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Critical reasoning: Reading 2

OER University

The aim of this course is to provide an opportunity to acquire critical thinking tools to critically analyse and evaluate knowledge claims. These tools are crucial to making informed decisions in study, work and private situations. Reading 2 provides an orientation to two common obstacles to clear thinking: preconceived ideas and fallacies.



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TOPIC 2: Obstacles to clear thinking

If you actively participate in the learning opportunities provided in Topic 2, you will acquire the competence to:

- recognise some of the obstacles to clear thinking
- shy away from fallacies, stereotypes and preconceived ideas.

Activity 1

Carefully consider the following pictures and then, in your journal, answer the questions that follow (for your own benefit you should write down your responses because you will need to revisit them again):

(1) The twins



(2) Australian drag queen



(3) Papuan



- (1) In your opinion, what kind of work does each of the people pictured above do?
 - (2) Do you think that these people are married? Why? Why not?
 - (3) Which economic class does each of them belong to: poor, middle class or privileged? Why?
 - (4) Which gender "category" does each of them belong to: male, female, inter-sexed, transgender or no particular gender? Why do you say so?
 - (5) Which tribe/race does each of them belong to? Why?
 - (6) Do you think that the people pictured above are violent? Why? Why not?
-

Feedback

In your journal, critically consider your responses to the questions above. Did you look at the pictures with an unbiased mind, or were you influenced by your own perceptions of what professional people, married people, rich people or poor people look like?

As you will see when you consult the online references we have suggested, two main obstacles to clear thinking are: preconceived ideas and fallacies. Preconceived ideas could be broadened to include social conditioning, labelling and stereotypes.

The section below will give you the opportunity to learn to recognise these obstacles to clear thinking. However, before you move on with your process of becoming an initiated critical thinker, we would like to advise you to rent a copy of the DVD “Thank You For Not Smoking” from your nearest video/DVD store. Sit back in front of the TV and enjoy the DVD – the text and visuals provide wonderful material for critical thinking. After having watched the movie, please post your comments in the form of a blog (keeping a copy for your journal).

2.1 Preconceived ideas

Preconceived ideas are ideas that decisively influence our thinking, but which we have not critically reflected upon. As you will see if you consult your online references, not all preconceived ideas are fallacious (based on false assumptions).

However, we must constantly consider our preconceived ideas critically to test their validity. In critical reflection we ask about the grounds for holding a belief. Do these grounds withstand rational scrutiny? Is there sufficient evidence to support the belief? Is the belief appropriate in its context? What weight should we give to counterarguments and counterexamples? And so on.

Activity 2

Consider the following story and try out the activity on your friends:

A man and his son are driving together on a stormy night. They have an accident in which the father is killed and his son badly injured. The boy is taken to the local hospital and requires urgent surgery. He is prepared for the operation and wheeled into the theatre. The surgeon arrives, looks at the boy and says, “I cannot operate on my own son”. How is this possible?

Feedback

To many people the story presents a riddle. But the answer is obvious. The surgeon is the boy’s mother. The story is a riddle only if we have a preconceived idea which associates being a surgeon with being male. There is no good reason to hold this idea.

Below we explore how preconceived ideas such as social conditioning, labelling and stereotyping affect our capacity for critical reasoning. The topic of preconceived ideas is an interesting field and it is worth exploring the various forms of **preconceived ideas**, ranging from **racial** and **gender stereotypes** to the inability to see ourselves clearly. Search online using the above keywords and the references we have suggested or the references you find from your own online search. Use your journal to make notes. (Remember to copy the URL and date of access so that you can revisit the site if you need to and so that you can reference the site correctly if you make use of the ideas you find.)

2.1.1 Social conditioning (seeing only what we expect to see)

We are sure you will agree that we all inherit or assimilate certain biased attitudes and values from our parents, schools, friends, and so on. Many of these attitudes and values come to us before we are able to test them for their validity. Later on in life, some of these attitudes and values seem to be obviously true and we do not think about whether we need to question them. Simply by the accident of birth, we find ourselves in a particular place at a particular time in history. The customs, social institutions and material setting of that place and time decisively influence the way we see the world. This background frames our view so much that it is only with difficulty that we can turn around and critically assess the framework itself.

Activity 3

Here is an interesting activity illustrating that we are conditioned to see only what we want to see. Access your own preconceived ideas by doing the activity. Read out loud the **colours**, and **not** the words, you see in the list below.

YELLOW **BLUE** **ORANGE**
BLACK **RED** **GREEN**
PURPLE **YELLOW** **RED**
ORANGE **GREEN** **BLACK**
BLUE **RED** **PURPLE**
GREEN **BLUE** **ORANGE**

Feedback

Did you read the correct colours or were you influenced by the visual colours of the words? This activity clearly illustrates our **social conditioning**.

Preconceived ideas are embedded in, and borrow their “obviousness” from, our social conditioning framework. The ideal of critical thinking is to step outside this framework and make judgments in the manner of an ideal observer. While the standard of absolute objectivity may be regarded as a regulative ideal, it would be naive to think that this can be achieved, especially when it comes to issues such as morality, justice and aesthetics. But scepticism about the possibility of absolute objectivity need not deflect us from attempting to achieve some distance from our social backgrounds and the preconceived ideas we grew up with. Social conditioning is an obstacle to critical reasoning, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle.

As we learn the names for different things and how to go about operating as human beings in society, we are told what is good and what is bad, what is to be desired and what is to be avoided, and what it means to be in the world in general. Most of this is perfectly innocent and practical, but our parents' or guardians' various judgments of themselves and of the world will creep in whether we are aware of it or not. In simplified terms, some people have a positive outlook on life while others have a negative outlook, and whether our parents believe they live in a world that is threatening and negative, or one that is helpful and positive, will have a deep impact on our psyche.

If our parents live in the illusion that money is important, politicians are corrupt, marriage is nothing special, and work is tedious, then that becomes part of our own outlook as well. Some of these negative beliefs are so deeply ingrained in our society that we don't even notice them, and they then become stuck in our subconscious while our context and perspective are still relatively limited.

Activity 4

Consider the following claims (or opinions) about two people from different backgrounds and then answer the questions that follow:

Claim: Peter grew up in the wealthy northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

Therefore, Peter is likely to believe in the values of individuality and the superiority of capitalism.

Claim: Paul grew up in the poor suburb of Alexandra.

Therefore, Paul is likely to believe in the value of community and the superiority of socialism.

- (1) Do you think that these claims are based on sound reasoning? Why? Why not?
- (2) Would you say that these claims are based on preconceived ideas? Why? Why not?
- (3) What preconceived ideas are embedded in these arguments?

Feedback

These claims are not outcomes of reflective critical reasoning. Rather, they are assumptions based on preconceived ideas about socioeconomic class and personal identity and values.


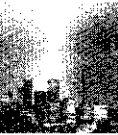




Activity 5



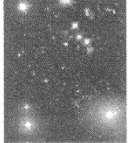


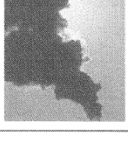


Consider the following pictures carefully then choose whether you associate each picture with good or bad news; a good or bad omen; or no association. In the blank spaces next to the pictures explain, why you have made the particular choice.

The pictures depict:

- An owl
- A lightning strike in a city
- A mirror
- A black cat
- A rainbow

- A ladder
- A snake
- A spider
- Stars in the universe
- A glass of milk
- Sheep
- A column of smoke
- A bee
- A monkey.

SOCIAL CONDITIONING						
Picture	Good news	Bad news	Good omen	Bad omen	None	Reason
						
						
						
						
						
						

SOCIAL CONDITIONING						
Picture	Good news	Bad news	Good omen	Bad omen	None	Reason
						
						
						
						
						
						
						
						

Feedback

As critical reasoners we must examine systematically our own preconceived ideas. This does not mean that our ideas must necessarily change. Critical reasoning does not tell you what to think, nor does it advocate any particular set of ideas or beliefs as the correct ones. The entire set of ideas that you inherited may turn out to be rationally defensible (although this is very unlikely).

2.1.2 Labelling

Labels are a useful way of focusing on a particular feature of a group of people or things when that feature is relevant to the context.

For example, when we are discussing which venue to use for a meeting, we may label someone as “disabled”. Here the label would be relevant to the considerate treatment of someone who is confined to a wheelchair, for example. But labelling people may sometimes hide other important and relevant features and cause us to prejudice someone’s interests. Labelling someone “doctor” may encourage us to accept her opinions on matters outside her area of expertise. Labelling a political party “democratic” may encourage us to accept its policies blindly just because we support the ideals of democracy. In South Africa the racial labels “black” and “white” have caused South Africans to focus on the differences between people, thus tending to overlook important and relevant attributes that people have in common.

Activity 6

Consider the following example of labelling and then respond to the questions that follow:

I knew a man who had lost the use of both eyes. He was called a “blind man”. He could also be called an expert typist, a conscientious worker, a good student, a careful listener, a man who wanted a job. But he couldn’t get a job in the department store order room where employees sat and typed orders which came over the telephone. The personnel man was impatient to get the interview over. “But you’re a blind man,” he kept saying, and one could almost feel his silent assumption that somehow the incapacity in one aspect made the man incapable in every other. So blinded by the label was the interviewer that he could not be persuaded to look beyond it (Allport 1954).

- (1) Do you think that the outcome of the interview would have been different if the interviewer was aware of the obstacle of labelling?
- (2) What is your opinion about labelling people?

The following are some of the answers we received when we asked this question of different people:

Person X: I think it is stupid, although I have to admit it I also do it, but I think it is better to get to know a person before you make judgments.

Person Y: Labelling people dehumanises them. However, sometimes this might be appropriate to do, (paedophiles, rapists, etc), but for the most part it is not.

Person Z: I think it's wrong. But I don't care if other people do it. I just don't. I feel that puts me above everyone else in that way.

(3) Do you also sometimes label people?

- (a) What is your opinion about the answers provided above?
 - (b) With which answer do you associate best?
 - (c) Why do you agree or disagree with the answer provided by Person Y?
-

Feedback

Labels form an obstacle to critical reasoning because they often invite us to look at the label rather than at what is being labelled. Instead of being a convenient tool for communication, they become a way of oversimplifying a complex situation and encouraging prejudice.

For instance, when we play a card game, all we need to know is the value of the cards. The details of the pictures do not change the values; so they remain invisible. Card players need only label the card. That thinking habit works well in a card game, but we often use this same mental shortcut in the "real world". We see people or situations only long enough to assign a label or category. Then we deal with the label instead of the reality – and that prevents clear thinking.

2.1.3 Stereotypes

We need labels to make quick judgments, but relying on labels leads to stereotyping and prejudice. We ignore individual differences. Soon we see only the label.

We usually stereotype groups to which we do not belong. The poor stereotype the rich and the rich stereotype the poor. Kids stereotype "old folks", who in turn stereotype "today's kids". We have trouble identifying individual members of groups we stereotype. To us, "they all look alike". Police notice this when witnesses try to pick the guilty person out of a line-up consisting entirely of one ethnic group.

Many of us hold a stereotype that "bad guys" should look bad; learnt probably from watching movies and television. But the most evil criminals can look very ordinary. Believers in the "criminal stereotype" sometimes protect themselves against the label only to fall victim to the reality. (In this regard, refer to the first activity for Topic 2 and your responses to the pictures.)

Nations at war create stereotypes to label the enemy. Soldiers find killing humans like themselves difficult. So, propaganda departments create labels for the enemy so that they appear less than human, and therefore more "killable". When those stereotyped believe the label applied to them it becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy". The label encourages behaviour that makes the label come true.

Activity 7

Read the South African National Anthem below or substitute it with your own national anthem and then respond to the questions that follow. [Note: Having engaged with words on a page, go online and try to find an audio-/audio-video version of the anthem. How is the experience different?]

*Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika
Maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo
Yizwa imithandazo yethu
Thina lusapho lwayo*

*Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso,
O fedise dintwa le matshwenyeho.
O se boloke ... o se boloke,
Setjhaba sa heso,
setjhaba sa South Africa, South Africa.*

*Uit die blou van onse hemel,
Uit die diepte van ons see;
Oor ons ewige gebergtes
Waar die kranse antwoord gee.*

*Sounds the call to come together,
and united we shall stand.
Let us live and strive for freedom,
In South Africa our land.*

- (1) How does the National Anthem make you feel? Do you feel comfortable with it? If not, why not?
- (2) Do you sing along at occasions, such as sports gatherings and graduation ceremonies, where the National Anthem is played?
- (3) If you are South African, do you sing all four verses of the Anthem? If not, why not? If you are not South African, are there any elements of your own national anthem with which you feel uncomfortable?
- (4) Statistical studies suggest that many people feel uncomfortable when they have to sing the National Anthem. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this?

Feedback

We think the answers can be found by understanding people's discomfort against the backdrop of their cultural stereotypes that are based on ignorance, fear, lack of knowledge of metaphorical language use in different cultures and a need (conscious or unconscious) to protect group identity.

Many, and possibly most, judgments of people based on membership in a group are likely to be based on stereotyping. Statements that begin with "people like you", or "you people" are likely stereotypes even if you believe they are factual. We think the best way to overcome a stereotype is by personal contact. The more individuals in a group you know personally, the more difficult it is to believe a stereotype. In this regard, we would like to encourage you to make contact with fellow

students who belong to cultural groups other than yours, because exposure to individual differences is part of a true education. Travel can have the same effect. As simple a stereotype as “Scandinavians are blue-eyed blondes” is challenged by a trip to Sweden, Finland, or Denmark where simple observation proves it false.

Stereotypes are generalisations, or assumptions, that people make about the characteristics of all members of a group, based on an image (often wrong) about what people in that group are like.

The Holocaust was the destruction of European Jews by the Nazis through an officially sanctioned, government-ordered, systematic plan of mass annihilation. As many as six million Jews died, almost two-thirds of the Jews of Europe. Although the Holocaust took place during World War II, the war was not the cause of the Holocaust. The war played a role in covering up the genocide of the Jewish people.

How could this have happened? The answers can be found by understanding how violence of this magnitude can evolve out of prejudice based on ignorance, fear, and misunderstanding about minority groups and other groups who are different from ourselves.

Activity 8

Use the following grid to assess whether the answers you gave in the first activity for Topic 2 are the result of social conditioning, labelling or stereotyping:

<i>Your responses</i>	Social conditioning	Labelling	Stereotyping
Responses to picture 1.			
Responses to picture 2.			
Responses to picture 3			

Critical self-reflection

In Topic 1, you had the opportunity to explore what it means to think for yourself and to become a critical thinker. At the end of Topic 1, in the critical self-reflection exercise we suggested that, as a starting point in developing your competence at critical self-reflection, it would be useful to express your views on some controversial issues. Let us now take critical self-reflection a step further. Return to your earlier responses to the topics (marriage, single parenting, racial differences, gender differences, etc) that you wrote down in your journal and consider the following questions:

- (1) Did you label or stereotype the persons in your responses?
- (2) If you used labelling and stereotyping, do you think it was the result of social conditioning, a defence against discomfort or perhaps some other reason?
- (3) At this stage of your initiation process in becoming a critical thinker, we consider it appropriate to challenge you by asking two more questions.
 - (a) Do you want everyone to be like you?
 - (b) Who are you really and whom/what do you represent?

2.2 Fallacies

If you consult the suggested online references, you will see that a fallacy is a deceptive argument that tries to persuade us to accept the claim that is being advanced, but the reasons in support of the claim are irrelevant or inappropriate. Put differently, a fallacy is an error in reasoning. This differs from a factual error, which is simply being wrong about the facts.

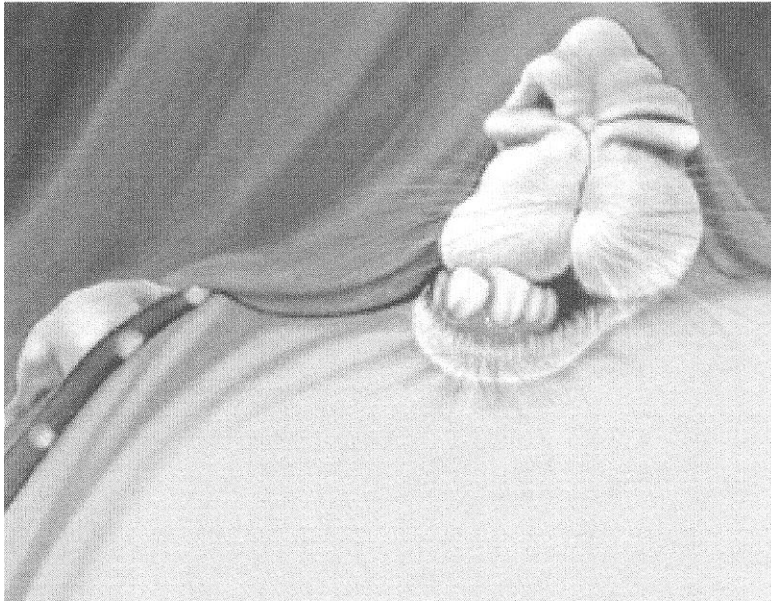
As you will see, some basic background information on fallacies is provided in the suggested online references. In this reading, we shed some more light on the topic. Please remember that while it is important to consult multiple sources, the outcome of the learning process should be that you will be able to recognise inadequacies in arguments. In the section below, we will introduce you to various kinds of fallacies. There are many more types of fallacies that are not covered in this reading, such as the argument from ignorance, appeal to force (or coercion), appeal to the masses, appeal to pity, appeal to spite, shifting the burden of proof, post hoc reasoning, red herring fallacy, affirming the consequent, denying the antecedent, et cetera.

Should you be interested in knowing more about these fallacies, you can research them on the internet or read more about them. The following are useful internet sites: www.epscohost.com; www.en.wikipedia.com; and www.google.com. Also listen to various examples of fallacies: YouTube – Funny Fallacies: The argument from ignorance www.youtube.com/watch. Here are the titles of some books (also listed in the bibliography in the Course Guide) on the topic you can read: Teays (2003) *Second thoughts: critical thinking for a diverse society*; Kahane & Cavender (2006) *Logic and contemporary rhetoric*; and Butterworth & Thwaites, (2005) *Thinking skills*.

2.2.1 Slippery slope argument

A slippery slope argument leads one from seemingly unimportant and obviously true first premises to calamitous and exaggerated consequences in the conclusion.

The “slippery slope” argument format is essentially that if you make any exceptions to a rule, or if you make rules that depend on fine distinctions, pretty soon people will be ignoring the rule or rules entirely because they won’t accept the difference between the exception and everything else. This kind of fallacy is also known as the “camel’s nose in the tent”, the “give an inch”, or the “crack in the foundation” argument. As the names suggest, the point of departure in this kind of “argument” is that if you allow exceptions to a rule, it creates a slope away from the absoluteness of the rule, down which people will slide further and further until they will not obey the rule at all. In other words, “if you give people an inch, they will take a mile” or “if you let the camel put its nose into the tent, pretty soon the whole camel will be in your tent”.



Usually this kind of “argument” has the following form:

- (1) Event X has occurred (or will or might occur).
- (2) Therefore event Y will inevitably happen.

This sort of “reasoning” is fallacious because there is no reason to believe that one event must inevitably follow from another without an argument for such a claim. This is especially clear in cases in which there are a significant number of steps or gradations between one event and another.

You can read more on the topic by consulting the following website:

<http://www.garlikov.com/philosophy/slope.htm>

Examples of slippery slope arguments

- (1) “We have to stop the rise in tuition fees! The next thing you know, they’ll be charging R10 000 a semester!”
- (2) “We shouldn’t get involved in the conflicts in other countries. Once the government sends in a few troops, it will then send in thousands to die.”
- (3) “You can never give anyone a break. If you do, they’ll walk all over you.”
- (4) “We’ve got to stop them from banning pornography. Once they start banning one form of literature, they will never stop. Next thing you know, they will be burning all the books!”

Here is a more extended example of a slippery slope “argument”:

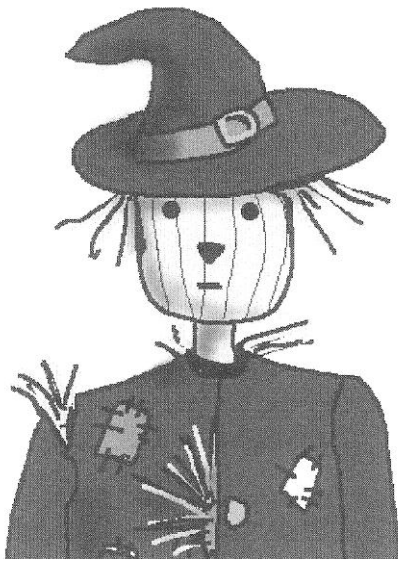
Cigarette smokers are being prevented from smoking wherever they want to. Being prevented from doing something is an interference in someone’s liberty. Liberty is at the very foundation of our democratic principles. Without the protection of personal liberty, democracy is threatened. Therefore, preventing people from enjoying a cigarette in a cinema is a direct threat to our democratic principles.

2.2.2 Straw man argument

A straw man is someone without substance, who can be easily defeated. Sometimes an opponent will respond to an arguer's claim by interpreting it in a way that makes it easy for him to knock down the argument. He deliberately ignores the strong points of the argument and attacks a straw man. For example:

Suppose an arguer claims that nonhuman animals should be accorded rights to protect them from unnecessary suffering because of their sensitivity to pain. A respondent says that this is unacceptable because animals are stupid and therefore would not be able to claim their rights anyway.

Note that this is not what was claimed in the original argument. The opponent attacks a straw man, rather than the real issue.



To identify a straw man argument, you must be familiar enough with the topic in question to recognise when someone is setting up a caricature. Understanding when someone is using this deceptive tactic is the best way to call attention to the weakness of the straw man position.

Another example of a straw man argument can be seen in the following hypothetical situation between a child and his parent:

Child: "Can we get a dog?"

Parent: "No."

Child: "It would protect us."

Parent: "Still, no."

Child: "Why do you want to leave us and our house unprotected?"

You will find additional examples in the online references.

2.2.3 Begging the question

As you will see in the online references, the fallacy of begging the question occurs when what is supposedly proved by the conclusion of an argument is already assumed to be true in the premises. In other words, the very thing you are trying to prove (your conclusion) is presupposed in the supporting argument (your premises). This is sometimes called “circular reasoning”. Carefully look at the following example and then also look at the examples in your online references:

Deliberately ending the life of a foetus is murder. So it should be clear that abortion is nothing but the illegal killing of the foetus.

The premise of this argument and its conclusion make exactly the same claims, because “abortion” means the “deliberate ending of the life of a foetus” and “murder” means “illegal killing”. The premise gives no support to the conclusion and the argument begs the question. This can be illustrated as follows:



The fallacies discussed above make it clear why it is important to know how to take apart an argument and examine its constituent parts. By moving beyond the wordiness, it is possible to look at each piece individually and see that we just have the same ideas being presented more than once.

2.2.4 Equivocation

The fallacy of equivocation occurs when a word is used in one sense in one part of an argument and in a different sense in another part of the same argument.

Example:

Helen M Alvaré provides the following example of equivocation (Cozic & Petriken 1995:24):

The elements of the moral argument on the status of unborn life ... strongly favor the conclusion that this unborn segment of humanity has a right not to be killed, at least. Without laying out all the evidence here, it is fair to conclude from medicine that the humanity of the life growing in a mother's womb is undeniable and, in itself, a powerful reason for treating the unborn with respect.

Analysis of the example:

This argument equivocates on the word “humanity” — “the condition of being human”—which means “of, ... or characteristic of mankind” ((The) Random House College Dictionary 1975, sv “humanity”). The two relevant meanings here are:

- (1) “of mankind”, meaning being a member of the human species.
- (2) “characteristic of mankind”. For instance, the “human heart” is “human” in this sense, since it is not a human being, but is the kind of heart characteristic of human beings.

Applying this to Alvaré’s argument, it is true that the “humanity” of an embryo or foetus is medically undeniable, in the second sense of “human” — that is, it is a “human embryo or foetus”. It is, however, an equivocation on “human” to conclude, as Alvaré did, that it “has a right not to be killed”. Parts of the human body are “human” in this sense, but it is only a whole human being who has a right to life. For example,

the humanity of the patient’s appendix is medically undeniable but it would be absurd to claim that the appendix has a right to life and should, therefore, not be surgically removed.

Exposition:

Equivocation is the type of **ambiguity** which occurs when a single word or phrase is **ambiguous**, and this ambiguity is not grammatical but lexical. So, when a phrase equivocates, it is due not to grammar, but to the phrase as a whole having two distinct meanings.

Of course, most words are ambiguous, but context usually makes a univocal meaning clear. Also, equivocation alone is not fallacious, though it is a linguistic booby trap which can trip people into committing a fallacy. The fallacy of equivocation occurs when an equivocal word or phrase makes an unsound argument appear sound. Consider the following example:

All banks are beside rivers. Therefore, the bank (= the financial institution) where I deposit my money is beside a river.

In this argument, there are two unrelated meanings of the word “bank”:

- (1) In the first instance, “bank” refers to a riverside.
- (2) In the second instance “bank” refers to a financial institution.

This “argument” commits the fallacy of equivocation because the word “bank” is used in one sense in the first part of the argument and in a different sense in the second part of the same argument.

You will find more examples of equivocation in your online references.

2.2.5 Complex question

The fallacy of the complex question occurs when two or more questions are disguised as one question.

Here is an example:

Is it government’s unlawful conduct or moral decline that brought the economy to its knees?

In this example two questions are rolled into one and premeditate a particular answer. The answer to the first question may be “yes”, while the answer to the second question may be “no”.

Another example of the fallacy of the complex question is:

Have you stopped beating your wife and children?

How is the person being addressed supposed to answer this question? If he answers “Yes”, then he is admitting that he has been beating his wife and children. If he answers “No”, then he is admitting that he is still beating his wife and children.

Consider the next example of a court of law case brought against a person, who killed an attacker in self-defence:

Where did you hide the weapon you used to kill the deceased?

The answer to the hidden, unasked question, “Did you use a weapon to kill the deceased?” is assumed, thereby creating the fallacy.

2.2.6 Faulty analogy

The error of faulty analogy occurs when a comparison is made between two different things, and there are no relevant similarities between them. For example:

Someone argues that interracial marriages that result in mixed-race children produce inferior children. She draws an analogy between dog breeding and child rearing. She argues that the best dogs are judged to be those which are of the purest breeding, from parents of the same breed – and so the best children are those from parents of the same race group.

In this argument the error of faulty analogy is committed because dog breeding and child rearing are clearly **not** analogous cases – there are many dissimilarities between having children and breeding dogs. The purpose of breeding dogs is to retain the features of the breed, while the purpose of having children is not to retain the features of a particular race.



You will find other examples of the fallacy of faulty analogy in your online references.

Activity 9

We have now explored six different types of fallacies. These fallacies can be categorised as distraction fallacies.

Analyse the following statements and arguments. In what ways are they fallacious?

- (1) Do you support freedom and the right to bear arms?
 - (2) Have you stopped using illegal sales practices?
 - (3) If we pass laws against fully automatic weapons, then it won't be long before we pass laws on all weapons, and then we will begin to restrict other rights, and finally we will end up living in a communist state. Thus, we should not ban fully automatic weapons.
 - (4) Since scientists cannot prove that global warming will occur, it probably won't.
 - (5) Since you cannot prove that ghosts do not exist, they must exist.
 - (6) You should never gamble. Once you start gambling you will find it hard to stop. Soon you are spending all your money on gambling, and eventually you will turn to crime to support your earnings.
 - (7) You can be sure that we will give you an honest deal on a second-hand car because we are always straight and honest whenever anybody buys a car from us.
 - (8) Those who support gun control are wrong; they believe that no one should have the right to defend themselves.
 - (9) Don't even think about his position. Opposing the death penalty means letting criminals walk away from crimes scot free and giving them the green light to murder anyone they choose.
 - (10) Marriage without love is like driving a car without brakes.
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2.2.7 Ad hominem argument

An *ad hominem* argument attacks the character or circumstances of the person who is making a claim rather than challenging the claim itself.

Example:

Mrs Ntuli's argument is exactly what one can expect from an atheist like her.

In this example the person is attacked rather than the soundness of her argument.

Note that there are three forms of an ad hominem argument:

- a personal attack on a person's character
- an attack on the circumstances of the person advancing a claim, and
- an attack on a person's interests.

These three forms of ad hominem arguments are explained in detail in your online references. Try to find examples that illustrate each category.

2.2.8 False appeal to authority

The fallacy of false appeal to authority takes place when an authority or famous person is quoted in order to get the conclusion the speaker wants (rather than providing solid evidence to confirm or

refute the claim). The fallacy of false appeal to authority occurs when the “authority” cited is not an expert in the field under discussion. For example:

There is nothing wrong with human cloning. I know this because my medical doctor said that human cloning is morally justified.

The authority cited in this example is an expert in the field of medicine, but he or she is not an expert in the field of ethics. To get his claim accepted, the arguer is committing the fallacy of false appeal to authority because he is quoting an authority who is not, in fact, an authority in the field being discussed.

2.2.9 False dilemma

The fallacy of false dilemma occurs when an “either-or” choice is presented when, in fact, there are more than two alternatives. Here is an example:

Let’s face it, John. Either you are going to be aggressive and show her who’s the boss or you are going to let her walk all over you. I don’t need to tell you what you should do. A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.

Here the fallacy of false dilemma is committed because the arguer presents only two alternatives when, in fact, there are more options available for dealing with the situation at hand. This kind of either-or argument ignores the complexity of the issue.

2.2.10 Hasty generalisation

This fallacy occurs when a generalisation is made on the basis of insufficient evidence. For example:

Mr Williams claims: “All good engineers are men because I have not come across any good female engineers”.

Here Mr Williams commits the fallacy of hasty generalisation because he has not looked into all cases of engineers, male or female. The reason Mr Williams offers for his claim or generalisation is insufficient or ill-considered.

Activity 10

We have now explored four other types of fallacies: ad hominem arguments; false appeal to authority; false dilemma; and hasty generalisation. These fallacies can be categorised as emotion fallacies. More examples and explanations can be found in your online references.

Consider the following. What kinds of fallacies are being committed in each case?

- (1) America: love it or leave it.
- (2) Colonel Smit has been a soldier for most of his life. He should know whether the invasion of Iraq was justified or not.
- (3) The MP has claimed that the salaries of the members of the House should be raised because business executives with fewer responsibilities get paid more, and that MPs’ salaries have not kept up with inflation. But listen, that’s nonsense. He’s a politician, and, of course, wants to raise the pay of politicians.

- (4) Either you support our socialist ideals, or you are a capitalist.
 - (5) The theory of evolution cannot be true. The Bible says the world was created in seven days.
 - (6) Every person is either wholly good or wholly evil.
 - (7) As an academic professor, Smith has shown himself to be biased and unscientific. It is pathetic to see Professor Smith, a non-South African, deploring conditions here when his own country calls for social and moral regeneration.
 - (8) English people are not very logical. They are suspicious of theorists.
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In summary

We have noted several common fallacies in reasoning. But an argument can fail in many other ways. The point is not to look out for particular fallacies only, but to develop a sense of when an argument is going astray. We can only develop this sense with practice. In subsequent topics you will be introduced to the techniques of argument analysis and argument evaluation in detail. But, in the end, successful critical and philosophical reasoning relies on acquiring a knack for recognising bad arguments.