

FALLACIES OF MORAL REASONING

Fallacies of moral reasoning are logically incorrect ways of reasoning that attempt to persuade emotionally or psychologically. During classroom discussions and in issue-related essays, we will labor to identifying and exposing such fallacies, in the positions articulated in our readings, in-class during our discussions, as well as in our written work.

Study the following fallacies and be ready to identify them when you see or hear them:

- I. **Ambiguity:** When we use a word or phrase in such a way that it is not clear, or can be taken in more than one way.

- II. **Genetic Fallacies:** These are called "abusive" because they attack the something about the source "or genesis" of the argument, instead of dealing with the merits of the argument itself. E.g.: saying a proposal "smacks of socialism" is not dealing with the proposal itself. It is always fallacious to attack an argument because of its source.

- III. ***Ad hominem*** (is Latin for "to the man"): This attacks the person instead of the person's argument. E.g.: In response to somebody saying they didn't feel right about participating in a demonstration against discrimination, some one responded, "You're a fascist without any moral sense, you just want to perpetuate racism." Or if an energy consultant accused opponents of a nuclear power plant of being "wild-eyed fanatics." Or is it is said that anyone who opposes administration policy is a "communist dupe."
 - A. Such tactics are often successful in drawing attention away from reasoned arguments.

- IV. **Invincible ignorance:** Insists on the legitimacy of an idea despite contradictory facts. The phrase "I don't care what you say" is a dead giveaway. E.g., "It doesn't matter what anybody thinks, abortion is wrong."

- V. **Questionable Claim:** is a statement that cannot stand up to scrutiny, because it is too broad a claim. Superlatives (phrases including adjectives or adverbs like always, never, best, worst) are often indicators of questionable claims.
 - A. E.g., Every time someone is executed, violent crime decreases, therefore, capital punishment works. (Or even): Executions reduce crime is an empirically questionable claim.

- VI. **Straw Man:** Changing another person's position/argument into a form that is easier to attack. (The metaphor is about setting up a "straw man" argument and then knocking it down.)
- VII. **Is / Ought:** Trying to derive a moral statement from a factual statement. Assuming because something is, it ought to be.
- VIII. **Inconsistency:** Contradicting one's own argument.
- IX. **Begging the question:** answering the question with a question or a variation of the same question; or just assuming that a statement what must be proved is true, in such a way as to make it seem more plausible.
- A. Circular arguments: e.g. How do you know God exists? Because the Bible says so. How do you know the Bible speaks truth? Because it is inspired by God.
- X. **Argument from ignorance:** Insists a argument is true unless it is proved false, or false until proved true. "Since there is no clear evidence that [someone] knew about the bribe, he must be innocent."
- XI. **Appeal to authority:**
- A. 80% of Americans polled are against abortion, so it clearly is wrong.
- B. The President has more information than we do, so he must have good reason for his decision.
- XII. **Provincialism:** Sees things exclusively through the eyes of one's own group, organization, nation, etc. (Most moral arguments that emphasize the protection of one's own preferred group fall into this fallacy.)
- XIII. **Hasty conclusion:** Moral conclusions based on insufficient evidence:
- A. E.g., conclusions based on anecdotal instead of thoroughly researched views of the facts. Often includes a failure to consider pertinent and available science.
- XIV. **Two wrongs make a right:** Everybody is doing it. The statement to the cop: Why don't you chase and ticket that other vehicle – it was going faster than I was.
- XV. **Fallacies of Faulty Causation:**
- A. **Causal oversimplification:** Correlation does not = causation. Association does not mean that something has a causal impact.

- B. **Slippery slope:** if one particular undesirable thing happens, it will inevitably lead to an even worse consequence, will lead to yet another worse consequence, and so on, on a “slippery slope” to some horror. It is the inevitability of the assumption that is fallacious; these are also forms of the questionable claim fallacy.
1. E.g.: If you take that first drink you will become a destitute drunk.

For more sites about fallacies:

<http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/>

Consider, also, these thoughts from “Moral Reasoning in Applied Ethics” by the philosopher Keith Allen Korcz, at <http://www.uclou.louisiana.edu/~kak7409/MoralReasoning.html>. Korcz concluded his reflection with these thoughts:

What is the point of moral reasoning? Well, we can think of moral reasoning as a tool and, like any tool, there are lots of ways it can be used.

One thing it can be used for is discovering truths. People who use moral reasoning to try to discover truths begin with a certain view about morality. One component of that view is that there are moral truths to begin with. A second component is that moral truths, like truths about math or physics, can be discovered by careful reasoning and, in some cases, in part by observing the way things are in the world.

Note that using moral reasoning to discover moral truths is different from using moral reasoning to persuade others that their moral claims are correct. Someone can try to discover a moral truth simply for the sake of satisfying their own curiosity or contributing to scholarship in the field without trying to convince everyone that they are correct. This is the same sort of thing a biologist trying to understand the genetic code of an obscure snail might be trying to do. The biologist isn't trying to persuade the world at large about snails; rather the goal is to contribute to the scholarship of biology and/or satisfy his or her own curiosity.

Moral philosophers try to influence public opinion on moral issues about as frequently as biologists try to influence public opinion, which is to say, not very often. Many professionals feel that moral philosophers, biologists and such are failing to fulfill a professional responsibility when they don't do a good job of informing the public about the results of their research. For instance, some biologists have criticized their own

profession for failing to adequately inform the public that research has established that the evolution of species is a fact accepted by virtually all competent professionals in the field, with the result that, for example, 47% of adult Americans polled in 1993 favored creationism over evolution.² Aside from whether the critics are right, the point is that the vast majority of what professional philosophers do has nothing to do with trying to change the views of the public at large.

It is possible to try to use moral reasoning to persuade the public at large, but such argumentation is unlikely to be effective. One reason for this is that moral reasoning is aimed at proving or disproving claims, and claims are things which are believed. But a person's beliefs, the social psychologists tell us, have little to do with their behavior. Some studies have found that a person's expressed beliefs are likely to account for less than 10% of their behavior. Rather, our behavior is far more influenced by emotions and social pressures, many of which we are not even aware.

Of course, many people, especially those who are well educated, do at least make an attempt to believe according to reason. But even they are highly vulnerable to various social pressures and emotions. When we are influenced by these pressures and emotions, we often respond to reasoned argumentation by trying to avoid the issue or change the subject, by nodding and agreeing with a claim we think is false in order to avoid conflict, by appealing to clichés (e.g., "Everyone has a right to their own opinion"), or even by getting angry. We all, on one occasion or another, convince ourselves that these kinds of defense mechanisms are justified and correct, rather than realizing that what we have done is simply ignored the issues in question.

In short, moral reasoning will not change the world. At best, it will persuade a few persons who either don't have a strong emotional investment in the issue in question, or who can keep their reasoning and emotional lives sufficiently separated to recognize the merits of a good argument. This may seem like a very small thing to achieve, but if those whose opinions you can change are those whose opinions you deeply respect, the results can be quite rewarding.

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