

CONTROVERSIAL DEBATE STRATEGIES

—LESSON THREE—

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You will encounter at least one fallacy in any argument where the claims are invalid; where the warrants are invalid; where the evidence is invalid; where any combine are insufficient; or where all of those components are disconnected. So far, you might be thinking, “*These problems seem easy enough to spot!*” True, some logical fallacies are obvious, especially when they clearly appeal to a rhetor’s self-interests. However, in practice, they can be “camouflaged” by a skillful use of words or images. Today’s lesson is about “seeing through the camouflage.”

HASTY GENERALIZATIONS

Among all fallacies, the **hasty generalization** is most prevalent. A hasty generalization is an inference or suggestion drawn from insufficient evidence. Here’s an example: “*Because my Honda broke down, ALL Hondas must be junk.*” Hasty generalizations form the basis for stereotypes about people or institutions; because a *few* people in a large group are observed to act in a certain way, one infers that *all* members of that group inevitably, unmistakably, undeniably behave similarly. The following examples demonstrate how hasty generalizations are really just “sweeping claims” that have little merit...

Women are bad drivers.
Men are not romantic.
Italians live on pasta.
English teachers always nitpick.
Scientists are all nerds.

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You could no doubt expand this roster of stereotypes by the *hundreds*.

To draw valid inferences, you must *always* have sufficient, credible evidence—a random sample of a population; a selection large enough to represent fully the subjects of your study; an objective method for sampling the population or evidence; and so on. And you must qualify your claims appropriately. After all, people do not need generalizations to make reasonable decisions in life; such claims can be offered legitimately—that is, if placed in context and tagged with appropriate qualifiers (“some,” “a few,” “most,” “occasionally,” “rarely,” “possibly,” “in some cases,” “under certain circumstances,” “in my experience”) instead of “always” or “undeniably.”

You should be alert to hasty generalizations when you read reports and studies of any kind—especially case studies based on carefully selected populations. Be alert for the fallacy, too, in the interpretation of poll numbers. Everything from the number of people selected, to the time the poll was taken, to the exact wording of the questions may affect the poll’s outcomes.

“All Asians are good at math” is a hasty generalization. It started with a now-infamous 1987 *Time* magazine cover that showed six young students, sitting behind a computer and books, with the caption “Those Asian American Whiz Kids.” A hasty generalization by *Time*—an otherwise credible news source—is responsible for one of the most prevalent stereotypes in society today.



POST HOC



In Latin, the **fallacy of faulty causality** is described by the expressions “post hoc” or “ergo propter hoc.” These translate word-for-word as “after this, therefore, because of this.” Odd as the translation may sound, it accurately describes what faulty causality is: The fallacious assumption that, because one event or action follows another, the first necessarily causes the second. Consider this famous lawsuit: A writer sued the Coors’ Brewing Company, unsuccessfully, claiming that drinking copious amounts of the company’s beer kept him from writing “The Great American Novel.”

Some actions, of course, do produce reactions. Step on the brake pedal of your car and you will move hydraulic fluid that pushes calipers against discs to create friction that stops the vehicle. Causal relationships of this kind are reasonably convincing; one can provide valid evidence of relationships between the events sufficient to convince most people that an initial action did, indeed, cause subsequent actions. In other cases, however, a supposed connection between cause and effect turns out to be completely wrong.

For example, doctors now believe that when an elderly person falls and is found to have a broken leg or hip, the break usually caused the fall rather than the other way around. In our democratic society, causality can be especially difficult to control or determine when economic, political, or social relationships are involved.

That’s why suspiciously simple or “politically convenient” causal claims should always be subject to scrutiny. In the 1990s, for example, crime rates in New York City fell sharply. Then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his supporters claimed that credit was largely due to the Giuliani Administration’s innovative policing strategies, such as cracking down on minor crimes to prevent the commission of more serious offenses.

But some of these policies had actually begun on Giuliani’s predecessor. Moreover, during the same period, crime fell just as much in other American cities—including those whose police forces operated very differently from New York’s. Giuliani’s strategies may well have contributed to the drop. But analysts disagree strongly about how much.

BEGGING THE QUESTION



At the risk of making a hasty generalization, there's not a teacher in the country who hasn't heard the following argument: *"You can't give me a 'C' in this course! I'm an 'A' student!"* For a member of Congress accused of taking bribes, a press secretary makes a version of the same argument: *"Congressman X cannot be guilty of accepting bribes; he's an honest person!"* In both cases, the problem with the claim is that it's made on grounds that cannot be accepted as true; those grounds, in and of themselves, are in doubt. How can the student claim to be an "A" student when, in fact, she or he just earned a "C"? How can the accused bribe-taker defend her- or himself on the grounds of honesty when that honesty is now suspect.

Setting such arguments in Toulmin terms helps to expose the fallacy.

Claim:

You cannot give me a "C" in this course because I'm an "A" student.

Fallacious Warrant or Rationale (Logic):

An "A" student is somehow incapable of ever receiving a "C."

Claim:

Congressman X cannot be guilty of bribery because she or he is an honest person.

Fallacious Warrant or Rational (Logic):

An honest person cannot be guilty of accepting bribes.

With the warrants stated, you can see why "begging the question"—that is, assuming as true the very claim that is being disputed—is a form of "circular argument" divorced from reality. If you assume that an "A" student cannot receive a "C," then the first argument stands. But no one is an "A" student by definition; that standing has to be earned by performance in individual courses. Likewise, even though someone with a record of honesty is unlikely to accept bribes, a claim of honesty isn't an adequate enough defense against specific charges. An honest person will not accept bribes, but merely claiming someone is honest doesn't make that person so.