

Logical Fallacies 101

Or, how to spot illogical arguments

by Scip Garling

Logical fallacies (errors in reasoning) are not obscure rhetorical devices left over from forensic classes of the past. No, fallacies are alive and well — and thriving in the immigration debate. Opponents of immigration reform use them constantly to block critical discussion of our country's immigration policy. A familiarity with some common fallacies may help readers to identify them in the arguments of others and avoid them in arguments of their own. What follows is a brief overview of several major logical fallacies and their use in the immigration debate.

1. POST HOC, ERGO PROPTER HOC (Coincidence and Causality)

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc (literally, after this, therefore because of this) is a causal fallacy. Although the name is a mouthful, it is simple to understand: just because two things happen to coincide doesn't mean one causes the other. For example:

Whenever I carry an umbrella my allergies are better. Therefore, to improve my allergies, I should always carry an umbrella.

It may be true that whenever I carry an umbrella my allergies are better. But that does not mean that my allergies are better because I am carrying an umbrella. This doesn't mean that the two are not somehow related. In this case, the two factors may have a common cause: I am carrying an umbrella because it is raining, and when it rains the pollen count goes down, improving my allergies.

In the context of the debate about immigration the *post hoc* fallacy looks like this:

Scip Garling is Chief of Research at FAIR (The Federation for American Immigration Reform) in Washington, D.C.

After our huge wave of immigration at the turn of the century, America went on to greatness.

This may be true, but it does not follow that such greatness was caused by the huge wave of immigration. In fact, greatness may have been achieved despite immigration; or perhaps the optimum conditions that formed the foundation of greatness also attracted immigrants at the same time. In any case, to jump to the conclusion that immigration is the cause of our country's greatness is unwarranted.

This fallacy is a favorite of immigrationist Julian Simon, who argues that because material indicators (such as the cost of raw materials and the standard of living) have gotten better over the last fifty years while the population has been skyrocketing, the only possible conclusion is that the more people we have the better off we are.

2. THE APPEAL ARGUMENTS (the "Ad" Arguments)

When someone really doesn't have a leg to stand on, or is too lazy to craft a causal fallacy, he often resorts to an "appeal" argument, i.e., he appeals to emotion instead of reason. The appeals are very handy when there isn't a lot of time for debate, and are often heard before large audiences. They are an attempt to get you to feel instead of think, because if you start thinking, you may start thinking for yourself.

A. Argumentum ad populum (appeal to popularity)

Since some people feel it is more important to be popular than either right or good, they often appeal to the popularity of an idea to get you to buy into it. "E.T. must be a great movie — everybody's going to see it" is very similar to "Everyone likes the idea of immigration, so it must be a good thing." There could be many reasons that a great number of people have gone to see E.T. (for instance, maybe they had to take their children to see it); but it is not necessarily a great film because of that. So too, many

people might like immigration because it makes them feel good about the desirability of our nation; but that doesn't necessarily make immigration a good thing for the country.

B. *Argumentum ad baculum* (appeal to force)

The appeal to force boils down to "agree with me or you'll be in trouble." When immigrationists argued that the District of Columbia should grant suffrage to aliens living there, one of the reasons was that without the right to vote, the aliens might take to the streets in frustration, as they did in the Mt. Pleasant Riots. Force may indeed be a motivator for going along with something; but it doesn't make it right. *Argumentum ad baculum* may also be thought of as coercion, or an appeal to fear.

C. *Argumentum ad verecundiam* (appeal to inappropriate authority)

Argumentum ad verecundiam (literally, the appeal to deference) relies on one's willingness to defer to important people on all sorts of matters, whether they know better than you or not. Madison Avenue relies on this appeal heavily: Whoopi Goldberg advertises MCI, Candice Bergen plugs Sprint, and Bill Cosby sells Jello. These actors are not experts — either in telecommunications or gelatinous foodstuffs; yet their celebrity status is expected to influence you in such matters. The same happens when immigrationists cite "a survey of economists" or quote Bill Gates as proof that immigration is good for the country. Economists may have some idea of what expands (but not improves) the economy, and Bill Gates probably has an idea of what is good for Bill Gates; but citing them as experts on the benefits of immigration to the country is simply an appeal to an inappropriate authority.

D. *Argumentum ad misericordiam* (appeal to pity)

When your spouse comes home and begins to argue that the Venetian blinds should be closed slanting up instead of down (for no particular reason), and finally says "Just humor me, I've had a hard day," he is using the *argumentum ad misericordiam*. If the appeal is blatant enough, it can actually be amusing. There is the story of the teenager who killed his parents and then begged for mercy from the court because he was an orphan.

Almost any newspaper article on immigration

will make an *argumentum ad misericordiam* (usually at the beginning):

Widowed Maria Vargas, who works two jobs and sews her own clothes, only wants to make a better life for her baby girl. She heard that, in America, if she works hard, she can give her daughter the life she could only dream of as a child.

By focusing our emotions on the plight of the individual, the author distracts from the overall effect of a million Maria Vargases. Journalism calls this human interest — but it is an appeal to pity nonetheless.

3. ACCIDENT (the Rigid Rule)

In general, rules are good; but there can be *too* much of a good thing. Rules are not absolute, and cannot be applied unthinkingly to every situation. The fallacy caused by over-strict adherence to a rule or principle is called Accident.

Courts of law continually must be on guard against the fallacy of accident when applying rules (laws) to specific situations (cases). A famous example of such is found in *Schenck v. United States* (1919), in which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes writes:

The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.

As a general rule, we have freedom of speech; but the court recognized that such a rule must be modified in circumstances where speech is used to endanger the public.

Because rules make things simple, the fallacy of Accident can be very seductive; and immigrationists often use this allure to their advantage:

Hardworking people are good for the economy. Immigrants are hardworking people. Therefore, immigrants are good for the economy.

Hardworking people are, in general, good for the economy, and we can even grant the assumption that all immigrants are hardworking people. But that doesn't mean that any quantity of hardworking immigrants is good for the economy. The economy is not so simple that one rule can cover it. The following example shows why such arguments won't work:

Prunes are good for you. (They are, certainly when compared with junk food.)

The more good things you eat, the better off you are. (This is true.)

Therefore, the more prunes you eat the better off you are. (This is not true, as anyone who has ever eaten a great many prunes will tell you.)

The moral here is that rules should never be blindly assumed to apply in all instances.

4. CONVERSE ACCIDENT (Hasty Generalization)

The fallacy of Converse Accident is, as its name implies, similar to the fallacy of Accident. In Accident, you misapply a general rule to a specific situation; in Converse Accident, you generalize a specific situation into a sweeping rule. Thus, Converse Accident is sometimes called Hasty Generalization.

If you went to Paris for one weekend, and came back home with the following observation:

I don't like Paris — it always rains too much there,

you would be guilty of the fallacy of Converse Accident. Two days do not yield enough information from which to generalize a city's weather. If you went to Seattle for a weekend and came to the same conclusion, you would still be committing the fallacy. Just because you would happen to be correct (it does rain a great deal in Seattle) doesn't alter the fact that the generalization is unwarranted.

Similarly, three immigrants are not sufficient for a generalization about all immigrants:

Albert Einstein, John Lennon, and Peter Brimelow have been good for our society.

Albert Einstein, John Lennon, and Peter Brimelow are immigrants.

Therefore, immigrants are good for our society.

Sometimes the argument is less specific: "Some immigrants start Fortune 500 companies, are valedictorians, and have 32 percent fewer cavities than Americans." Perhaps, but to extrapolate from those few to the 23 million immigrants in the United States is clearly a Hasty Generalization.

5. IGNORATIO ELENCHI (Irrelevant Conclusion)

Another popular fallacy is the Ignoratio Elenchi (literally, Unawareness of the Pearl). You might

more easily remember it as Irrelevant Conclusion. You are involved in an ignoratio elenchi when you pull your conclusion out of thin air, i.e., when your conclusion has nothing to do with your premises. This may sound as if it never happens, but it is actually quite common. When was the last time you heard a commercial for soft drinks or blue jeans? Such advertisements are commonly involved in the fallacy. So also are politicians when election year comes around:

I love my children; have never missed a day's work; I served my country in wartime; and I believe in the divine nature of America's destiny. Therefore, you should vote for me in November.

The points are interesting, and may arguably say something about the character of the candidate (e.g., that he is an ordinary parent with good health who got drafted); but the conclusion that he is the appropriate person to elect to office comes out of nowhere.

Even a casual listener to immigrationist arguments will turn up examples of Ignoratio Elenchi. Here is one such example:

Immigrants are colorful and add to our diversity.

Immigrants only come here to better their lives and mean no one harm.

Immigrants evince family values.

Immigrants pay tribute to the greatness of our country by wanting to come here.

Therefore, the annual number of immigrants should not be reduced.

The premises (if you accept them) might lead to some conclusion (perhaps that immigrants are well-meaning), but the conclusion that immigration reform is not necessary does not follow.

Immigration limitation is such a serious matter of public policy that watching for fallacies is a practical necessity. □

How Can We Divide Resources Fairly?

"There's no way to cover America's poor people if we have to cover Mexico's poor people, too. The price of compassion is restriction. If you're going to serve everybody, you're going to serve nobody."

— Former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm

They Won't Go Away

The issues raised by Pat Buchanan will not fade

by **Scott McConnell**

The Great Fear set off by Pat Buchanan's victory in New Hampshire has now expired. Buchanan's loss in Arizona, followed by Dole victories in South Carolina and then everywhere else, made it clear that the Buchanan campaign would be a neo-populist protest vehicle, not a serious bid for power.

The Republican sense of relief is palpable; even if — as remains possible — Bob Dole loses badly in November and takes the GOP majorities in the House and Senate down with him, the business interests which form the GOP's backbone will face no frontal challenge.

No candidate will be pointing out that mass immigration undermines the wage levels of less-educated American workers — and none will raise indelicate questions about the corrosive impact of economic globalization on American communities.

Buchanan's flameout was a more closely run thing than Dole's landslide delegate totals now suggest. In a way it serves as a backhanded compliment to the much-maligned profession of political consultants, who have

Scott McConnell is a syndicated columnist. This article is reprinted by permission from the New York Post, March 13, 1996.

no role in the pitchfork pundit's campaign.

Had there been a politically savvy grownup with the candidate's ear during the crucial 72 hours following the New Hampshire win, Buchanan might have been told that he had all the Arizona gun-nut voters in his pocket anyway, and that the time was right to present himself in a Catholic-run homeless shelter — there to speak quietly about what Americans owe to one another as part of the social contract.

Better that, certainly, than to gallivant with rifle and a black hat around the OK Coral. Apparently, however, there was no one in the campaign with a sufficiently mainstream sensibility to say so — a fact which, by itself, speaks volumes about Buchanan's weakness as a candidate.

But though Buchanan will not win anything this year, the themes animating his candidacy are not going to vanish. Mainstream commentators like to dismiss Buchanan's message as "preaching fear" (to quote *Newsweek's* cover). The subtext of such claims is that there is really nothing to fear — and if there were, Buchanan is offering only chimerical solutions.

But what if the illnesses diagnosed by Buchanan are real? And what if the cures he is offering are as plausible as those tendered by anyone else?

Edward Luttwak, a re-

nowned political writer analyst and historian, recently described the Buchanan campaign as part of world-wide populist reaction against the "turbo-capitalism" of free trade and domestic deregulation.

Luttwak points to last autumn's widespread strikes in France and the wave of neo-communist electoral victories in Eastern Europe as other instances where the populations of relatively advanced countries are shouting an emphatic "No" to the new imperatives of the global marketplace.

...What if the illnesses diagnosed by Buchanan are real? And what if the cures he is offering are ...plausible?

And they are not deluded for doing so. Luttwak notes that while Buchanan's remedies would likely reduce America's overall GNP, they would also produce a more prosperous middle and working class.

Tariffs would limit the ability of well-off Americans to pick and choose goods from the global marketplace; American consumers would be, in effect, forced to buy inferior American-made