



Philosophy 200

Fallacies of Relevance

Fallacies of Relevance

- When we give reasons to believe a claim, it is understood (or conversationally implied) that those reasons ought to be relevant.
 - sometimes irrelevant premises are a form of deceit
 - sometimes irrelevant premises are mistaken for relevant ones

Ad-hominem “arguments”

- o The most basic definition of an Ad-hominem argument is an argument directed at the person presenting the argument rather than the argument itself.
- o Sometimes this is a more legitimate move than at other times. These cases will be difficult to distinguish, but relevance will be the key factor.
- o What follows are several varieties of Ad-hominem arguments.

Deniers

- o Deniers deny the truth of what is said by a person on the basis of what the denier claims about that person.
- o Louie often testifies in court for money, so we should not believe what he said today in court.
- o Larry doesn't know anything about politics. He voted for Ross Perot twice! His prediction of an Obama win is surely false.

Silencers

- o Silencers revoke a person's right to speak in a given circumstance without necessarily negating the truth of what they say.
 - o When this is used as an excuse not to entertain the merits of the argument, it represents the fallacy
 - o When this is used for a recognized and relevant purpose (like non-senators not being able to propose senate legislation) it is legitimate.

Dismissers

- o As characterized in the text, the dismisser points out an agent's self-interest in a claim that the agent makes.
 - o To go counter to the text a bit, this is seldom legitimate counterargument. A person's interest in a state of affairs that they advocate does not negate the desirability of that state of affairs to others.
 - o we need further facts about someone's integrity before we accuse them of intentional deception.

Inconsistency:

- When a person's opinions are inconsistent over time (or inconsistent with their behavior, as in the tu quoque "argument"), we might be inclined to dismiss everything they say.
- This should not be the case. People change their minds from time to time, and sometimes do not themselves follow what they know to be good advice. Inconsistency is not an independent reason to reject their claims.

Genetic fallacy:

- Whenever a view is rejected because of its causal, historical, or group origins, the genetic fallacy has been committed. Many things that are true were first proposed by odd groups of people or for odd reasons. The origin of a claim is seldom relevant to the truth of the claim.

Appeals to Authority

- In general, there is nothing wrong with appealing to authority to increase confidence in the truth of one's claims. The problem arises when the appeal is to an irrelevant authority. This happens more often than one might think.

Questions to ask about appeals to authority:

1. Is the authority cited an authority in the area under discussion?
2. Is this the kind of question that can be settled by expert opinion?
3. Has the authority been cited correctly?
4. Can the authority be trusted to tell the truth?
5. Why is appeal to authority being made at all?

Appeals to authorities that are always irrelevant

- What many people think is true is not necessarily the case. Assuming that the popularity of a belief is relevant to the truth of the belief is the **fallacy of appealing to popular opinion**.
- The fact that a claim has been held for a long time also provides no reason to believe the claim is true. This is the **fallacy of appealing to tradition**.

Emotional Appeals

- o When a person's emotions are being manipulated to get them to assent to or deny something, this is fallacious reasoning. There are as many names for these as there are names for emotions.
- o wow, that student has a tough time at home, you should give them a break on some of these test questions. (appeal to pity)
- o Choosy moms choose Jif (apple polishing)

Appeal to Ignorance

- o This is an attempt to shift the burden of proof.
 - o Ordinarily, if you are making a claim, it is up to you to justify your claim, not up to your opponent to justify its opposite.
 - o 2 examples:
 - o Aliens exist, because nobody has proven they do not.
 - o Aliens do not exist, because nobody has proven that they do.