

PART 1 – HOW TO CHEAT IN AN ARGUMENT

(Or even better, how to catch yourself doing it)

1.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FALLACIES

The art of recognising the difference between honest argument and fraud has been in poor health of late. That's good enough for a society which is overflowing with the riches of oil and held together by the self-interest of the market, and where there is a range of choice, with plenty of ways to be right, and second chances if you're wrong. But in our new, urgent world, getting it right matters more.

The accepted name for the hazards that arise regularly in conversation is "fallacies". From the point of view of formal logic, a "genuine fallacy" is an error (like 'Begging the Question', see Annex below) which violates the laws of reasoning.

There is also informal logic, which is, of course, the junior partner. It is often thought of as formal logic's disreputable relation, for it has no such set of solid rules from which conclusions can be deduced. The discussion of logic in the context of subjects such as religion, culture and environment by books such as this one seems to violate the principle of logical rigour, which ought not to be contaminated by reference to any particular practical applications. This mixing up of logic and content is exactly what you cannot do with formal logic.

On the other hand, without content, logic has no purpose. Formal logic is the road; informal logic is the journey.

Informal fallacies in argument can be messy – they might be about the equivocal use of language, or submission to a threat, or humour, or distraction, or a misconception about the way things work. They can be used for good purposes or bad, but the risk of them causing trouble, especially for those unfamiliar with them, is significant.ⁱ

One of the symptoms of all this is that there is no definitive list of fallacies: you can (within limits) invent fallacies as you go along, and it is possible to turn fallacies to advantage – using them, for instance, to persuade the other person of a conclusion for the wrong reasons (though a person who is fluent in informal logic should be able to expose such schemes). In fact, informal logic is altogether too informal for some tastes, and some logicians conclude with regret that it does not exist. Here, for example, is the logician Jaakko Hintikka, more in sorrow than in anger:

The [logical] structures I am concerned with uncovering are intended to be of the same kind as the structures studied in mathematical logic and foundations of mathematics. I have a great deal of sympathy with the intentions of those philosophers who speak of "informal logic", but I don't think any clarity is gained by using the term "logic" for what they are doing."ⁱⁱ

Alternatively:

OLD GENT (*to Logician*) Beautiful thing, logic.

LOGICIAN (*to Old Gent*) Provided it's not abused.

Eugène Ionesco (1959), *Rhinoceros*

2.

FALLACIES – A QUICK TOUR

Absence. Stop listening.

Abstraction. Keep the discussion at the level of high-flown generality.

Accent. Use tone of voice to smuggle fraud past the listener without suspicion.

Ad Hominem. Have a go at the other person, rather than their argument.

Air-castle. Declare a fine objective. Argue from the assumption that you have already achieved it.

Anecdote I. Dismiss crucial evidence as mere anecdote.

Anecdote II. Accept a mere anecdote as crucial evidence.

Assent. Go with the flow of authority or opinion.

Assertion. Simply assert your case, without any argument at all.

Big Stick. Threaten.

Blame. Assume that the problem is solved when you have found someone to blame. A goat, perhaps.

Causes. Assume that an event which follows another event was therefore caused by it.

Certainty. Be unaware of the possibility that you may be wrong.

Choice. Assume that we do what we choose, and we choose what we want.

Cold argument. Present a case so cold and impersonal that the other side freezes.

Common Nature. Assume everyone else is as good-natured – or not – as you.

Composition. Argue that, since one person can do it (e.g. come 1st) we can all do it.

Correlation gambit. Assert that “they” are all the same.

Damper. Refuse to recognise anything except moderation, or any idea which isn’t unremarkable.

Decisiveness. Sweep aside all argument by the supercharged simplicity of your reaction.

Definition. Define a word to mean what you want it to mean today, and defend that definition at all costs.

Dialectic. Explain everything in terms of the struggle between two powerful forces: workers and capitalists, heaven and hell, us and them.

Disconnection. Fire off slogans. Don’t worry about whether they join up.

Discretion. Do not tell them the truth, because they, unlike you, are not intelligent or strong enough to cope with it.

Empty Sandwich. Say something that sounds plausible and avoids being wrong by virtue of actually meaning nothing at all.

Evil Motive. Explain away the other side’s argument by the brilliance of your insight about their real intentions.

Exception. Insist that a statement is entirely untrue because there is (or might be) one case where it does not hold.

Exit. Walk out.

Expectation. Assume that if the other side does not say what you expect, they need help.

Expertise. Appeal to your own, or someone else’s expert knowledge. Now it’s beneath your pay-grade to listen.

F-Word. Proof that you are getting to the heart of the matter, while everyone else is dithering.

False Consistency. Avoid having to choose between two incompatible alternatives, by going for both.

False Opposite. Define a word in terms of it *not* being its opposite. Example: regulation is good, because its opposite is chaos.

False Premise. Start with nonsense. Build on it with meticulous accuracy and brilliance.

False Similarity. Assume that every new event or argument is the same as a previous event or argument which you have already made up your mind about.

Familiarity bias. Believe things that sound familiar; disbelieve things that don’t.

Fine-Distinction-Intolerance. Refuse any judgment at the margin (e.g. where pass/fail hangs on one mark).

Fluency. Be so fluent in your delivery that no one notices what you are saying.

Foolish Past. Dismiss former times as of no significance: they weren’t as clever then as we are now.

Fragmentation. Disrupt with such persistence that the person’s argument is reduced to disjointed remarks, which can be picked off at leisure.

Give up. Assume that, if you cannot think of a solution, there isn't one.

Go with the flow. Keep to yourself an opinion which might cause trouble.

Grim Reality. Assume that good qualities are either fantasy or nostalgia. Lends plausibility to claims of harsh necessity.

Half truth. Speak the truth, but leave out the part that matters.

Hearing-trouble I. Don't listen.

Hearing-trouble II. Hear every challenging argument as belonging to an "-ism", or a "wing", and reject it in boredom and disgust.

Hearing-trouble III. Hear no challenging argument unless it belongs to an "-ism" or a "wing" which you can recognise.

High Ground. Insist that the other side is irresponsibly overlooking the profound importance of what is at stake. A distraction from the argument itself.

Humility. Expose your humility as proof of your good judgment.

Hyperbole. Use wild exaggeration – especially useful for making the other person's case look ridiculous.

Ideology. Live and die for a single seductive theory that explains everything.

Inattention. Don't trouble to read what has been written before disagreeing with it.

Innocence. Present yourself as the sweet innocent, who cuts through all the clever stuff and with refreshing childish simplicity gets straight to the point.

Intelligence. Rest secure – someone of your intelligence can't be wrong.

Interrupt. Destroy all possibility of a sensible conversation, by not allowing the other side to speak. If necessary, shout.

Irrelevance. Assume that if you cannot immediately see the relevance of something, it is off the topic and merits no further thought.

Lunch bias. Agree with anyone who buys you lunch.

Many questions. Mix the agreed with the debatable. Example: "Has your objectionable boyfriend got a corkscrew I could borrow?"

Memory as irrelevant. Assume that you don't need to remember anything, because your opinion is enough, and anyway you can find it on Google.

Mind-set. Sustain your opinion inflexibly, without regard to any argument at all.

Money. Assume that money is the only measure that matters, and the only motivation that works.

Nit-pick. Use an error of detail to rubbish the other side's whole case.

No Alternative. Conclude that, since options A, B and C are impossible, *therefore* we must take option D. But D may be impossible too. And what about option Q?

Nothing new. Respond to all information – including the most astonishing – in the same way: "I know".

Numbers. Give your case plausibility by quoting precise statistics; 1 spoof number is worth 743 carefully-researched words.

Permanent Present. Assert that the future, or at least the direction of progress, will be much the same as now.

Perpetual notion. Assume that today's scientific opinion will hold good in the future.

Plausibility. Bluff your way through. Get the grades.

Possession. Quarrel with any thought that is not your own.

Reasons. Dismiss an argument as wrong if the other side cannot give reasons for it. Cite their irrational intuition as proof of how rational you are being, as needed.

Reductionism. Dismiss the entire argument other than the simplified bit of it you want to talk about.

Repetition. Make the same argument over and over again, until the other side is screaming.

Rhetorical capture. Be carried away by the other side's rhetoric, or your own.

Scepticism. Dismiss anything that is surprising.

Scientism. Explain that you're a scientist, so that, if you don't understand it, it can't be true.

Sedation. Send the other side to sleep.

Self-denying. A truth which undoes itself by being spoken. Example: "The reason we have such a strong, loving relationship is that you remind me of my mother."

Self-evident. Assume that, because something is self-evident, you don't need to find out whether it is true or not.

Semi-serious. Make your point only half seriously; if it goes down badly, you can claim to be only joking.

Shock Tactics. If someone disagrees with you, freak out.

Simplification. Simplify to the point of lunacy. It makes you audible in politics.

Sincerity. Use your sincerity as a license never to have to apply your mind again.

Slippery Slope. Rubbish a proposal on the grounds that it would cause mayhem if taken to a ludicrous extreme.

Smiler (The). Dismiss the other side's case with amiable contempt.

Spiking guns. Admit that your argument has (trivial) flaws, so that you can dismiss the other side's objections as trivial.

Spillover Fallacy. Use your expertise in one field as a license to pronounce on all other topics with authority.

Strife. Think of every argument as a battle you have to win as proof of your identity.

Sunk cost. Value a project on the basis of what you have spent on it in the past, not the net benefits it will bring in the future.

Survivor Bias. Defend a bad practice by pointing solely to the (few) examples or people which have survived it.

Tautology. Repeat your assertion in different words, hoping that the other side will think you have made a case for it.

Truism. Try to destroy the argument with a loaded statement of the meaningless: "Democracy is democracy".

Ultimatum. Threaten to walk out: "I don't want to live in a society like that".

Uncertainty. Dismiss the possibility that you may be right.

Undeniable words I. Insert "hooray" words (equality, democratic, competitive, vibrant) which no one could disagree with.

Undeniable words II. Insert "boo" words (old boy network, toff, elitist, like-the-Nazis, outdated, bigot, hypocrite) which everyone can agree to hate.

Unfalsifiability. Use a form of argument that can never be shown to be false; e.g. "If only we could all be peaceful, there would be no wars."

Unmentionable. Live in hope that since you do not speak about something, it does not exist.

Wishful thinking. Say what you have made yourself believe, because you wish so much it were true.

Wolf. Insist that, because expectations of trouble were false in the past, they will prove false in the future.

(The Annex below explores fifteen fallacies a little further)

ANNEX – KEY FALLACIES

Begging the Question.

A circular argument, using your conclusion as an argument to prove your conclusion, sometimes in light disguise. For instance:

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION: Would the use of biotechnology help to feed the world?

ANSWER: Yes. Why? Because, if we don't use it, many will starve.

That discussion is evidently getting nowhere; the person who argues in this way may or may not be aware that the assumption which, she implies, is already agreed is what the argument is actually about. More examples: There is no need to worry about oil depletion. Why? Because the people who worry about oil supplies are being alarmist. Why do you say that? Because there is no need to worry about oil depletion. *Or*, we must take our place at the heart of Europe. Why? Because, if we don't we will be missing an opportunity. What opportunity? The opportunity to take our place at the heart of Europe. *Or*, Christopher Marlow survived his attempted murder and lived to write Shakespeare's plays for him. How come? Well, he escaped out of the back door of the tavern in Shoreditch and went to live in Spain. How do you know? Well, if he hadn't, he wouldn't have been able to write Shakespeare's plays for him, would he?



It is possible to deliver a speech which consists almost entirely of sentences which beg the question, especially during the passages designed for rhetorical arousal:

We now have an opportunity to truly transform our system into a world class system fit for the 21st century ... There is a real appetite out there to embrace change, to improve our system and to end the two-tier culture which brands so many of our young people as failures at the age of 11.

I relish the challenge of transforming our outdated and unequal education system into a modern and flexible one that places equality of opportunity for each and every child at its core.

I believe such a system will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but can deliver it for all.

(Caitríona Ruane, Education Secretary (2007), presenting the Northern Ireland Government's decision to abolish grammar schools).ⁱⁱⁱ

Begging the Question is common, but there is so little awareness of it that the phrase is generally taken to mean no more than "this raises the question whether...", leaving the fallacy without even a reliable name. Its career as a destroyer of argument, however, is unchecked, and it can lurk in single words ("anachronism", "modern", "Luddite", "scientific", "accessible", "elitist", "reality", "stereotype"). Even the tone of voice, if weary enough, can suggest, deceptively, that the matter is too obvious to need explanation.

Here is an example from the debate about globalisation:

The former head of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Mike Moore, writes persuasively about the benefits of free trade. He shows that the lowering of trade barriers has stimulated growth, that the countries that have been the most open to trade have enjoyed the most economic progress and the greatest rise in the incomes of the poor. And, as former prime minister of New Zealand, he has the experience of making that country a pioneer of free-market agriculture, with benign effects across the economy. How, then, can there be doubts when he argues that the anti-globalisation movement, if successful, would bring catastrophic consequences, not just for the poor in developing economies, but for all of us? Can Mr Moore and the anti-globalisation protestors really be talking about the same thing?^{iv}

The opposing argument states that globalisation, in the form of free trade, opening up small-scale production in the non-industrialised countries to competition from multinationals, leads to unemployment and dispossession. It makes agriculture dependent on imported energy; it devastates soils, ecosystems and communities; it raises incomes in part by destroying local subsistence and forcing people into the cash economy; it is supported by the governments of the affected countries not least because of the debts into which they have been lured. Food security, with higher overall yields and greater diversity, less damage to the soil and higher real local incomes, would be more fruitfully sought by helping farmers to make the best use of their own skills applied to local conditions.

Both sides beg the question: they are each correct if their premises are accepted: if the priority is to expand world trade, to push ahead with the global market, Mr Moore's conclusions naturally follow; if it is to build on the resilience of communities, to protect them from the turbulence of the global market, and to improve their food security, his critics are correct. The begged question is the one thing they should actually be talking about.^v

Cant.

Offering assurances of goodness and good intentions, showing that no nice person could possibly disagree with you.

Little Red Riding-Hood and her grandmother were suckers. First, the grandmother opened her cottage door to the bass-voiced wolf claiming to be Little Red Riding-Hood. Then Little Red Riding-Hood got into bed with, and then eaten by, the wolf, who had disguised himself by wearing the grandmother's clothes. She had noticed some anomalies: "What big ears you have", she said, doubtfully. "The better to hear you with", said the wolf. Oh, that's all right, then.



Cant has a short life. Soon, in his true identity, the wolf jumped out of bed. Then he did sit and eat.^{vi}

Death.

Being irrationally afraid of discussing death: the means by which an ecosystem keeps itself alive, selects its fittest, controls its scale, gives peace to the tormented, enables young life, and accumulates inherited meaning as generations change places. A natural system lies in tension between life and death: death is as important to it as life. *A lot* of death is a sign of a healthy large population. *Too much* death is a sign that it is in danger; it is not coping; its terms of coexistence with its habitat are breaking down. *Too little* death is a sign of the population exploding to levels which will destroy it and the ecology that supports it. *No death* means that the system is already

dead.

The reduction of life to an icon – the assertion that life (*viz*, human life) is sacred – disconnects the mind from the ecosystem to which it belongs. It is a fertile error. Beneath the exaggerated regard for life lies an impatience with, a disdain for, the actual processes that sustain the ecology that sustains us. Expressing faith in the sanctity of human life is a license – in a series of little, well-intentioned, self-evident steps – to kill the ecology that supports it. The large scale system, relying on its size and technology, and making an enemy of death which should be its friend, joins a battle which it cannot win. In systems thinking, death is sacred.^{vii}

Diplomatic Lie.

- (1) An essential lie to protect a person against an enemy. Example: lying to the Gestapo about the presence of Jews in the attic.
- (2) A way of maintaining privacy against intrusive enquiry.
- (3) An essential lie to protect a person from being hurt. Example: “No I did not see your wife going off with Fred at closing time.”
- (4) A temporary way out of trouble. Example: “No, I did not go off with your wife at closing time”.
- (5) The sort of lie which *you* tell. Other people’s lies are plain lies.

Discounted Future.

This is a favourite fallacy of today’s economics, which lacks a coherent concept of time – or, at least, it has a mechanical technique for dealing with time which can be applied uncritically.

The key principle underlying the treatment of time here is the rate of interest. Economics recognises that if a person needs to borrow money from another person with whom he or she is not in a close reciprocal relationship, then the lender will reasonably expect to get something back for the money he provides (usually interest), in the same way as any other provider of goods and services. That introduces the principle of “discount” – money you won’t have until a future time is worth less than it would be worth if you had it now.

The problem arises when the discount principle is applied to other assets. For example, the value in a hundred years’ time of a stock, such as a fishery, discounted at a rate of 3 percent per annum for a hundred years, is just 5 percent of its present value, and if a valuation of this kind is taken literally, it can be used as a justification for fishing it to destruction now, because it is a depreciating asset.

The fact that the interest rate calculation can be made does not necessarily mean that people will be foolish enough to make it, or to apply it uncritically, but, if they do, economics provides an apparent justification.

Distant Uncertainty.

The argument that, since we do not know what is going to happen in the short term, we are even less likely to know what is going to happen in the long term. This is true only sometimes. In other cases, the long-term may be more predictable than the short term. For instance, if you are sitting in a room with a thermometer and a cup of hot coffee (and you don’t drink it), you can forecast accurately the temperature it will be in five hours’ time (the temperature of the room), but not the temperature it will be in ten minutes’ time. You can forecast a long-term trend in the oil market (prices will rise) but have no idea what they will do in the next few days.

Distraction.

Diverting attention from the argument.

Consider the proposition that two and two makes four. Distraction might urge, for instance, that the idea is old-fashioned, that the time has come to move on from traditional thinking on the matter, or that it is too technical for the public to understand. It could take the form of an ingratiating assurance that the only thing that matters, naturally, is the well-being and happiness of everyone concerned. Distraction might urge that it is perfectly okay nowadays to think that two plus two makes five; or that even thinking about it means an unforgivable neglect of the far more important proposition that three plus four makes seven. You might be invited to take note that there is money to be made by taking a different view of the matter, or that we have to move on from the notion if we are to be competitive, or that the proposition is a bit rich coming from someone with a private life like yours. Or it could insist with some passion that, contrary to the view that two plus two makes four, we must take our place at the heart of Europe. Distraction might add, with hoped-for finality, that the argument has already been lost: two plus two is going to make five in the future, whatever we do.

Distraction, evidently, has the power and freedom to cause havoc wherever it likes. It is a spoiler, worse than the cheat: the cheat at least recognises the existence of the rules on which argument depends if it is to make any sense, even though he then proceeds to break them, hoping not to be found out. Distraction recognises nothing except conquest: the argument is too serious to have any connection with the orderly rules of honourable play; it will be settled by other means. Rules? What rules? It presumes the death of logic.

A characteristic form of distraction is to make an assertion which is not true, but which is hard to disagree with. This happens, for instance, with the appeal to the inevitable: the distracter does not argue for or against a proposal; instead, he simply asserts that it is going to happen anyway, and he may do so in a slightly bored drawl that passes off the sell-out as if it were a routine comment on the weather. Don't stand for this: it is one of the ways in which our citizens' right to have a say in deciding for ourselves dwindles into a loss of belief that we can influence anything at all. It is designed to induce give-up-itis, an acceptance that technology and the sweep of history make the decisions. What we are then supposed to do is to surrender, to make sure we are not in the way.

Ignorance.

The case of not knowing anything about the subject, but not letting that put you off.

Its main habitat consists of trying to break the rule that "you can't prove a negative" – concluding that, since you can't find something (such as a black swan) it follows that it doesn't exist. Variants are:

1. The scientist's fallacy that something that has not been proved and understood therefore does not exist (e.g. homeopathy, morphic resonance, ghosts). This tends to be stated in the assertion that "there is no evidence that...", often reflecting a determination not to find it, or the use of a research model which dismisses what matters as anomaly and noise.
2. The non-scientist's fallacy that something that has not been proved not to exist therefore does exist. Variants of this are the non-scientist's version of the scientist's fallacy: the view that a phenomenon around which there is still uncertainty (e.g. climate change) is therefore untrue; and the hypochondriac's fallacy that a problem that has not been shown not to exist

therefore does exist.^{viii}

Implicature.

The presence of a subtext – another meaning – which makes a statement not quite as simple, or as innocent, as it looks. Examples:

- “What did you think of the singer?” “Well, I liked her dress.”^{ix}
- “We are tackling the problem of global warming”. There is nothing wrong with the statement itself, but it implies that we are on the way to solving the problem; it may also be taken to imply that we can do the job on our own. It sounds reassuring, but it may be telling you that the efforts to tackle global warming are not having much success.

The philosopher Paul Grice, who coined the word, pointed out that implicature is commonplace in conversation, and that it comes in many forms. Given its potential to mislead, he argued for a code of good conduct in communication, which he called the Cooperative Principle: be as informative as required (but no more), do not say things which you believe to be false or for which you have no evidence, be relevant, avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief and orderly...

... except when you're not. *Surviving the Future* advocates asides, long-windedness if it comes with a story, frank untruths if there is a reasonable chance that the other person can untangle the irony, broken logic if it reflects the difficulty of explaining things which break your heart or are hard to understand. It does not share the modest self-restraint which we find in Psalm 131:

I do not exercise myself in great matters : which are too high for me. ^x

Surviving the Future finds that, when dealing with great matters, it can, from time to time, be a good thing if there are cracks and faults in the argument, for the repair of which help is invited. It is a reminder that a conversation is a cooperative affair, not just a series of beautifully-manicured statements.^{xi}

Indignation.

Dismiss the other side's case as too repugnant to contemplate.

Indignation is an urban emotion: it looks for action to be taken by someone else, believing that the way forward is agitation. It begs the question: if you are indignant about something, it has to be an outrage, and caused by someone other than you – otherwise, of course, you wouldn't be indignant, would you? And it is urban in the sense that, in the city, it is easy to get away, so you can absent yourself from a conversation, indignantly telling the other person you find his views repugnant. You won't be needing to borrow his horse.

Out of town, it is different. It is a waste of time being indignant in a field of buttercups. You have to see to it yourself. That may involve time in a circumstance not of your choosing, in a conversation not on your terms.

Paradox.

A statement which contradicts itself, or which seems to do so. Example:

{This sentence is false.}

This is called the Liar Paradox; it can make you feel dizzy if you think about it too long, and it is said to have caused the premature death of Philetas of Cos, philosopher, romantic poet and tutor to the young Ptolemy II in the fourth century BC.^{xii} Paradoxes are extremely important because many of the most interesting truths contain seeming contradictions: as Francis Bacon remarked, “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion”.^{xiii} A person who is intolerant to paradox is likely to be excluded from an understanding of systems, and to be confined instead to a fallacious world-view consisting of smoothly-consistent error and fraudulent simplification. But an excessive fondness for paradox can be dangerous too, allowing the person simply to accept contradictions without thinking about them or, in a Marxian way, revelling in paradox and refusing to accept that an analysis has been accomplished unless it ends in mind-numbing contradiction. Paradoxes are in a sense alive: greater understanding of them does not solve them but uncovers deeper layers of interest. A paradox that is “solved” is not a paradox.^{xiv}

Relative Intelligence.

Failure to account for the match between mental capacity and the problems that have to be solved. As society becomes more complex, the relative intelligence of *homo sapiens* declines, leaving us on a lower Relative Intelligence Quotient (RIQ) than a swan, or a beetle.

Scourge of Hypocrisy.

The fallacy that, if what I do falls below the standards of what I say, my argument can be dismissed without further ado.

This fallacy arises from the obvious discomforts of a contrast between good words and bad deeds, like those of *Measure for Measure's* Angelo, upright in public, outrageous in private.

And yet, if an argument is a good one, dissonant deeds do nothing to contradict it. In fact, the hypocrite may have something to be said for him. For instance, he may not be making any claims at all about how he lives, but only about his values in the context of the argument. There is no reason why he should not argue for standards better than he manages to achieve in his own life; in fact, it would be worrying if his ideals were *not* better than the way he lives. He is not dazzled by his high personal standards; he does not make an icon of himself as the model of high moral standing. He is not defended by his sincerity from the possibility of self-criticism. His ideals are not limited to what he can achieve himself. What matters is whether his argument is right or not. With accusations of hypocrisy in the air, difficult questions about real problems short-circuit into *ad hominem* quarrel.

Hypocrisy is a bad thing with good qualities. Sincerity is a good thing with bad qualities; it shines a light on the simple certainties of your feelings on the matter, rather than on the awkward realities of the case. Some of the most intensely savage people this planet has ever produced were noted for their sincerity and their incorruptible and austere lives. There was Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), largely responsible for the reign of terror during the French revolution, but, in his own life, he was the “Sea-Green Incorruptible”. And there was Conrad of Marburg (d. 1233), thin with fasting, who, in imitation of Jesus, rode on a donkey from place to place on his mission to discover and burn heretics and witches. For ground-breaking catastrophes, we have to turn to the incorruptible. We are safer with those who are not preoccupied with admiration of their own moral standing, confident that they can think no wrong.^{xv}

If required to choose between sincerity and hypocrisy (writes the theologian David Martin), “Give me a friendly hypocrite any day”.^{xvi}

Shifting Ground.

This is the attrition tactic: as each of your opponents' arguments is defeated, he tries another one, looking for weak points or simply reducing you to exhaustion:

“We were disagreeing about Muck, but to back up my case, I will have a go at you, in turn, about Staffa, Shuna, Eigg and Arran, Mousa, Canna, Lewis and Coll. ... And Yell...”

At the level of the quarrel, this may be quite healthy, a release of accumulated resentments. Or, it may be more serious because, if what you have to argue against is not one point but a dozen, it can be hard to keep any one point in the frame for long enough to discuss it: my nuanced observations about Eynhallow merely prompt a rant about Sgeotasaigh.

And if you do start getting somewhere with it, the opposition is likely to shift the ground again – and pretend he hasn't. People don't really think like that, they just argue like it, calling in at any proposition that catches their eye, like moths fluttering opportunistically around sources of light. There may be no end to this, short of a breakdown in all possibility of a conversation, or – perhaps with help – some insight about what the conversation is *really* about, which may be nothing to do with islands at all, but an expression of deep resentments.

There are alternatives. One (recommended) is to stick to one subject at a time.

But another is to stop taking it so seriously. The idea that the outcome of an argument actually matters is a relatively new one, and in the history of traditional societies, we find arguments being fired-off in sequence, not to change anyone's mind, but to keep the peace. An illustration of this from Old Germanic history describes what we may now think of as an extended dinner party of the time, held by Turisind, King of the Gepidae. His son has recently been slain in battle by the Langobards. So he invites the Langobards chieftains round to dinner, where another of his sons addresses them. History conveniently summarises an extended argument:

SON: You are white-footed mares. You stink.

LANGOBARDS: Go to the field of Asfeld, there you will surely learn how valiantly those “mares” of yours can put about them, where your brother's bones lie scattered like an old nag's in the meadow.

After a lot of this, we are told, “they bring the banquet to a merry end.” Altogether, a great evening. And, in the Old Norse and Old Germanic tradition, the hall in which such slanging matches were held was called “the great place of peace”.^{xvii}



Straw Man.

Invent an argument which the other person did not use, and then launch a horrified attack on it.

This is distraction at its most immediate, obvious and intentional. Summarise the other side's case. Make sure your version of it is as ridiculous as possible. Demolish the summary. Claim victory.

A variant is simply to save yourself the trouble of understanding what the other side is talking about. Alternatively, launch into a free-wheeling parody – a song [Gr. *ōid*] of mockery [Gr. *pará*]. Your victim is forced onto the defensive, and possibly into fury. You're winning.

Here is an example. The target is the organic movement; the tactic is to make it sound like a fundamentalist religion.

- 1) Set up your straw man: “The high priests of the organic movement tell us that natural chemicals are good and synthetic chemicals bad.”

2) Demolish it: “This is utter nonsense. ... Arsenic, ricin, aflatoxin are all highly poisonous chemicals found in nature. Yet the supposed superiority of natural over synthetic is the rock on which the organic movement is built”.^{xviii}

Good. Now you can sit back and wait for the other side to go into a lumbering explanation (there will doubtless be something there which, if really necessary, will allow you to unleash another straw man). Here it comes:

Organic cultivation is not based on ridiculous claims about things being “natural”, but on principles of fertile soils, crop rotations, local ecosystems and animal welfare. It builds plants’ and animals’ ability to sustain their own health. It does not depend on pesticides and fertilisers produced from diminishing supplies of oil and gas. It conserves soils, water and energy; it protects habitats. It produces food richer in nutrients than conventionally-grown food, and free of contamination by synthetic chemicals. And local food production, now a priority, will improve food security, relying less on the transport which will be at risk when oil gets scarce, conserving local farming and skills, and building local fertility on productive, resilient principles known as “organic”.



Have you quite finished? It makes no difference anyway, because the straw man stopped listening ages ago. Well, he really doesn’t have to, for he has magic powers. He can make inconvenient truths disappear at a stroke. And he can provide his minders with an intoxicating sense of being right. Actually, the straw man has a dark history, but in more recent times he has been a symbol of finality, an old fellow with a short life who had to die at the end of the harvest, and to hand over to the new generation. Peasant societies used to unwind on the last day by making a straw man from the last sheaf, just to beat it to pieces with the flails they would soon be using to thresh the corn (perhaps to warn the rest of the corn what was coming). And there was a startling variant of this, where the man who cut the last bundle of corn was picked on for special treatment. His face would be blackened; he would be feted and feasted, mocked and parodied. Fortunately, he had an understudy in the form of a straw goat, which he would carry about on his back. In the end, the goat would be placed on the ground and destroyed with the flails.^{xix}

You see, you have forgotten about organic agriculture already.^{xx}

- i . For a comparison between the two kinds of fallacy, see Deborah Bennett (2004), *Logic Made Easy*, chapter 11. There is a very large literature on fallacies. For an introduction, see, for instance, Jay Heinrichs (2007), *Thank You for Arguing*, chapter 14; Madsen Pirie (2006), *How to Win Every Argument*; Robert H. Thouless (1930), *Straight and Crooked Thinking*; Anthony Weston (2000), *A Rulebook for Arguments*; and Jamie Whyte (2003), *Bad Thoughts*; For more detailed treatment see Douglas Walton (1995), *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, and Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*. Maybe the best of all is David Fischer (1971), *Historians' Fallacies*.
- ii . Jaakko Hintikka, in Jaakko Hintikka and Fernand Vandamme (1985), *Logic of Discovery and Logic of Discourse*.
- iii . Caitriona Ruane, Member of the Legislative Assembly (4 December, 2007), "Outlining a Vision for Our Education System", Northern Ireland Assembly, Stormont, Belfast, at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/education/selection/ruane041207.pdf>
- iv . WTO: Mike Moore (2003), *A World Without Walls*; Rosemary Righter (2003), "Free for all", *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 September, pp 6-8 (review of Moore's book). Yields: Jules Pretty (2002), *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land and Nature*, chapter 4.
- v . Begging the Question (*Petitio principii* – literally: "Ask [your opponent] to concede the question-at-issue, so that you can use it to prove your point." See Hamblin (1970), *Fallacies*, pp 32-35), Frans van Eemeren and Bob Grootendorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*, pp 153, 214; Christopher Tindale (2007), *Fallacies and Argument Appraisal*, pp 72-77; Douglas Walton (1989) *Informal Logic*; (1995), *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, pp 49-54.
- vi . Cant (*Argumentum ad cantum* – whine). Wratislaw, A (2008), *Sixty Folk Tales from Exclusively Slavic Sources*, p86, Forgotten Books.
- vii . See Lewis Mumford (1961), *The City in History*, especially pp 600, 636.
- viii . Madsen Pirie (2006), *How to Win Every Argument*, pp 92-94, "*Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*". Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke and Allan Janik (1984), *An Introduction to Reasoning*, pp 146-147; Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*, pp 188-194, 212-213.
- ix . Implicature is a term introduced by Paul Grice, (1989), *Studies in the Way of Words*, chapter 2. The example of the singer comes from the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*.
- x . Psalm 131, verse 2.
- xi . Grice acknowledges (pp 34, 53-55) that irony, carefully used, can truthfully communicate the opposite of what the words say.
- xii . Cited in R.M. Sainsbury (1988), *Paradoxes*, Cambridge, p 1.
- xiii . Francis Bacon (1625), "Of Beauty", *Essays*.
- xiv . Further reading: Sainsbury (1988); Glenn W. Erickson (1988), *Dictionary of Paradox*, University Press of America; Roy Sorensen (2005), *A Brief History of the Paradox*, Oxford.
- xv . Seagreen Incorruptible: the nickname is in Thomas Carlyle (1837), *The French Revolution*, vol II, Book IV, p 198.
- xvi . David Martin (2006), "Shelves of Sincerity", *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 June, p 28.
- xvii . The Shifting Ground is a form of irrelevance (*Ignoratio elenchi*). See Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*, pp 133, 214. An "elenchus" is a form of Socratic refutation which shows the interlocutor that what he thinks he knows is inconsistent with his other opinions; this is used as a means to

spur him on to think again – as distinct from a “sophistic” argument which aims to refute the opponent by any means. See also David Fischer (1971), *Historians’ Fallacies*, p 284; Douglas Walton (1995), *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, and C.L. Hamblin (1970), *Fallacies*, pp 31-32. Old Germanic banquet: Johan Huizinga (1949), *Homo Ludens*, pp 87-88.

xviii . Organic agriculture: Dick Taverne (2003), “You have to be green to swallow the organic food myth”, *The Times*, 7 October, p 20.

xix . Harvest ritual: J.G. Frazer (1922), *The Golden Bough*, chapter 48.

Dark history of the straw man: The Straw Man is a version of the sacrifice ritual which marks conclusion and death at the end of the summer, and takes us into the dark area of scapegoat and blame. Julius Caesar describes straw man sacrifices in his *Gallic War* (Book VI):

The whole Gallic race is addicted to religious ritual; consequently those suffering from serious maladies or subject to the perils of battle sacrifice human victims. ... Some weave huge figures of wicker and fill their limbs with humans, who are then burned to death when the figures are set on fire. They suppose that the gods prefer this execution to be applied to thieves, robbers, and other malefactors taken in the act, but in default of such they resort to the execution of the innocent.

By comparison with that, a mere fallacy is small beer.

xx . Straw Man: Christopher Tindale (2007), *Fallacies and Argument Appraisal*, pp 19-28; Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1992), *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies*, pp 128-131, 215; Antony Weston (1987), *A Rulebook for Arguments*, pp 6-8.