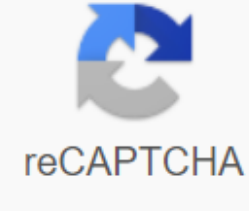




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False analogy examples in politics

RETURN TO ENLIGHTENMENTTHINK AGAIN Last year, in order to illuminate how unreasonable the human mind can really be, I made a list of incredibly common logic fallacies that we all commit. I used politics to illustrate, and some readers misunderstood my list as a kind of partisan attack, which wasn't meant to be. For the most part, however, my original list has received a lot of positive feedback, so I decided it was time to revisit the topic and find some more common fallacies. Once again, I will use current events and modern American politics as examples, but I will strive to be moderate. While I'm sure some readers won't be satisfied unless I spend all my time attacking Republicans or Democrats, I want to stress that the point of this list is not to score political points, but to illustrate the fact that politicians and experts of all kinds use fallacies on a daily basis. Sometimes they use them unintentionally, sometimes they know they are doing it, but each time, they must be treated with skepticism and critical thinking, because without those tools, all we have left is an illogical partisan dispute. THE APPEARANCE TO TRADITION It is traditional to compare your politicians with Hitler We will start with an easy one. The appeal to tradition is exactly what it seems, an argument that presupposes that the best way to do something is as has always been done. This is almost completely false and disallowed the nature of progress, but it remains a deeply effective argument. Most of us are programmed to resist change and like to cling to our traditions, so we tend to agree with the people who argue in defense of those traditions, especially as we age. I insist that this is a generalisation and it is certainly not true for all of us. President Obama demonstrated this yesterday in his speech to governors. As he argued against cutting spending for infrastructure projects, he said: This has not traditionally been a partisan issue. Lincoln laid the rails during the course of a civil war. Eisenhower built the Interstate System. Both sides have always believed that America should have the best of everything. We do not have third-class airports or third-class bridges and third-class highways. That's not who we are. We shouldn't start going down that road. There are a couple of different fallacies here, but the clearest thing is their appeal to tradition, the idea that just because Lincoln and Eisenhower spent money on infrastructure projects, that's the only way to avoid having third-rate airports and third-class bridges and third-party highways The president may be right, but that's not the point: it's a bad argument. Of course, there are certain social conservatives who appeal to tradition as a reflection. If it comes to legally defining marriage as a traditional union between a man and a or tell us that we must honor the promise of loyalty in schools because they never had a problem with it when they were in school, we have all heard these callings to tradition. There are certainly traditions worth preserving, but only because something is a tradition does not automatically make it a good thing. After all, for a long time, slavery was a tradition. THE FALSE DICHOTOMY (FALSE DILEMMA) Here in America, we do both, often at the same time Every time you are given a limited number of options that try to force you to think inside the box, you have probably been given a false dilemma. The simplest and most common form of this is the false dichotomy, where the argument proposes that it has only two options. This is used in politics for any number of reasons: either the speaker wants me to accept something arguing that the only available alternative would be much worse, or the speaker simply wants to bring people together through an argument from us against them. This is best exemplified today by the collective bargaining debate that began two weeks ago in Wisconsin. According to Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, and several other conservative leaders, we are at a critical crossroads (note that this mental image is one of two roads) on which the government must choose between addressing huge deficits or allowing public unions to collectively negotiate for benefits. This is clearly a false dichotomy, because it is possible to do both, not a third option. However, the pro-union side does not get a free pass, because arguments coming from that end of the spectrum tend to fall victim to the appeal to the motive and the slippery fallacy of the slope. Of course, the biggest example of false dichotomy in American politics is one we see every few years when it comes to election times. Most people think we have to vote for a Republican or a Democrat, and those are the only options available to us. As a third-party card-carrying member, I have struck this point to death, but it is worth reiterating: the only reason we are in this false dilemma is because we believe in it. But it extends to more than just elections, because many of us tend to intuitively believe that if Democrats get it wrong, Republicans should be right (or visa versa). This is laughable in their face, because both sides may be right and both may be wrong, or as is even more common, an entire party might not be united in its views on any given subject (which is a different fallacy - a hasty generalization - to be dealt with in a future list). THE FALSE ANALOGIA Japan: Indistinguishable from Islam Humans think of the metaphor, that the arguments that use them are usually the most effective. We have to be careful to remember, however, that there is no such thing as a perfect metaphor. This is where the false analogy comes into play, because strictly speaking, all they're fake. However, some analogies are better than others, and particularly terrible analogies should be called false ones. An analogy rises to this level when used to come to a conclusion on two things based on their common points. In logic it speaks, someone argues that X and Y are similar because they both contain A and B, but then adds that, because X contains C, Y must also contain C. This fallacy can also be turned in his head by someone who argues that, because the two things being compared have one thing that is different, the analogy must be completely false (because X contains A and B and because Y does not contain B, Y cannot contain A). This is also fallacious, for more or less the same reasons. I know it's a little complicated and confusing, so let's get to the examples. A few months ago, when the Ground Zero Mosque proposal was on the news, columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote an explanation of why he and many on the right opposed it. He wrote that although no one opposes Japanese cultural centers, the idea of putting one in Pearl Harbor would be offensive. This is a false analogy for any number of reasons, but let's dissect it. First, we need to isolate the central analogy. While there are several metaphors that can be removed from his statement, what comes down to is that a proposed Japanese cultural center in Pearl Harbor is analyte to the proposed Islamic cultural center at Ground Zero. Pearl Harbor and Ground Zero share some common ground: the United States was attacked there by a foreign power, the attack led to a large-scale military conflict, a horrible number of American lives were lost, etc. However, the attack on Pearl Harbor came from all over Japan, while the 9/11 attack was not carried out by all Islam (not even close), which is where the analogy becomes fallacious. The relationship between Japan and Pearl Harbor is not the same as the relationship between Islam and Ground Zero. (For those who try to find out what C is, it is the objection that people should make to the proposed cultural centers; Krauthammer is arguing that because Japanese should raise objections, the Islamic one should as well.) This kind of thing is quite common in politics, either by people comparing government to business, people to sheep, or experts in giant hot air bags (hard to find fallacy in that one, actually). Still, the most frequent uses of false analogy involve history, as in the example above. Politicians and political thinkers love to compare current events with past events, and people are often so dazed by the similarities that they forget to double-check the importance of There is no formal fallacy of appeal to history that I know of, but it is one that you should definitely take into account when hearing political arguments. THE FALSE PREMISE That's just we all know that there is no shellfish in Hell similar to the false analogy (and sometimes difficult to distinguish from it) is the false premise, where a valid argument is made using faulty information. Technically, this is not a fallacy at all, because the logic of an argument that uses a false premise can be really perfectly sound. Still, I'll list it here (and it's on several lists of logical fallacies) because it's a misleading form of argument that appears quite often. A false premise is usually found in the simplest conclusions. For example, take the transitive classic argument (if A is equal to B and B is equal to C, then A is equal to C), which is solid as a rock, logically speaking. However, if it turns out that A is not, in fact, equal to B, then the argument is flawed by a false premise. Indeed, this becomes a matter of fact, not logic. I don't want to spend much time here talking about the new health law, as I spent much of the last list arguing, but I'll mention it one last time regarding the statements the president made yesterday during his speech to the governors. When he began discussing the new law, his argument was that because governors want to reduce deficits and because the health law will reduce deficits, governors must be in favor of the new health law. This is a perfectly logical argument. However, there is a possibility that the new health law will not reduce deficits, as well as the possibility that governors may not be interested in reducing deficits in the first place. If it turns out that any of these are the case (and only time can really say so), then President Obama's argument is based on a false premise. It's a simple example. Often, the false premise is much harder to discern, because it is usually not presented as part of the argument. The undeclared main premise is sometimes considered part of a logical fallacy that I will come to at a time, but suffice it to say, there are many arguments that assume that something is true even though it could actually be false. For example, there is the argument that we should ban smoking in all public places in order to improve overall health, which has some undeclared main premises: (1) smoking is bad for your (true) health; (2) prohibit smoking in all public places will reduce smoking (doubtful); (3) prohibit smoking in all public places will reduce exposure to second-hand (true) smoke; (4) secondhand smoke is bad for your health (dubious). BEGGING THE QUESTION The irony is that it is true The term begging the question is one of the most abused terms in the English language and should usually be replaced by lifting the Contrary to what you probably think it means, pleading with the question is actually the name of a logical fallacy. Sometimes it is also referred to as a circular argument or a tautology, although there are subtle subtle between the three things. An argument asks when the premises, whether declared or not, include the argument to be proved. For example, it could be argued that God exists because the Bible says so and the Bible is the supreme authority because it is the word of God. Sometimes begging for the question can be laughably simple, as in the argument, stealing is illegal because it goes against the law. However, the arguments that raise the question are sometimes so subtle or complex that they are difficult to notice. For example, the question arises of stating the following (stolen from a book very old by Richard Whately): Allowing every man unlimited freedom of expression should always be, in general, advantageous to the state, as it is highly conducive to the interests of the community that each individual must enjoy a perfectly unlimited freedom to express his feelings. Another type of this fallacy is the undeclared main premise, mentioned above. For example, if someone argues that we have to keep drugs illegal to prevent rampant drug abuse, the main undeclared premise (found in the DNA of the argument itself, therefore, is asking for the question) is that legal drugs are abused less than illegal drugs. An even better example is the argument that abortion is morally incorrect because murder is morally incorrect. The main undeclared premise is that abortion is the same as murder. Before I finish, I would like to give up that I am not immune to logical fallacies in my own writings and arguments. While I encourage my readers to point them out to me if they can find them, they are not allowed to act smug about it, because you, whoever you are, are not immune to them either. We all make logical fallacies, and we all fall into them. The important thing is that we remain vigilant against them, assuming that we are interested in debating in good faith and seeking the unsafe truth. Don't worry, there are many logical fallacies that I haven't addressed yet, and there's not much chance they'll stop appearing in politics. What I'm trying to say is that you'll see another one of these lists in the near future. See you then! -e. magill 3/1/2011 Your browser does not support online frames. Get out of the age of the computer stone now! Already!

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