic structure and function of the English language and the language of an argument. He caveats these first three sections by saying that “readers might be put off by what they perceive to be an emphasis upon the obvious.

I do, in fact, place a good deal of stress on the obvious in this book, and that is quite deliberate. In logic, as in life, it is the obvious that most often bears emphasizing, because it so easily escapes our notice” (McInerney, 2005, p. x).

Although language and our use of it holds a symbiotic relationship with logic, McInerney spends 88 uninspired pages defining and over complicating aspects of language that are, as he says, obvious. Instead of putting his readers to sleep by dissecting and defining the rudimentary construct of the

English language, he could have emphasized the importance of paying attention to obvious details.

Using interesting historical examples of either sound logic or attempted logic gone awry would make a much more memorable impact. Instead, readers feel as though they are wading through the sludge of an SAT or ACT preparatory guide. Ultimately, McInerny succeeds in writing a basic guide to the science of logic however; *Being Logical: A Guide to Good Thinking* does not inspire readers to internalize a desire for truth gained through the art of logical thinking.

The book is a dry and simplistic analysis of logic that lacks any inspiring or memorable real world examples that a reader could call upon while logically navigating their everyday life. References Keeter, S. (2007). Trends in Public Opinion About the War in Iraq, 2003-2007. Retrieved October 3, 2011 from Pew Research Center Publications: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/431/trends-in-public-opinion-about-the-war-in-iraq-2003-2007>. McInerny, D. Q. (2005). *Being Logical: A Guide to Good Thinking*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.