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# Avoiding Pitfalls in Reasoning

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**Abstract**

I'd rather not be an idiot and neither would you. One useful tool in avoid idiocy and figuring out what's true is to be aware of logical fallacies. Some errors in thinking are so common that they have been named in infamy. This article is an anti-idiocy vaccine to immunize you to common fallacies such as poisoning the well, begging the question, false dichotomy, and others, in order to give you a better shot at avoiding fallacy and finding out what's true.

Just as there are right and wrong ways to play tennis, give a lecture, drive a car, play drums, or build a boat, there are right and wrong ways to think. We cannot help thinking, but we can monitor and correct our thinking and that of others by using reason. Thinking well is essential to living well since bad thinking often leads to bad outcomes. We never praise someone for being irrational or unreasonable. But how do we avoid these epithets? How can we improve our reasoning? One reliable method is to study proper patterns of argument, such as induction and deduction. Another method is negative, but still helpful: we can uncover improper kinds of reasoning that masquerade as reasonable, known as fallacies, and avoid being tricked by them.

Some mistakes in reasoning are so common that they are dubbed logical fallacies. The astute fallacy detective can find them everywhere since they spring up like weeds in an untended garden. Each age suffers from abuses in reasoning, but in our day, particular fallacies are in vogue and often left undetected. We can only sample a few logical fallacies in the vast menagerie of error. Logical fallacies are no respecter of religion or politics. They can be found everywhere.

We begin with a fallacy called poisoning the well.

## Poisoning the Well

If a well is poisoned, all the water is bad. You drink none of it. Some water trucks have a sign on them: 'non-potable water', meaning it is unhealthy to drink but has other uses. But as a metaphor, 'poisoning the well' means to reject a truth claim based on the claimant's membership in a group. A truth claim stipulates that something is the case about objective reality. 'God exists' is a truth claim, as is 'God does not exist.' Consider this example of poisoning the well related to the existence of God: John, who believes in God, is talking to Sam. Sam says, 'Hey, John, I read this interesting argument in *Skeptic Magazine* against the existence of God.' John replies, 'Well, of course. What do you expect from *Skeptic Magazine*? They are a bunch of brainwashed atheists. Forget it.' John poisons the well instead of considering the argument. Even a convinced theist should be willing to consider arguments against theism and vice versa.

By dismissing atheists as 'brainwashed', John adds another fallacy called *argumentum ad hominem*, which is an attack against the person and not against the argument. Perhaps some atheists are 'brainwashed' – meaning they hold their view through peer pressure or some other non-rational factor – but there is no reason to assume that all atheists hold their views in this way. *Ad hominem* fallacies are sadly common, especially in media and politics, where character assassination is more common than rational argumentation. However, someone's character or reputation may factor into a rational evaluation of a truth claim. If Jane is known to be a pathological liar, then Jane's claim of X has less weight than if a person known to be honest claims X.

Many wells are poisoned in political discussions. I was discussing an issue related to race, politics and economics with a colleague and mentioned the perspective of the economist Thomas Sowell. I asked the colleague if he had read Sowell. His response was, 'He's conservative!', as if that ended the conversation. His curled lip told the story: politically conservative views are worthless. My response was, 'Yes, but his perspective is worth considering. You should read him.' I don't think he did.

## Bulverism: The Ideological Fallacy

Poisoning the well can become an enterprise of ideological rejection when one viewpoint is assumed and all others are deemed somehow irrational, a reflection of mental illness, or self-serving. C. S. Lewis coined the neologism 'bulverism' in an essay of the same name in his collection of essays, *God in the Dock*. It looks like this:

1. I assume, without argument, that you are wrong about X.



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2. I further assume you are wrong about X because your view is tainted by something bad about you.
3. Therefore, I do not need to argue why you are wrong about X, since I have already undermined your perspective because of something about you.

**'By exposing the counterfeits of reason, we can better recognize and value good reasoning, which is conducive to better living for individuals and for society as a whole.'**

Lewis says this: 'The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly.' Lewis illustrates this with Freudianism and Marxism. Put crudely, Freudians explain behaviour based on psychological complexes and Marxists explain behaviour on the basis of economic interests. Thus, a Freudian explains (and explains away) belief in God as a result of people needing a cosmic father figure; it is a projection based on psychological need. The Marxist explains (and explains away) a defence of the free market; it is based on the capitalist's desire to exploit the worker.

Both of these assessments may be correct; however, neither of them engages any rational argument given by the theist or by the capitalist. Perhaps there is a good argument for God's existence (such as a cosmological argument) that does not depend on the feelings of the theist. Perhaps there is a good argument for capitalism that does not depend on greed or the desire for the business owner to exploit the worker. To engage in rational discussion, we need to appeal to reason and not to other causal factors that may impinge on beliefs. The bulverist tries to explain a person's belief based on non-rational causes – her upbringing, her economic class or her race.

This bulverist strategy backfires when it is assumed that all viewpoints with which he disagrees are based on non-rational ideologies which are impervious to evidence or refutation. If so, then no one has access to objective reasons for beliefs. The capitalist can retort, 'You Marxists only believe in class struggle because you are envious of the successful business people, and you want their wealth.' Put another way, if you poison my well, then I will return the favour and poison your well as well. Thus, we all get poisoned. Of course, we are getting nowhere fast. Lewis, however, has an apt response. We need 'some tenacious belief in our power of reasoning, held in the teeth of all the evidence that Bulverists can bring for a "taint" in this or that human reasoner'. In fact, 'the power of reasoning' is our only hope against the danger of logical fallacies.

## Don't Beg the Question

The strategy of the bulverist also commits the fallacy of begging the question (which needs to be distinguished from raising the question, which is no fallacy). Instead of arguing that his position X is correct, the bulverist simply assumes X is correct, and then looks for reasons why anyone would deny that X is correct. Consider an example: Jeff says, 'Capital punishment is wrong because two wrongs don't make a right.' If so, he has only assumed that capital punishment for murder is as wrong as the murder itself. The statement 'Two wrongs don't make a right' is only correct if capital punishment is wrong, and he has made no case for that. Thus, the question has been begged.

## False Dichotomy, Anyone?

Poisoning the well and begging the question are often paired with the false dichotomy fallacy, which is an oversimplification that reduces the



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logical options to a dichotomy. Consider first a true dichotomy: either a woman is pregnant or she is not pregnant. If she is carrying a fertilized ovum, then she is pregnant. If not, then she is not pregnant. There is no third option, such as semi-pregnant or quasi-pregnant.

However, in political matters, false dichotomies are often displayed. One may state, 'You either believe in systemic racism against people of colour (POC) in the United States or you are a racist.' Of course, the terms 'systemic racism' and 'racism' need to be defined (and often are not), but the basic claim is that if one believes that unfair racial outcomes are not unjustly 'baked into the system', then one holds wrong and immoral views about POC that are tantamount to racism. But this is a false dichotomy.

Without denying the existence of real racists who favour racial discrimination, Bill may question the claims of systemic racism while not holding any derogatory views of POC. Rather, Bill may recognize areas of society where POC are not advancing as they should and propose ameliorating programmes and policies that, nevertheless, do not assume systemic racism. Thus, the original dichotomy (believe in systemic racism or be a racist) is a false dichotomy, since one may be a non-racist but not affirm systemic racism. That is a legitimate third option, thus refuting the dichotomy claim.

This illustration assumes neither that systemic racism does not exist nor that there are no racists. On the contrary, it only highlights how a false dichotomy works. Once we eliminate this kind of error, we can begin to reason better about matters of great importance, such as racial fairness and justice.

The false dichotomy fallacy is often invoked about gun control in the United States. Some argue that guns are not the cause of mass shootings. Rather, the cause is found in broken homes, drug abuse, poverty, social alienation, or some other human issue. One finds memes to this effect, especially after a horrific mass shooting. To put it rather crudely, 'Guns don't kill people. People kill people.' No, people kill other people with their guns. It is a both/and condition, not an either/or condition (false dichotomy). Wherever one stands on this issue, it must be admitted that the availability of guns, especially rapid-firing guns with large magazines, contributes to gun murders, even if the guns by themselves murder no one.

## The Red Herring

It's odd that a fish can be a logical fallacy, but the fish makes a point by making a stink. A red herring is a metaphor for an irrelevant issue brought into a debate in order to throw someone off the scent of an argument. It is a fallacy of misdirection. The phrase's origin is traced to a trick used to mislead bloodhounds sent out to catch a fox. A red herring was dragged across the trail to send the hapless hounds in the wrong direction. In a press conference in 2021, then-president Donald Trump was put on the spot by a reporter about one of his policies. Instead of answering the charge, he said, 'I'm going to win in a landslide in the next election.' Politicians are particularly adept at this fallacy, since they so often avoid answering hard questions by choosing to divert the discussion.

## *Argumentum ad baculum*: Threats Instead of Arguments

Another fallacy does not even pretend to be logical, but still dogs and demeans discussions on controversial issues. Some will not voice certain ideas because they fear being 'cancelled', which can mean being banned from social media, publicly shamed, or fired. The *ad baculum* fallacy states this: if you affirm X, then you will be punished. Therefore, do not affirm X, unless you want to be punished. Or, as the CEO of a business might put it, 'All who disagree with my new policy can submit their resignations now.' A less obvious instance of this fallacy in action is when an undergraduate student disagrees with her professor but is afraid to voice her objection in class or in a paper, since she knows the professor will punish views with which he disagrees, even if they are well stated. She has not been refuted, only intimidated. A good professor will not penalize students merely for disagreeing with him or her.



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‘Lewis says this: “The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly.”’

## The Use-Mention Fallacy

This fallacy confuses the semantic setting of words or phrases. For example, Psalm 14 in the Hebrew Bible says, ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”.’ The text mentions what the fool says, by using quotation marks, but it does not agree with what the fool says, as the context shows. Thus, if someone claims that the Bible affirms that there is no God, they have committed the use-mention fallacy. But consider a real-life example. A professor of literature was teaching on a text written by the black writer James Baldwin, in which Baldwin uses the n-word. In the lecture, the professor mentioned Baldwin’s use of the n-word. He was later reported by offended students and disciplined by his school for using a racial epithet. Nevertheless, the professor (however imprudent and insensitive he may have been) was not using the n-word himself to refer to anyone else, but was rather mentioning the use of the n-word by another person, that is, James Baldwin.

Speakers will sometimes indicate that they are mentioning a word or phrase (not using it) by holding up two bent fingers on each hand to signify ‘air quotes’. However, the status of this fallacy *as a fallacy* is questioned by people who deem that some words should not be spoken by anyone, irrespective of whether one is using them or mentioning them.

## Find Those Fallacies

Space forbids finding and refuting other fallacies (the reader may already feel a sad fatigue), but our succinct survey has uncovered some of the leading reason-corrupting culprits, which appear all too often in discourses about politics, morality, religion, and in everyday conversation. By exposing the counterfeits of reason, we can better recognize and value good reasoning, which is conducive to better living for individuals and for society as a whole.

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