Once upon a time, in an earlier edition of this book, we complained about how the level of political discussion had dropped. How little did we know! Since that time, we’ve watched the discussion of issues on radio, on television, and in issue-oriented books turn into shouting matches on television and radio as the presentation of evidence and argument give way everywhere to rhetoric, bombast, and plain old name-calling. Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Sean Hannity, and others from the right wing of American politics have dominated the airwaves in recent years. Recently they’ve been joined by Al Franken, Mike Malloy, and others on Air America, a talk network from the other end of the political spectrum. “Issue oriented” programs on television, such as the McLaughlin Group, feature talking heads who debate points by out-shouting each other.

As it becomes more difficult to find a serious discussion of an important issue, it gets easier and easier to find examples of rhetorical devices designed to provoke emotional, knee-jerk reactions. Unfortunately (for us as individuals as well as for public policy), it can be altogether too easy to allow such responses to take the place of sound judgment and careful thinking. In this chapter, we’ll target some specific devices designed to produce this effect—devices that go beyond the rhetorical coloration we talked about in the last chapter. The stratagems we’ll discuss...
below sometimes masquerade as arguments, complete with premises and conclusions and language that would suggest argumentation. But while they may be made to look or sound like arguments, they don’t really provide legitimate grounds for accepting a conclusion. In place of good reasons for a conclusion, most of the schemes we’ll look at in this chapter offer us considerations that are emotionally or psychologically linked to the issue in question. The support they may appear to offer is really only pretended support; you might think of them as pieces of pretend reasoning, or pseudoreasoning.

The devices in this chapter thus all count as fallacies (a fallacy is a mistake in reasoning). The rhetorical devices we discussed in the last chapter—euphemisms, innuendo, and so forth—aren’t fallacies. Of course, we commit a fallacy if we think a claim has been supported when the “support” is nothing more than rhetorically persuasive language.

People constantly accept fallacies as legitimate arguments; but the reverse mistake can also happen. We must be careful not to dismiss legitimate arguments as fallacies just because they remind us of a fallacy. Often beginning students in logic have this problem. They read about fallacies like the ones we cover here and then think they see them everywhere. These fallacies are common, but they are not everywhere; and you sometimes must consider a specimen carefully before accepting or rejecting it. The exercises at the end of the chapter will help you learn to do this, because they contain a few reasonable arguments mixed in with the fallacies.

THE “ARGUMENT” FROM OUTRAGE

We just tuned in to Rush Limbaugh for a few minutes, to see if he was outraged about something or other, and we were not disappointed. He was talking about some recent criticism of Tom DeLay, the majority leader in the House of Representatives. Rush’s first words were,

The left is just a drooling mob and it’s ugly out there. The left wing and their attack on DeLay is not new. As a matter of fact, Tom DeLay was the first demon of choice of the left. But it went nowhere. No traction, no fund-raising, no focus group numbers, so the gangbangers on the left went after Cheney. Remember that?

Although we’ve heard him more worked up, his voice was still tense with disbelief and indignation that “the left” was causing problems for DeLay. The technique of expressing outrage—anybody who doesn’t see this point must be a fool or a traitor!—is one we’ve identified with Limbaugh because he was one of the early masters of the method; we even referred to the use of outrage to persuade people as “the Limbaugh fallacy” in the previous edition. But the technique is not unique to Limbaugh, of course; it’s typical of today’s hardline talk show people. And apparently it works, if the people who call in to the programs are any indication, since they tend to be as outraged at the goings-on as the hosts of the programs. That’s the idea, of course. If a person gets angry enough about something, if one is in the throes of righteous indignation, then it’s all too easy to throw reason and good sense out the window and accept whatever alternative is being offered by the speaker just from indignation alone.
Now, does this mean that we never have a right to be angry about something? Of course not. Anger is not a fallacy, and there are times when it’s entirely appropriate. However, when we are angry—and the angrier or more outraged we are the more true this becomes—it’s easy to become illogical, and it can happen in two different ways. *First, we may think we have been given a reason for being angry when in fact we have not.* Were Tom DeLay’s detractors “out to get him” because he had actually done something wrong, or were they simply trying to get rid of him because he was an effective leader in the Congress, as was claimed by his radio defenders? This would take some investigation to find out. (By investigation, we don’t mean simply going down the dial to listen to another radio talk show host!) At any rate, it is a mistake to think that something is wrong just because it makes somebody angry, even if it’s us whom it seems to anger. It’s easy to mistake a feeling of outrage for evidence of something, but it isn’t evidence of anything, really, except our anger.

*Second, we may let the anger we feel as the result of one thing influence our evaluations of an unrelated thing.* If we’re angry over what we take to be the motives of somebody’s detractors, we must remember that their motives are a separate matter from that of whether their criticisms are accurate; they might still be right. Similarly, if a person does something that makes us mad, that doesn’t provide us a reason for downgrading him on some other matter, nor would it be a reason for upgrading our opinion of someone else.

The “argument” from outrage,* then, consists in inflammatory words (or thoughts) followed by a “conclusion” of some sort. It substitutes anger for reason and judgment in considering an issue. It is a favorite strategy of demagogues. In fact, it is the favorite strategy of demagogues. Let’s say the issue is whether gay marriages should be legal. Left-of-center demagogues may wax indignantly about “narrow-minded fundamentalist bigots dictating what people can do in their bedrooms”—talk calculated to get us steamed although it really has nothing to do with the issue. On the other side, conservative demagogues may allude to gays’ demanding “special rights.” Nobody wants someone else to get special rights, and when we hear about somebody “demanding” them, our blood pressure goes up. But wanting a right other people have is not wanting a special right; it’s wanting an equal right.

A particularly dangerous type of “argument” from outrage is known as scapegoating—blaming a certain group of people—or even a single person (like George W. Bush or Bill Clinton) for all of life’s troubles. George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama who ran for president in 1968 on a “states’ rights platform” (which then was a code word for white supremacy) said he could get good old Southern boys to do anything by whooping them into a frenzy over Northern civil rights workers.

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*In discussing this and several succeeding fallacies, we’ve used the word “argument” in quotation marks to indicate that we are not really talking about an argument at all. (Such marks are sometimes called “irony” quotation marks, and are not unrelated to the “downplaying” quotation marks described in Chapter 4.)*
"Arguments" based on outrage are so common that the fallacy ranks high on our list of the top ten fallacies of all time, which is contained in Appendix 2. It's unfortunate they are so common—history demonstrates constantly that anger is a poor lens through which to view the world. Policies adopted in anger are seldom wise, as any parent will tell you who has laid down the law in a fit of anger.

**SCARE TACTICS**

George Wallace didn’t just try to anger the crowds when he told them what Northern civil rights workers were up to; he tried to scare them. When people become angry or afraid, they don’t think clearly. They follow blindly. Demagogues like Wallace like to dangle scary scenarios in front of people.

Trying to scare people into doing something or accepting a position is using **scare tactics**. One way this might be done is the George Wallace method—dangling a frightening picture in front of someone. A simpler method might be just to threaten the person, a special case of scare tactics known as “argument” by force. Either way, if the idea is to get people to substitute fear for reason and judgment when taking a position on an issue, it is a fallacy. Likewise, it is a fallacy to succumb to such techniques when others use them on us.
Fear can befuddle us as easily as can anger, and the mistakes that happen are similar in both instances. Wallace’s listeners may not have noticed (or not cared) that Wallace didn’t actually give them proof that civil rights workers were doing whatever it was he portrayed them as doing; the portrayal was its own evidence, you might say. When we are befuddled with fear, we may not notice we lack evidence that the scary scenario is real. Imagine someone talking about global warming: The speaker may paint a picture so alarming we don’t notice that he or she doesn’t provide evidence that global warming is actually happening. Or take gay marriages again. Someone might warn us of presumably dire consequences if gay people are allowed to marry—we’ll be opening “Pandora’s box”; marriage will become meaningless; homosexuality
will become rampant; society will collapse—but he or she may issue these warnings without providing details as to why (or how) the consequences might actually come about. The consequences are so frightening they apparently don’t need proof.

Fear of one thing, X, may also affect evaluation of an unrelated thing, Y. You have your eye on a nice house and are considering buying it, and then the real estate agent frightens you by telling you the seller has received other offers and will sell soon. Some people, in this situation, might overestimate what they really can afford to pay.

To avoid translating fear of one thing into an evaluation of some unrelated thing, we need to be clear on what issues our fears are relevant to. Legitimate warnings do not involve irrelevancies and do not qualify as scare tactics. “You should be careful of that snake—it’s deadly poisonous” might be a scary thing to say to someone, but we don’t make a mistake in reasoning when we say it, and neither does the other person if he or she turns and runs into the house. Suppose, however, that the Michelin tire people show an ad featuring a sweet (and vulnerable) baby in a ring of automobile tires. Showing pictures of car tires around infants will produce disquieting associations in any observer, and it wouldn’t be unreasonable to check our tires when we see this ad. But the issue raised by the Michelin people is whether to buy Michelin tires, and the fear of injuring or killing a child by driving on unsafe tires does not bear on the question of which tires to buy. The Michelin ad isn’t a legitimate warning; it’s scare tactics.

OTHER FALLACIES BASED ON EMOTIONS

Other emotions work much like anger and fear as sources of mistakes in reasoning. Compassion, for example, is a fine thing to have. There is absolutely nothing wrong with feeling sorry for someone. But when feeling sorry for someone drives us to a position on an unrelated matter, the result is the fallacy known as “argument” from pity. We have a job that needs doing; Helen can barely support her starving children and needs work desperately. But does Helen have the skills we need? We may not care if she does; and if we don’t, nobody can fault us for hiring her out of compassion. But feeling sorry for Helen may lead us to misjudge her skills or overestimate her abilities, and that is a mistake in reasoning. Her skills are what they are regardless of her need. Or, suppose you need a better grade in this course to get into law school or avoid academic disqualification or whatever. If you think you deserve or have earned a better grade because you need a better grade, or you try to get your instructor to think you deserve a better grade by trying to make him or her feel sorry for you, that’s the “argument” from pity. Or, if you think someone else deserves a better grade because of the hardships he or she (or his or her parents) suffered, that’s also the “argument” from pity.

Envy and jealousy can also confuse our thinking. Compassion, a desirable emotion, may tempt us to emphasize a person’s good points; envy and jealousy tempt us to exaggerate someone’s bad points. When we find fault with a person because of envy, we are guilty of the fallacy known as “argument” from envy. “Well, he may have a lot of money but he certainly has bad manners” would be an example of this if it is envy that prompts us to criticize him.

Pride, on the other hand, can lead us to exaggerate our own accomplishments and abilities and lead to our making other irrelevant judgments as well.
It especially makes us vulnerable to **apple polishing**. Moore recently sat on a jury in a criminal case involving alleged prostitution and pandering at a strip club; the defendant’s attorney told the members of the jury it would take “an unusually discerning jury” to see that the law, despite its wording, wasn’t really intended to apply to someone like his client. Ultimately the jury members did find with the defense, but let us hope it wasn’t because the attorney flattered their ability to discern things. Allowing praise of oneself to substitute for judgment about the truth of a claim, or trying to get others to do this, as the lawyer did, is the apple polishing fallacy.

Feelings of **guilt** work similarly. “How could you not invite Trixie to your wedding? She would never do that to you and you know she must be very hurt.” The remark is intended to make someone feel sorry for Trixie, but even more fundamentally it is supposed to induce a sense of guilt. Eliciting feelings of guilt to get others to do or not do something, or to accept the view that they should or should not do it, is popularly known as putting a **guilt trip** on someone, which is to commit a fallacy. Parents sometimes use this tactic with children when they (the parents) won’t (or can’t) offer a clear explanation of why something should or shouldn’t be done. Certainly, if the child knowingly does something wrong, he or she should feel guilty; but whatever has been done isn’t wrong **because** he or she feels guilty.

Hopes, desires, and aversions can also lead us astray logically. The fallacy known as **wishful thinking** happens when we accept or urge acceptance (or rejection) of a claim simply because it would be pleasant (or unpleasant) if it were true. Some people, for example, may believe in God simply on the basis of wishful thinking or desire for an afterlife. A smoker may refuse to acknowledge the health hazards of smoking. We’ve had students who are in denial about the consequences of cutting classes. The wishful thinking fallacy also
underlies much of the empty rhetoric of “positive thinking”—rhetoric that claims “you are what you want to be” and other such slogans. As obvious (and as obviously fallacious) as it may appear when you read about it here, wishful thinking can be a powerful influence and can sometimes defeat all but our most committed efforts to do the rational thing.

Most people desire to be liked or accepted by some circle of other people and are averse to having the acceptance withdrawn. A desire for acceptance can motivate us to accept a claim not because of its merits, but because we will gain someone’s approval [or will avoid having approval withdrawn]. When we do this, or try to get someone else to do it, the fallacy is the peer pressure “argument.” Now, obviously nobody ever said anything quite so blatant as “Ralph, this claim is true because we won’t like you any more if you don’t accept it.” Peer pressure is often disguised or unstated, but anyone going through an American high school, where you can lose social standing merely by being seen with someone who isn’t “in,” knows it is a real force. Kids who feel ostracized sometimes take guns to school.

It doesn’t have to be one’s associates who exert peer pressure, either. In scientific experiments, people will actually revise what they say they saw if a group of strangers in the same room deny having seen the same thing.

Real Life

Positive Outlook Won’t Delay Cancer Death, Study Says

NICE, France — New research has dealt a blow to the idea that a positive outlook might improve a patient’s chances of surviving cancer, scientists said Saturday.

However, experts said it is still worthwhile for patients to improve their attitude, perhaps by joining a cancer support group, because often it does make them feel better.

The findings were presented Saturday at a meeting of the European Society of Medical Oncology in Nice, France. The researchers reviewed evidence to determine whether psychologist-run support groups kept patients alive.

“There were some studies out there showing that positive-thinking type of support will not only improve your quality of life—which undoubtedly it does, I’m not questioning that—but also will prolong the lives of cancer patients,” said Dr. Edzard Ernst, a professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter in England who led the study.

“One study from 1989 gets cited over and over and over again, and we knew there were one or two negative studies on this, too, so we decided to see if it was true,” he said.

The researchers analyzed 11 studies that included a total of 1,500 patients.

“The data provided no evidence at all to show that these types of approaches prolong life in cancer patients,” Ernst said.

— Associated Press

Source: Sacramento Bee, October 19, 2002.
One very common fallacy that is closely related to the peer pressure “argument” involves one’s sense of group identification, which people experience when they are part of a group—a team, a club, a school, a gang, a state, a nation, the Elks, Wal-Mart, the U.S.A., Mauritius, you name it. Let’s define the group think fallacy as happening when one substitutes pride of membership in a group for reason and deliberation in arriving at a position on an issue; and let’s include the fallacy in our list of the top ten fallacies of all time, because it is exceedingly common. One obvious form of this fallacy involves national pride, or nationalism—a powerful and fierce emotion that can lead to blind endorsement of a country’s policies and practices. (“My country right or wrong” explicitly discourages critical thinking and encourages blind patriotism.) Nationalism is also invoked to reject, condemn, or silence criticism of one’s country as unpatriotic or treasonable (and may or may not involve an element of peer pressure). If a letter writer expresses a criticism of America on the opinion page of your local newspaper on Monday, you can bet that by the end of the week there will be a response dismissing the criticism with the “argument” that if so-and-so doesn’t like it here, he or she ought to move to Russia (or Cuba or Afghanistan or Iraq).

Group think does not play cultural or political favorites, either. On the opposite side of the political spectrum are what some people call the “blame America first” folks. The group think ethic of this club includes, most importantly, automatically assuming that whatever is wrong in the world is the result of some U.S. policy. The club has no formal meetings or rules for membership, but flying an American flag would be grounds for derision and instant dismissal.

Group think “reasoning” is certainly not limited to political groups either. It occurs whenever one’s affiliations are of utmost psychological importance.

Now, these various emotional fallacies, from the “argument” from outrage to the group think fallacy, all share certain properties. They often [though not always] contain assertions you might call “premises” and other assertions that you might call a “conclusion.” But the “premises” don’t actually support the “conclusion”; rather, they evoke emotions that make us want to accept the conclusion without support. So, although they can wear the clothing of arguments, they are really pieces of persuasion (Chapter 1). Whenever language is used to arouse emotions, it is wise to consider carefully whether any “conclusions” that come to mind have been supported by evidence.

RATIONALIZING

Let’s say Mr. Smith decides to do something really nice for his wife on her birthday and buys her a new table saw. “This saw wasn’t cheap,” he tells her. “But you’re going to be glad we have it, because it will keep me out in the garage and out of your way when you’re working here in the house.”

The fallacy in the reasoning in this made-up example is pretty obvious. Mr. Smith is confusing his wife’s desires with his own.
When we do this, when we use a false pretext to satisfy our own desires or interests, we’re guilty of rationalizing, a very common fallacy. It almost made our list of the top ten fallacies of all time (Appendix 2).

Now, there is nothing wrong with satisfying one’s desires, at least if they don’t harm someone or aren’t illegal. But in this book we’re talking logic, not morals. Rationalizing involves a confusion in thinking, and to the extent we wish to avoid being confused in our thinking, we should try to avoid rationalizing.

“But,” you may be saying, “It is good to do nice things for other people. If you do something that helps them, or that they like, or that benefits the world, what difference does motivation make? If, for whatever reason, the table saw makes Mr. Smith’s wife happy, that’s what counts.”

Now, there is something to be said for this argument, because it is good to make people happy. But whether Mr. Smith’s wife is happy or not, there has been a confusion in his thinking, a fallacy. And it is a common fallacy indeed. Obviously most instances of rationalizing are not as blatant as Mr. Smith’s, but people frequently deceive themselves as to their true motives.

Rationalizing need not be selfish, either. Let’s say a former oilman is elected governor of a state that produces oil. He may act in what at some level he thinks are the best interests of his state—when in fact he is motivated by a desire to help the oil industry. (Incidentally, you can’t just assume he would do this.) To the extent he is deceiving himself about his true motivation, he is rationalizing. But this isn’t selfish rationalizing; his actions don’t benefit him personally.

Rationalizing, then, involves an element of self-deception, but otherwise it isn’t necessarily devious. However, some people encourage others to rationalize because they themselves stand to benefit in some way. “Hey, Smith,” his buddy Jones says to him. “That’s a fine idea! Really creative. Your wife will really like a saw. Maybe you could build a boat for her, and you and I could go fishing.” Jones may or may not say this innocently: If he does, he too is guilty of rationalizing; if he doesn’t, he’s just cynical.

EVERYONE KNOWS . . .

In Chapter 4, we examined proof surrogates like “Everyone knows . . .” and “It’s only common sense that. . . .” Phrases like this are used when a speaker or writer doesn’t really have an argument.

Such phrases often appear in peer pressure “arguments” [“Pardner, in these parts everyone thinks. . . .”]. They also are used in the group think fallacy [“As any red-blooded American patriot knows, . . .”]. There is, however, a third way these phrases can be used. An example would be when Robert Novak says on CNN’s Crossfire, “Liberals are finally admitting what everyone knows, that airline safety demands compromise.” Novak isn’t applying or evoking peer pressure or group think; he is offering “proof” that airline safety demands compromise [and bad-mouthing liberals to boot]. His proof is the fact that everyone knows it.

When we do this, when we urge someone to accept a claim [or fall prey to someone’s doing it to us] simply on the grounds that all or most or some substantial number of people [other than authorities or experts, of course] believe it, we commit the fallacy known as the “argument” from popularity.
EVERYONE KNOWS . . .

That most people believe something is a fact is not evidence that it is a fact—most people believe in God, for example, but that isn’t evidence that God exists. Likewise, if most people didn’t believe in God, that wouldn’t be evidence that God doesn’t exist.

Most people seem to assume that bus driving and similar jobs are somehow less desirable than white-collar jobs. The widespread acceptance of this
assumption creates its own momentum—that is, we tend to accept it because everybody else does, and we don’t stop to think about whether it actually has anything to recommend it. For a lot of people, a job driving a bus might make for a much happier life than a job as a manager.

In some instances, we should point out, what people think actually determines what is true. The meanings of most words, for example, are determined by popular usage. In addition, it would not be fallacious to conclude that the word “ain’t” is out of place in formal speech because most speakers of English believe that it is out of place in formal speech.

There are other cases where what people think is an indication of what is true, even if it cannot determine truth. If several Bostonians of your acquaintance think that it is illegal to drink beer in their public parks, then you have some reason for thinking that it’s true. And if you are told by several Europeans that it is not gauche to eat with your fork in your left hand in Europe, then it is not fallacious to conclude that European manners allow eating with your fork in your left hand. The situation here is one of credibility, which we discussed in Chapter 3. Natives of Boston in the first case and Europeans in the second case can be expected to know more about the two claims in question, respectively, than others know. In a watered-down sense, they are “experts” on the subjects, at least in ways that many of us are not. In general, when the “everyone” who thinks that X is true includes experts about X, then what they think is indeed a good reason to accept X.

Thus it would be incorrect to automatically label as a fallacy any instance in which a person cites people’s beliefs to establish a point. (No “argument” fitting a pattern in this chapter should unthinkingly be dismissed.) But it is important to view such references to people’s beliefs as red alerts. These are cautionary signals that warn you to look closely for genuine reasons in support of the claim asserted.

Two variations of the “argument” from popularity deserve mention: “Argument” from common practice consists in trying to justify or defend an action or practice (as distinguished from an assertion or claim) on the grounds that it is common. “I shouldn’t get a speeding ticket because everyone drives over the limit” would be an example. “Everyone cheats on their taxes, so I don’t see why I shouldn’t” would be another. Now there is something to watch out for here: When a person defends an action by saying that other people do the same thing, he or she just be requesting fair play. He or she might just be saying, in effect, “OK, OK, I know it’s wrong, but nobody else gets punished and it would be unfair to single me out.” That person isn’t trying to justify the action; he or she is asking for equal treatment.

The other variant of the argument from popularity is the “argument” from tradition, a name that is self-explanatory. People do things because that’s the way things have always been done, and they believe things because that’s what people have always believed. But, logically speaking, you don’t prove a claim or prove a practice is legitimate on the basis of tradition; when you try to do so, you are guilty of “argument” from tradition. The fact that it’s a tradition among most American children to believe in Santa Claus, for instance, doesn’t prove Santa Claus exists; and the fact it’s also a tradition for most American parents to deceive their kids about Santa Claus doesn’t necessarily mean it is okay for them to do so. Where we teach, there has been a long tradition of fraternity hazing, and over the years several unfortunate hazing incidents have happened. We have yet to hear a defense of hazing that amounted
to anything other than an “argument” from tradition, which is equivalent to saying we haven’t heard a defense at all.

**SUBJECTIVISM AGAIN**

If somebody tells you sandpaper is slippery, you’ll conclude one or more of the following:

1. This guy doesn’t know what sandpaper is.
2. He doesn’t know what “slippery” means.
3. He’s using some kind of oddball metaphor.
4. He’s on drugs.

In Chapter 1, we talked about subjectivism, the idea that each person’s opinion is as good as the next person’s, or the notion that thinking a claim is true makes it true. A big problem with subjectivism is that it fails to respect the rules of common language. You can assign a word any meaning you want, but it takes more than one person to make that meaning a part of language. Within language, some phrases, like “tastes great,” or “that’s cool!” can be used pretty much as you please. But other expressions are bound by fairly rigid rules; you can’t just call any old thing sandpaper and expect people to understand you. Words like “slippery” are somewhere in the middle. “Slippery” has a subjective element that permits a broad range of application, but there are constraints. Sandpaper and campfires, for example, aren’t slippery, and thinking that either of them is slippery doesn’t make it so. Reasonable people might disagree as to whether your driveway is slippery after rain, but if your driveway is covered with ice, anyone who thought it wasn’t slippery would be dreaming.

Plus, subjectivism is problematic because people just get their facts wrong. If you tell the doorman you are over 21 or under 40, he may believe you, but that won’t make you over 21 or under 40 if you aren’t.

Where subjectivism gets traction and enjoys a measure of popularity is when it comes to moral value judgments.* Some people find it wildly attractive to think that whether or not something is morally good or morally bad is purely a matter of subjective opinion. In our municipal park, there is a disk golf course, where you play golf with Frisbees. Recently, somebody took a chain saw to a tree in the golf course and used the tree as a dirt bike ramp. Perhaps the culprit thought the act was a good thing, or at any rate didn’t think there was anything wrong with cutting down the tree; others disagreed. It is easy enough in a case like this to think, well, everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. But if someone maintained there is nothing wrong with blinding toddlers or pets to see how they react, it would be clear this person doesn’t understand right and wrong. We discussed subjectivism in Chapter 1: Thinking sandpaper is slippery just doesn’t make it so; thinking the driveway is slippery might make it so in some instances; thinking someone is 21 never makes it so; and thinking something is morally acceptable, if it ever makes it so, doesn’t always make it so.

Thus, it is probably best to think of subjectivism as a half-baked piece of philosophy, rather than as a “fallacy.” Yes, some expressions, by common

*See Chapter 13 for a definition; or check the glossary.
agreement, can be used as you please. But not all expressions are like that, and not every claim you think is true is made true by the fact you think it is.

THE RELATIVIST FALLACY

Relativism is the idea that one culture’s or society’s opinion is as good as the next, and that a society/culture’s thinking a claim is true makes it true in that society/culture. It’s by no means clear what constitutes a “culture” or a “society,” but adherents of relativism tend to think of this as a niggling theoretical detail, and we won’t go into it. Certainly there is a point at which the beliefs, attitudes, and habits of two societies are so different that the two must be regarded as different cultures, but there are also borderline cases. Are blue states and red states different cultures? In some ways, yes, and in some ways, no. Is NASCAR racing a separate culture? We won’t comment.

Very few people are relativists about every sort of claim. A water molecule consists of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, and if you assemble enough water molecules, you have a substance that does not flow uphill. If people on some island in the world speak English but don’t believe water consists of hydrogen and oxygen, you’d figure they lack science. You’d forgive them, but they’d be mistaken nevertheless. You would not say, well, in America water consists of hydrogen and oxygen, but on your island maybe it doesn’t. If they said, water flows uphill, you’d probably not know what to think; perhaps the island has unusual geophysical properties? But if you both look at the same creek, say, and you think the water is flowing downhill and they think it is flowing uphill, you’d conclude they had reversed the meanings of “uphill” and “downhill.”

Which, of course, is possible. For instance, within certain hip English-speaking subcultures, it became common to use the word “bad” to denote a desirable quality, so “That’s bad” meant what members of the British royal family and others still mean by “That’s good.” We the authors don’t use “bad” this way. If one of us won the lottery, the other would not say, “Man, that’s bad.” But a community of speakers can develop its own system of shared meanings, obviously.

Likewise a community can have its own moral standards. It is here that relativism has its main appeal. Different societies not infrequently have different standards of acceptable behavior. For example, most societies do not approve of slavery or human sacrifice, but certainly there are societies that once did; maybe some still do. Clearly one part of American society views homosexual activity as seriously immoral; another part clearly doesn’t. Members of the Taliban reportedly think it is good to keep women out of schools; red-state cultures and blue-state cultures are united in not sharing that view. Cross-cultural clashes of values are undeniable, and it can seem presumptuous to tell another society its standards are incorrect.

However, being presumptuous is not the same as being illogical. What is illogical is to think that a standard of your society applies universally, while simultaneously maintaining that it doesn’t apply to societies that don’t accept that standard. Unfortunately, relativists are sometimes guilty of just this confusion, and you occasionally hear statements like this:

Well, I think bullfighting is wrong, but other cultures don’t think so, and who am I to tell them what to believe? If they think there is
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TWO WRONGS MAKE A RIGHT

nothing wrong with bullfighting, then I guess it isn’t wrong for them to have bullfights.

We hope you can see that this paragraph is self-contradictory: The person is saying, in effect, that he or she thinks it is wrong to have bullfights, and that he or she thinks it isn’t wrong for some people to have bullfights. You can think that whether bullfighting is wrong depends on what a culture thinks, or you can subscribe to what your culture thinks, but you can’t do both.

This bit of inconsistency we shall call the relativist fallacy. To repeat the formula, the relativist fallacy consists in thinking a moral standard of your own group applies universally while simultaneously maintaining that it doesn’t apply to groups that don’t accept the standard. This is like saying that water is made out of oxygen and hydrogen but in Ethiopia it isn’t made out of oxygen and hydrogen. If you think human sacrifice is wrong period, then you cannot also say it isn’t wrong in some parts of the world.

Applying this to a more likely example, consider someone who says the following, or something that equates to it:

Well, I think it is wrong to force women to wear veils, but other societies don’t, and since they are entitled to their opinions as much as we are, it isn’t wrong to force women in those societies to wear veils.

If “they are entitled to their opinion as much as we are” means “their opinion is just as correct as ours,” then the passage commits the relativist fallacy.

TWO WRONGS MAKE A RIGHT

Let’s say you get tired of the people upstairs stomping around late at night, and so, to retaliate, you rent a tow truck and deposit their car in the river. From an emotional standpoint, you’re getting even. From a reasoning standpoint, you’re committing the fallacy known as “two wrongs make a right.” It’s a fallacy because wrongful behavior on someone else’s part doesn’t convert wrongful behavior on your part into rightful behavior, any more than illegal behavior on someone else’s part converts your illegal activity into legal activity. If an act is wrong, it is wrong. Wrong acts don’t cross-pollinate such that one comes out shorn of wrongfulness.

However, there is a well-known and somewhat widely held theory known as retributivism, according to which it is acceptable to harm someone in return for a harm he or she has done to you. But we must distinguish legitimate punishment from illegitimate retaliation. A fallacy clearly occurs when we
consider a wrong to be justification for any retaliatory action, as would be the case if you destroyed your neighbors’ car because they made too much noise at night. It is also a fallacy when the second wrong is directed at someone who didn’t do the wrong in the first place—a brother or a child of the wrongdoer, for example. And it is a fallacy to defend doing harm to another on the grounds that that individual would or might do the same to us. This would happen, for example, if we didn’t return excess change to a salesclerk on the grounds that “if the situation were reversed,” the clerk wouldn’t have given us back the money.

On the other hand, it isn’t a fallacy to defend an action on the grounds it was necessary to prevent harm from befalling oneself; bopping a mugger to prevent him from hurting you would be an instance. To take another example, near the end of World War II, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities, killing tens of thousands of civilians. Politicians, historians, and others have argued that the bombing was justified because it helped end the war and thus prevented more casualties from the fighting, including the deaths of more Americans. People have long disagreed on whether the argument provides sufficient justification for the bombings, but there is no disagreement about its being a real argument and not empty rhetoric.

RED HERRING/SMOKESCREEN

When a person brings a topic into a conversation that distracts from the original point, especially if the new topic is introduced in order to distract, the person is said to have introduced a red herring. (It is so called because dragging a herring across a trail will cause a dog to leave the original trail and follow the path of the herring.) In the strip-joint jury trial we mentioned earlier, the defendant was charged with pandering; but the prosecuting attorney introduced evidence that the defendant had also sold liquor to minors. That was a red herring that had nothing to do with pandering.

The difference between red herrings and their close relatives, smokescreens, is subtle (and really not a matter of crucial importance). Generally speaking, red herrings distract by pulling one’s attention away from one topic and toward another; smokescreens tend to pile issues on or to make them extremely complicated until the original is lost in the [verbal] “smoke.” When Bill Clinton had missiles fired at terrorists in Sudan, he was accused of creating a red herring to deflect public scrutiny from the Monica Lewinsky business. When George W. Bush talked about Iraq having missiles capable of threatening the United States, about that country’s potential of having a nuclear weapon “within six months,” and about similar possible Iraqi threats, he was accused of putting up a smokescreen to hide his real reasons for wanting to attack Iraq, which were said to be oil interests and his own personal desire to complete his father’s unfinished business.

Let’s look at another example, this one made up but fairly typical of what often happens. Let’s say a reporter asks Michael Chertoff (secretary of the Department of Homeland Security) whether his office has made the country substantially safer from attacks by terrorists. “I’m pleased to say,” Chertoff answers, “that the United States is the safest country in the world when it comes to terrorist attacks. Certainly nobody can give an absolute, one hundred percent guarantee of safety, but you are certainly safer here than in any other country of the world.”
Chertoff has steered clear of the original question (whether his agency had made the country safer) and is leading the reporter on a tangent, toward the comparative safety of the United States (the United States may already have been the safest country before the creation of the agency). He has dragged a red herring across the trail, so to speak.

Imagine the conversation continues this way:

Reporter: “Mr. Chertoff, polls say about half of the public think your agency has failed to make them safer. How do you answer your critics?”

Michael Chertoff: “We are making progress toward reassuring people, but quite frankly our efforts have been hampered by the tendency of the press to concentrate on the negative side of the issue.”

Once again Chertoff brings in a red herring to sidestep the issue raised by the reporter.

Whether a distraction or an obfuscation is a plain red herring or a smokescreen is often difficult to tell in real life, and it’s better to spend your energy getting a discussion back on track rather than worrying which type you have before you.

Many of the other fallacies we have been discussing in this chapter (and will be discussing in the next chapter) qualify, in some version or other, as red herrings/smokescreens. For example, a defense attorney might talk about a defendant’s miserable upbringing to steer a jury’s attention away from the charges against the person; doing this would qualify as an argument from pity as well as a smokescreen/red herring. Likewise, a prosecuting attorney may try to get a jury so angry about a crime it doesn’t notice the weakness of the evidence pointing to the defendant. This would be an argument from outrage—and a red herring.

Good point. Anyone know of a hospital or highway built by Rush Limbaugh or an automobile invented by him? Could somebody please show me one hospital built by a dolphin? Could somebody show me one highway built by a dolphin? Could someone show me one automobile invented by a dolphin?

— RUSH LIMBAUGH, responding to the New York Times’ claim that dolphins’ “behavior and enormous brains suggest an intelligence approaching that of human beings.”
To simplify things, your instructor may reserve the red herring/smoke-screen categories for irrelevancies that don’t qualify as one of the other fallacies mentioned in this or the next chapter. In other words, he or she may tell you that if something qualifies as, say, an argument from outrage, you should call it that rather than a red herring or smoke screen.

In an interview with CNN’s Connie Chung (photo below), tennis champion Martina Navratilova asserted that when she left Communist Czechoslovakia for the United States she changed one system that suppresses free opinion for another. Connie Chung told Navratilova to go ahead and think that at home, but asserted that celebrities shouldn’t “spill out” such thoughts in public, because “people will write it down and talk about what you said.” (Chung thus ineptly confirmed the very point Navratilova was making.)

One can only speculate as to what exactly was going on in Connie Chung’s head, if anything. Maybe she was worried that Navratilova’s comment would make people think bad things about the United States. Maybe she thinks the tennis star’s comment is unpatriotic. Maybe criticism of the United States just upsets her. Whatever her thoughts, the example nicely illustrates what we have been talking about in this chapter. Sometimes, instead of bringing forth considerations relevant to an issue, people give an unrelated “argument.” Many of the fallacies we have examined are like Connie Chung’s: The unrelated argument involves some kind of emotion, though it may be hard to pin down exactly what it is.

- “Argument” from outrage
- Scare tactics
- “Argument” by force
- “Argument” from pity
- “Argument” from envy
- Apple polishing
- Guilt trip
- Wishful thinking
- Peer pressure “argument”
- Group think fallacy
- Nationalism

Recap
Other fallacies discussed in this chapter don’t invoke emotions directly, but are closely related to emotional appeals. These include

- Rationalization
- “Argument” from popularity
- “Argument” from common practice
- “Argument” from tradition
- Subjectivism
- Relativist fallacy
- Two wrongs make a right
- Red herring/smokescreen

In all these specimens, there is something one might call a “premise” and something one might call a “conclusion,” but the “premise” either fails to support the conclusion or “supports” some tangential claim. In any case, a mistake in reasoning has been made, a fallacy has been committed.