

Critical Thinking

Session Three

Fallacies I: Problems to do with the Source



Rough Definition of 'Fallacy'

A Fallacy is a bad argument which may nonetheless be psychologically persuasive.

Two Projects in the Study of Fallacies

Project 1: Diagnosing the flaws in fallacies of various kinds (why they are bad arguments).

Project 2: Considering why fallacies of various kinds are psychologically persuasive (why they can seem like good arguments).

Ad hominem Arguments

The Ad hominem Fallacy

An ad hominem argument is fallacious when what is being attacked is somebody's argument. One tries to discredit the argument by attacking the source of the argument instead of the argument itself.

First flavour: *Argumentum ad hominem abusive*

The fallacy of calling into question some features of the arguer's appearance, demeanour, deportment or general character, where these features are irrelevant to the quality of the arguer's reasoning.

Example

Colin Craig thinks parents should be able to smack their children as part of a good parental correction measure, but Colin Craig is also the kind of person who thinks the Moon Landings might have been faked.

Second flavour: Circumstantial

Calling into question some features of the arguer's circumstances or views rather than discussing the quality of the arguer's reasoning.

Example

Peter Dunne argues against the plain packaging of cigarettes, but Dunne has taken gifts and hospitality from Big Tobacco. True, a lot of other politicians have as well, and Dunne does have amazing hair, but he's hardly an objective observer, is he? We can discount Peter Dunne's contributions to this debate.

Third Flavour: Tu quoque (Latin for 'you too')

Pointing out an inconsistency between the arguer's argument and the arguer's other attitudes or actions and concluding that, because of said inconsistency, the argument must be bad.

Example

You argue vehemently and persuasively that I shouldn't leak sensitive private data to the press, but I won't have a bar of it! You leak sensitive private data to your pet journalists all the time!

Not all ad hominem arguments are fallacious

i. An ad hominem argument which is used to discredit somebody's testimony about a matter of fact rather than somebody's argument might be a good argument.

ii. An ad hominem argument may simply be directed against a person, without trying to discredit any argument or testimony offered by that person. Such an argument may be good or bad. It depends on whether the personal attack is relevant to the conclusion of the argument.

Example of a legitimate ad hominem argument

You believe that violent offenders ought to face longer prison sentences, but you should not believe that because you have conducted a lot of research showing that violent offenders can only be rehabilitated by being integrated into their own communities. It is good research and you always say that you believe the results of it, so you should give up your belief in longer sentences.

Inverse ad hominem Argument

The Inverse ad hominem Fallacy

Instead of attacking the source of an argument and then claiming that the argument is bad (as in the ad hominem fallacy), one praises the source of an argument and then claims (fallaciously) that the argument is therefore good.

Example

We had a very smartly-dressed, well-spoken young woman in here yesterday and she explained why we needed a new water cooler in the staff kitchen. She obviously put a lot of time into her presentation and was very interested in what we are trying to achieve here, so I reckon we should follow her advice and make the purchase.

A legitimate inverse ad hominem

The Anglican Church has recently claimed that, prior to the arrival of Christian Missionaries the indigenous populations of the Polynesian Archipelago did not physically discipline their children. They could easily have just ignored or covered up this fact as the information they have offered this would reflect poorly on their organisation.

Appealing to Authority

An Appeal to Authority is an argument in which the reason given for inferring the conclusion is that some expert endorses it.

An appeal to authority is legitimate (non-fallacious) if the following four conditions are all met:

- (a) The person appealed to is a genuine authority in a field relevant to the truth of the conclusion;
- (b) There is substantial agreement among experts in that field that the view endorsed is correct;
- (c) The expert is testifying honestly
- (d) The expert opinion is not being used as a reason for rejecting somebody's argument

If any one of these conditions is not met, the appeal to authority is fallacious.

Fallacious Appeal to Authority

Dr. Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and Humanist denies the existence of God. Therefore, we too should accept that God does not exist.

Legitimate Appeal to Authority Example

My doctor, and every doctor I have ever been to, recommends that people should not take up smoking and if they do smoke, they should quit. So one should not smoke.

Is the following a legitimate Appeal to Authority?

World-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking has suffered from the debilitating effects of Lewy Garick's disease for many years now. He says that the condition of the universe at the time of the big bang was more highly ordered than it is today. In view of Hawking's stature in the scientific community, we should conclude that he is probably right.

Two interesting subspecies of fallacious appeal to authority are:

- i. Appeal to popularity, or appeal to consensus:
An argument that because most people believe X, X must be true.
- ii. Appeal to traditional wisdom: An argument that because X has been believed for a long time, X must be true.

Example of fallacious Appeal to Popularity

Anybody who still believes that prison acts as a deterrence to violent offenders is clearly deluded because hardly anybody believes that anymore!

A fallacious Appeal to Traditional Wisdom

I will continue to support the Labour Party; all of my family have been socialists and unionists and they voted for Labour, so I will too!

Red Herring Fallacies

A red herring fallacy is an example of an argument which contains a premise which is irrelevant with respect to the truth of the conclusion of the argument but has been put forward as a reason for believing the conclusion to follow from the premises.

Example of a Red Herring Fallacy

I feel that I deserve a warrant for my car. If I do not get a warrant, then I will not be able to drive my Mother to the hospital, and if I can't drive my Mother to the hospital it is quite possible that we will never know what is wrong with her, which is both inconvenient for her and a cause of concern for the family as a whole.

Red Herring Fallacy Example

There is a good deal of talk these days about the need to eliminate pesticides from our fruits and vegetables. But many of these foods are essential to our health. Carrots are an excellent source of vitamin A; broccoli is rich in iron; oranges and grapefruits have lots of vitamin C.

Redundant, irrelevant premises

Arguments which contain irrelevant premises are *not necessarily* examples of Red Herring fallacies.

Such arguments are not red herring fallacies because they do contain premises whose truth is relevant to the conclusion, but they also contain extra premises which add nothing to the argument.

These premises are irrelevant because they do not help to support the conclusion. The irrelevant premises may be true, but truth does not automatically bring relevance with it.

Irrelevant Premises Example 1

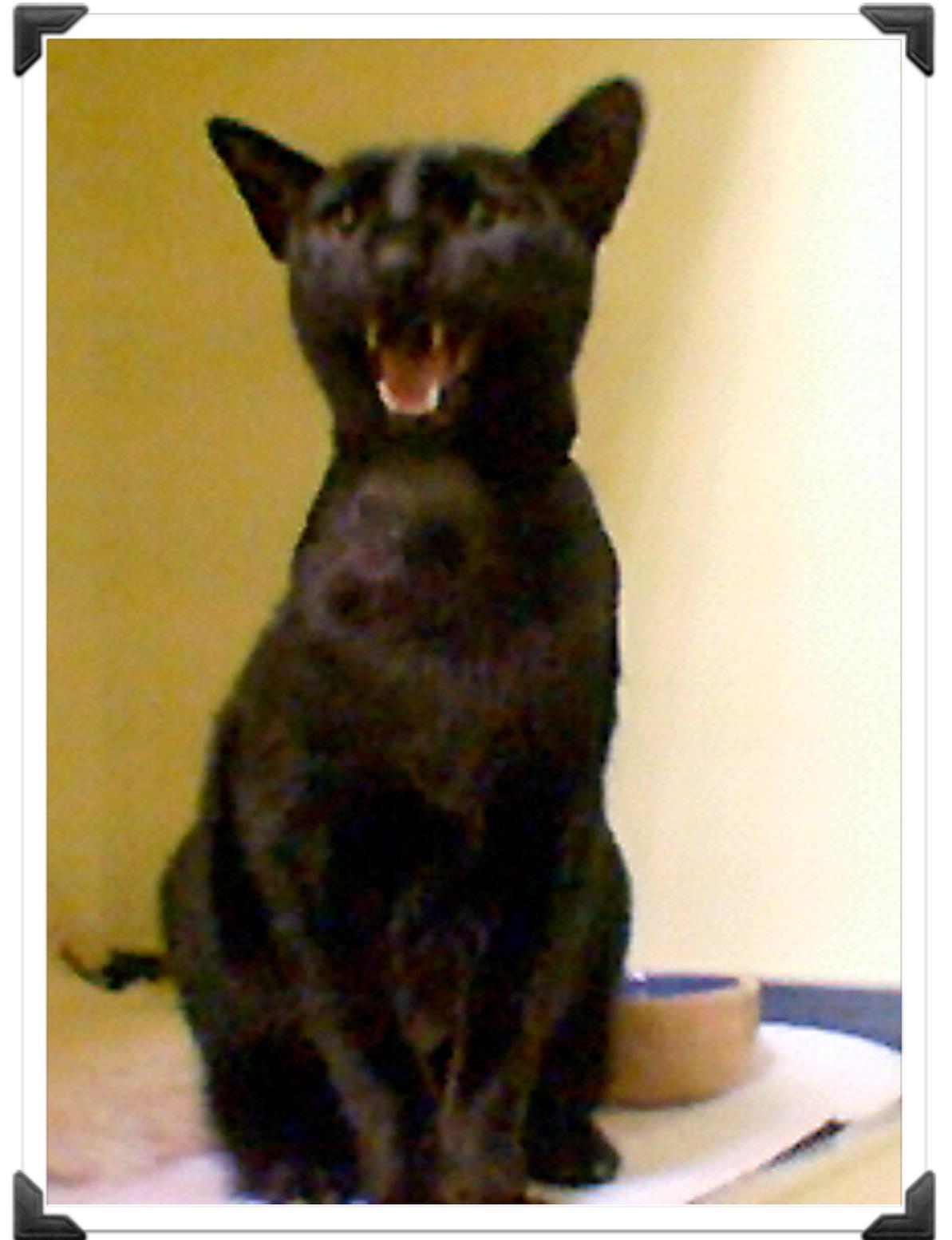
P1. Lek is a cat.

P2. All cats like to hide in boxes.

P3. Some dogs also like to hide in boxes.

Therefore,

C. Lek likes to hide in boxes.



Irrelevant Premises Example 2

We should all agree that it is the case that not all students are being treated equally. For those of you who are unsure as to why, here are the principle reasons to believe that conclusion. Now, all students should have equal access to lecture theatres and tutorial classrooms, and some of the tutorials students might attend are in room L101. It is the case that L101 does not have any wheelchair access. If a lecture theatre or tutorial room lacks wheel-chair access, then students in wheel-chairs and students not in wheel-chairs are not being treated equally, which is to say that not all students are being treated equally.

Irrelevant Premises Example 2

P1. All students should be treated equally.

P2. All students should have equal access to lecture theatres and tutorial classrooms.

P3. Some tutorials are held in L101.

P4. L101 does not have wheelchair access.

P5. If a lecture or tutorial room lacks wheel-chair access, then students in wheel-chairs and students not in wheel-chairs are not being treated equally.

Therefore,

C. Not all students are treated equally.

Simpler reconstruction

P3`. Some tutorials are held in L101.

P4`. L101 does not have wheelchair access.

P5`. If a lecture or tutorial room lacks wheel-chair access, then students in wheel-chairs and students not in wheel-chairs are not being treated equally.

Therefore,

C`. Not all students are treated equally.

Irrelevant Premises Example 3

The new TripleUp burger, made of three Kobe beef fillets, two bacon rashers, cheddar, Parmesan and cream cheese might just be the taste explosion you've never realized you need. Now, some nutritionists have said that the TripleUp is a heart-attack waiting to happen, but the TripleUp is no unhealthier for you than most other burgers on the market. Run, don't walk, to your nearest TripleUp stockist today!

Here we are told:

Hicks is guilty

Why should we believe this? Because:

The Americans have a good reason for detaining
Hicks

Why should we believe that:

The Americans have a good reason for detaining
Hicks?

Because:

Hicks is guilty

The Fallacy of Begging the Question

A question-begging argument includes, implicitly or explicitly, its conclusion as one of its premises.

Such arguments pass the logical task because the conclusion is just a restatement of one of the premises.

However, a question-begging argument should not persuade anybody since to be persuaded by the argument one must believe all its premises and this means already believing the conclusion.

All question-begging arguments are fallacious.