Fallacies and Argument Appraisal

Christopher W. Tindale

CRITICAL REASONING AND ARGUMENTATION

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FALLACIES AND ARGUMENT APPRAISAL

Fallacies and Argument Appraisal presents an introduction to the nature, identification, and causes of fallacious reasoning, along with key questions for evaluation. Drawing from the latest work on fallacies as well as some of the standard ideas that have remained relevant since Aristotle, Christopher W. Tindale investigates central cases of major fallacies in order to understand what has gone wrong and why. Dispensing with the approach that simply assigns labels and brief descriptions, Tindale provides fuller treatments that recognize the dialectical and rhetorical contexts in which fallacies arise.

This volume analyzes major fallacies through accessible, everyday examples. Critical questions are developed for each fallacy to help the student identify them and provide considered evaluations.

Christopher W. Tindale is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor in Canada. He is coeditor of the journal *Informal Logic: Reasoning and Argumentation in Theory and Practice*, author of *Acts of Arguing: A Rhetorical Model of Argument* and *Rhetorical Argumentation*, and coauthor of *Good Reasoning Matters*, third edition.

CRITICAL REASONING AND ARGUMENTATION

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This series is aimed at introductory students in the field of argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking. Informed by research in linguistics, communication, artificial intelligence, and pragmatics, as well as philosophy, books in this series are up to date in method and presentation, particularly in their emphasis on dialogue and rhetoric, which contrasts with the traditional "go it alone" approach. Each book is designed for use in a one-semester course and includes exercises.

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For Jonathan

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Preface

> The philosophy of reasoning, to be complete, ought to comprise the theory of bad as well as of good reasoning.
>
> – John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*

This latest addition to the Cambridge series in Critical Reasoning and Argumentation is a study of bad reasoning, principally as conveyed through traditional and modern fallacies. While the study of fallacies has a long and detailed history, the bulk of critical literature on the fallacies has appeared in the last three or four decades. So much that is new and interesting can be drawn into a full study of the fallacies. The rationale behind this volume is to introduce students to the study of fallacy by means of the latest research in the field, along with some of the standard ideas that have remained relevant since the time of Aristotle. Thus, each topic and fallacy is couched within a discussion of current thinking, providing the clearest explanation possible of both what goes wrong in some of the more prevalent patterns of fallacious reasoning and why arguers and audiences might be misled by such errors.

One thing the recent literature has made very clear is that fallacies are far more complex, and thus deserving of much fuller

analyses, than the traditional textbook treatments have suggested. Too often, fallacies are assigned a label and a brief description, along with an admonition to students to avoid such mistakes in their own reasoning. Not only is this insufficient as a treatment of any fallacy, but such an approach also fails to raise the question of how fallacious reasoning might come about in the first place and why it might prove so deceptive. Two things have reinforced the recognition of how complex fallacies really are: The first of these is the appreciation, now fully expressed in the literature, that many of the fallacies are failed instances of good argument schemes or forms. Hence, we cannot dismiss all *ad hominem* arguments or Slippery Slopes, for example, because there are circumstances under which such reasoning is appropriate. What is required, then, is a careful review of the differences between good and bad instances of such schemes. The label/description approach does not allow for this. The second feature that reveals the complexity of fallacious reasoning is the recognition that to evaluate fallacies fully we need to consider aspects of the context in which the argumentation arises. In many instances this involves the details of a dialogue between participants in an argumentative exchange. In other cases we must sift through what is available of the background to a dispute, such as the history of exchanges between the participants or the beliefs of the audience. This brings into consideration dialectical and rhetorical features crucial to understanding and evaluating fallacies and shows that the study involves more than a traditional logical assessment of the propositions involved. It is also important to consider these features when asking how the fallacious reasoning can come about and prove so effective.

Appreciating this complexity further helps explain why we should study the fallacies at all. One response might be that we should simply ignore them, since they demonstrate failures of human reason and do not contribute to our important social debates. But it is because of these things that we are advised to be

particularly alert to the presence and nature of fallacies. And if we are to do that, we should give them serious consideration and not relegate them to the status of minor topics touched on in passing. From my own perspective, this recognition has brought about a change of view. Although I was persuaded for a long time that the focus of the study of argumentation should be on good reasoning, the complexity of the fallacies and their interesting rhetorical features have convinced me that a more balanced treatment is important and that, as Mill reminds us, a complete appreciation of argumentation will involve accounts of both good and bad reasoning. The study of fallacies, then, is an important part of a whole approach to argumentation – the more so because it is so revealing of how we actually reason. As with many other activities in which we engage (like reading, writing, or calculation), the norm becomes so commonplace that we fail to notice it and learn from it. It is only when we are confronted with a breakdown of those norms that our attention is caught. In many ways fallacies are breakdowns of the norms of reasoning, and through their study we gain a better understanding of ourselves as reasoners and as members of audiences in social settings.

The approach taken to the fallacies in this book tries to match the seriousness and complexity presented in the foregoing paragraphs. This means in the first instance that I have tried as much as possible to illustrate the fallacies through cases of ordinary reasoning that can arise or have arisen in everyday contexts. We will see less of arguments expressed in just a few lines than of detailed reasoning embedded in larger contexts. The more broad contexts we provide and the more we say about them, the more we may be able to understand what has gone wrong and why. You will certainly find the examples in the exercises at the ends of the later chapters more detailed than some of those earlier in the book. This greater complexity reflects the expected growth of ability and understanding that students should develop as they work through

the book. The examples that illustrate fallacies are also presented by means of cases, since cases have a history and a context, involve people, and have consequences. While we will develop principles for dealing with the fallacies studied, any instance or suspected instance of one should be treated as a unique case, assessed on its own terms, since not all ideas associated with a fallacy may apply to any particular case. In this respect, the treatments again reflect what will be encountered outside an academic setting.

Given the conciseness of the book and its introductory nature, some decisions have had to be made about which fallacies to include and which to exclude. In general, I have tried to include the most regularly occurring patterns of fallacious reasoning. A secondary consideration has been given to those that are important historically because of what they illustrate about the nature of fallacies and why people both commit and are deceived by them. The book is designed to work as a companion to Douglas Walton's *Fundamentals of Critical Argumentation*, although it should also work with other good introductions to argumentation or in courses dedicated to the separate study of fallacies. The principal tool used to treat the fallacies is a set of Critical Questions for each. These questions are designed to help the reasoner think through the complexities of a given case, identifying what is at stake and what has gone wrong, and then focusing on the right features to provide a full evaluation.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the encouragement and interest of the late Terry Moore at Cambridge. I hope the final product reflects well as part of his legacy. He will be deeply missed.

My thinking about the fallacies and how they might best be treated has been influenced by a large number of people researching and writing in the field. The debts will be evident in the discussions and references of each chapter. I am particularly indebted

to Douglas Walton and Hans V. Hansen for their work as editors of this series and for their own contributions to the understanding of fallacies, the influences of which will be apparent. I have also gained much from recent discussions and written exchanges with Andreas Welzel on the causes of fallacious reasoning and the nature of fallacies as norm violations. During periods of writing over the last few years I have benefited from interactions with a number of students, particularly those at Trent University in my senior seminar on the fallacies. Finally, my former assistant, Daniel Farr, researched many of the examples used in the body of chapters and in exercises. I was indeed fortunate to have had such interested and able help.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study of Fallaciousness

1 Strong and Weak Arguments

Arguments have a range of types and employ a diversity of devices, from those that press a historical case using causal reasoning to those that recommend an economic course of action by appealing to an authority in the field. They will be characterized by a particular structure, where one or more statements (premises) are given in support of a conclusion, and a range of intentions: to persuade an audience, to resolve a dispute, to achieve agreement in a negotiation, to recommend an action, or to complete an inquiry. Because of these different intentions, arguments arise in different contexts that are part of the argumentative situation. Arguments also have a range of strengths, from those that conform to the principles of good reasoning to those that commit some of the more abysmal errors we will be considering in this book. In between are degrees of strength and weakness. In fact, many arguments of a more extended nature will admit of merits and demerits that can make our judgment about the overall quality of the reasoning quite difficult. A 'fallacy' is a particular kind of egregious error, one that seriously undermines the power of reason in an argument

by diverting it or screening it in some way. But a more precise definition is difficult to give and depends on a range of considerations. One famous definition of 'fallacy' that C. L. Hamblin derives from the Aristotelian tradition states: "A fallacious argument, as almost every account from Aristotle onwards tells you, is one that *seems to be valid* but *is not* so."[1] This raises three central questions about the definition: Are fallacies all and only arguments, because Hamblin's definition is strictly speaking a definition of "fallacious argument"? Are fallacies all a matter of validity, which seems to restrict matters to the relations between the parts of an argument? And are fallacies detected through their psychological effect, because if they *seem* valid they must seem so to someone?

To begin addressing these questions and considering the kinds of problematic reasoning that may be elevated (or demoted) to the status of 'fallacy' we will adopt the approach that will be standard in future chapters and explore two cases:

Case 1A

This is from a letter sent to *Scientific American* (January 2, 2002) and it concerns the so-called Lomborg affair, a controversy that erupted in major scientific publications after Bjørn Lomborg published his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, in which he challenged many 'orthodoxies' of the environmental movement.

In the 1970s there was a lot of excitement over two books: one theorized that our planet had been visited by friendly aliens who had helped our ancestors with all kinds of "impossible" achievements, including the building of the pyramids; another proposed paranormal explanations for the Bermuda Triangle, complete with "irrefutable" evidence. I can't remember the titles of these books or the authors' names, but I do remember watching one of them being interviewed on television. Although the interviewer was definitely hostile, the author

[1] Charles L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 12.

remained confident and self-assured. After 15 minutes or so of well-informed questioning, however, the interviewer had effectively boxed his guest into a corner. At which point the still smiling, recently successful author finally stated, "If I'd said it that way, I probably wouldn't have sold many books."

As far as Lomborg and his book go, I don't think we need look any further than the above statement. Also, growing up and going to school in Cambridge, England, I am extremely disappointed that Lomborg's book was published by Cambridge University Press. I just hope they realize how they have tarnished their reputation by publishing such a work. I think a more suitable vehicle would have been the checkout stand at the local supermarket, which thrives on misinformation and distorted facts.

While the author addresses his comments to the editor of the periodical, his audience will be the general readership. In later chapters we will want to think about the kinds of beliefs and expectations audiences hold and how they may be predisposed to receive or challenge the ideas presented to them. Here we are primarily interested in the position or thesis that the author is promoting and the case he is making for it, because it is in the case that we see a strategy of argument being employed.

Clearly, the writer is antagonistic toward Lomborg's book. He is dismissing its merit as a serious work, judging it rather as a sensationalistic book. He makes this point implicitly rather than explicitly by associating it with two earlier sensationalistic books that made claims about aliens and the Bermuda Triangle. So the case for dismissing Lomborg's work involves associating it with two works that have already been dismissed. They have been judged, we might say, as "guilty" of being nonserious, unscientific work, and the present writer's strategy is to transfer this guilt to Lomborg and his book. Now, sometimes associations do exist and what holds for some partners in an association can be reasonably transferred to others. But we must be given reasons for believing both that an association exists and that a transfer of guilt is relevant. In this

argument, no such attempt is made. Thus, the reasoning is weak and the conclusion is not supported. Moreover, in this case we have an identifiable strategy of argument that analysts have judged to be fallacious. The fallacy in question is Guilt by Association. You can see further that the same strategy is employed in the second paragraph. This time the claim is made that Cambridge University Press has tarnished their reputation. But the support for this is the transfer of guilt from the association with Lomborg's book. This time, the association clearly exists, but since the previous guilt was never established, there is nothing to transfer.

Case 1B

This is a letter to the Canadian newspaper *Globe and Mail* (June 19, 2003, p. A16) that contributes to the debate over same-sex marriage in Canada:

> The liberal government plans to endorse same-sex marriage based on a lower-court ruling in Ontario (Ottawa Backs Gay Marriage – June 18). Once it does, the well-defined definition of traditional marriage in Canada will be forever altered.
>
> If we allow people to marry without regard to their sex, who is to say that we can't discriminate on the basis of number? It is a small step then to legalizing polygamy.
>
> Once we open up marriage beyond the boundary of one man and one woman only, there will be no difference based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms between gay marriage and polygamous marriage. Do we want to erode our societal values based on the whims of a small minority? I hope not, and let's not abuse the Charter in this way.

There is much happening in this argument that a full analysis would identify and evaluate, but we are again interested only in the primary strategy the writer employs in opposing this government initiative. The primary reason given for not allowing same-sex couples to marry is that doing so will lead to undesirable consequences because similar cases, here polygamous marriage, would have to