"With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two."

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Chapter 10
To understand the human mind, understand self-deception.

Anon

The word ‘fallacy’ derives from two Latin words, fallax (“deceptive”) and fallere (“to deceive”). This is an important concept in human life because much human thinking deceives itself while deceiving others. The human mind has no natural guide to the truth, nor does it naturally love the truth. What the human mind loves is itself, what serves it, what flatters it, what gives it what it wants, and what strikes down and destroys whatever “threatens” it.

The study of fallacies can be pursued in at least two different ways. It can be approached traditionally: in which case one defines, explains, and exemplifies ways in which unsound arguments can be made to appear sound. Or it can be approached deeply, in which case one relates the construction of fallacies to the pursuit of human interests and irrational desires. Using the first approach, students gain little by memorizing the names and definitions of fallacies. They soon forget them. Their minds are left largely untouched and therefore unmoved. On the other hand, the second approach makes possible the acquisition of lifelong insights into how the mind – every mind – uses unsound arguments and intellectual “tricks” to further its ends.

When we look closely at human decisions and human behavior, we can easily see that what counts in human life is not who is right, but who is winning. Those who possess power in the form of wealth, property, and weaponry are those who decide what truths will be trumpeted around the world and what truths will be ridiculed, silenced, or suppressed. The mass media of the world generate an unending glut of messages that continually sacrifice truth to “spin.” When we reach beneath the surface of things, we find a world in which the word ‘communication’ and the word ‘manipulation’ collapse into virtual synonyms.

Students need seminal insights and intellectual tools that enable them to protect themselves from becoming intellectual victims in a world of swarming media piranhas, or, just as bad, from joining the swarm as a junior piranha in training. Insights and tools, grounded in intellectual integrity, should be the ultimate aim of the study of “fallacies.” They have been our aim in this guide.
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with little wealth and power. They want to help people recognize how the wealthy and powerful often prey on the credulity, gullibility, and vulnerability of the poor or poorly schooled.

It should be noted that those we call the “manipulators” are often the victims of their own propaganda and devices. Caught up in their own propaganda and narrowness of vision, they sometimes fail as a result. Many businesses fail because of their inability to critique their own illusions. Nations often fail to act successfully because their leaders are caught up in their own unrealistic descriptions of the world (and of their enemies). Manipulators are not usually grand conspirators. Their one-sidedness is obvious only to those who can appreciate the difference between “self-serving” and “fairminded” thinking. Only those capable of self-critique and self-insight can accurately assess the extent to which they are involved in the social, psychological, and intellectual manipulation of others.

The Concept of Fallacies of Thought

The meanings of the word, “fallacy” found in the Oxford English Dictionary are:

1. Deception, guile, trickery, trick.
2. Deceptiveness, aptness to mislead, unreliability.
3. A deceptive or misleading argument, a sophism. In Logic esp. a flaw, material or formal, which vitiates a syllogism. Also, sophistical reasoning, sophistry.
4. A delusive notion, an error, esp. one founded on false reasoning. Also, the condition of being deceived, error.
5. Sophistical nature, unsoundness (of arguments); erroneousness, delusion.

To be a human thinker is often to be a “self-deceived” thinker and hence a “fallacious” thinker. However, to think of ourselves as believing what is false (or as defending and justifying prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions) is a painful thought. The human mind has developed ways to protect itself from that pain.

These ways have been labeled by psychologists as “defense mechanisms.” They deny or distort reality. Their use is not deliberate and conscious, but unpremeditated and subconscious. They include repression, projection, denial, rationalization, and stereotyping.

The word ‘fallacy’ derives from two Latin words, fallax (“deceptive”) and fallere (“to deceive”)

Naming Fallacies

The philosopher Schopenhauer, in commenting on tricks of persuasion, once remarked: *It would be a very good thing if every trick could receive some short and obviously appropriate name, so that when a man used this or that particular trick, he could at once be reproved for it.*
Unfortunately, there are an unlimited number of maneuvers one can make in camouflaging poor reasoning, making bad thinking look good, and obscuring what is really going on in a situation. Furthermore, most people are resistant to recognizing poor reasoning when it supports what they intensely believe. It is as if people subconsciously accept the premise “all is fair in the scramble for power, wealth, and status.” Any argument, any consideration, any mental maneuver or construction that validates emotionally-charged beliefs seems to the believer to be justified. The more intense the belief, the less likely that reason and evidence can dislodge it.

Most people deeply believe in — but are unaware of — the following premises:

1. IT’S TRUE IF I BELIEVE IT.
2. IT’S TRUE IF WE BELIEVE IT.
3. IT’S TRUE IF I WANT TO BELIEVE IT.
4. IT’S TRUE IF IT SERVES MY VESTED INTEREST TO BELIEVE IT.

The human mind is often myopic, inflexible, and conformist, while at the same time highly skilled in self-deception and rationalization. People are by nature highly egocentric, highly sociocentric, and wantonly self-interested. Their goal is not truth but advantage. They have not acquired their beliefs through a rational process. They are highly resistant to rational critique. Blind faith, fear, prejudice, and self-interest are primary organizers of much human thinking. Self-delusion, in conjunction with lack of self-command, characterize much human thinking. A highly compromised integrity is the result. If you point out a mistake in thinking to most persons, you may silence them momentarily. But most, like rubber bands that have momentarily been stretched and let go, will soon revert to whatever it was they believed in the first place.

It is for this reason that cultivation of intellectual virtues is so crucial to human development. Without a long-term transformation of the mind, little can be done to produce deeply honest thought. When challenged, the human mind operates from its most primitive intellectual instincts. This can be verified in the history of politics, economics, religion, and war — indeed in any history that deeply plumbs the human mind in action.

Consequently, it is important to learn to recognize the most common tricks of persuasion, that we might better understand ourselves and others. Used on others, fallacies are intellectually indefensible tricks of persuasion and manipulation; used on ourselves, they are instruments of self-deception.

In this guide we concentrate on the most common and flagrant intellectual tricks and snares. Sometimes these tricks are “counterfeits” of good thinking. For example, a false dilemma is the counterfeit of a true dilemma. We shall see this most obviously in dealing with errors of generalization and comparison.
There is No Exhaustive List of Fallacies

It is not possible to create an exclusive and exhaustive list of fallacies. The intellectual tricks, traps, and snares humans so commonly engage in (or fall prey to) can be described from many differing standpoints and in a variety of differing terms. In this guide, we deal only with those most common or most easily recognized. There is nothing sacred about our list or our analysis. Here is a list of common problems in human thinking. See if you can add to this list. It is common for people (in their thinking) to:

- be unclear, muddled, or confused
- jump to conclusions
- fail to think-through implications
- lose track of their goal
- be unrealistic
- focus on the trivial
- fail to notice contradictions
- use inaccurate information in their thinking
- ask vague questions
- give vague answers
- ask loaded questions
- ask irrelevant questions
- confuse questions of different types
- answer questions they are not competent to answer
- come to conclusions based on inaccurate or irrelevant information
- use only the information that supports their view
- make inferences not justified by their experience
- distort data and represent it inaccurately
- fail to notice the inferences they make
- come to unreasonable conclusions
- fail to notice their assumptions
- make unjustified assumptions
- miss key ideas
- use irrelevant ideas
- form confused ideas
- form superficial concepts
- misuse words
- ignore relevant viewpoints
- fail to see issues from points of view other than their own
- confuse issues of different types
- lack insight into their prejudices
- think narrowly
- think imprecisely
- think illogically
- think one-sidedly
- think simplistically
- think hypocritically
- think superficially
- think ethnocentrically
- think egocentrically
- think irrationally
- be incompetent at problem solving
- make poor decisions
- lack insight into their own ignorance
news (designed for national consumption) is always written with this premise in the background. We may blunder, but we always intend to do the right thing. Manipulators take advantage of this questionable premise by speaking and writing with such assumptions in the background. This posture is related to the fallacy of begging the question and leads to question-begging epithets. See “question begging.”

Dirty Trick # 10

Attack the Person (and not the argument)

When the opponent makes reasonable arguments, manipulators ignore those arguments and instead find a way to personally attack the reasoner. Name-calling (even mud slinging) often works (depending on how you do it). The spin artist knows what a particular audience will reject and insinuates that his opponent supports those terrible things. For example, the opponent might be labeled a communist or an atheist. Or it might be said of him that he supports terrorism, or is soft on crime. This strategy is sometimes called “poisoning the well.” It leads to the audience dismissing an opponent in a sweeping way — no matter what the opponent says in his defense. Of course, the spin artist knows the importance of correctly reading the audience to make sure that he doesn’t go too far. He realizes that the more subtle he can be, the more effective his manipulation will be.

Dirty Trick # 11

Beg the Question

One easy way to prove a point is to assume it in the first place. Consider this example:

“Well, what form of government do you want, a government by liberal do-gooders ready to spend your hard-earned dollars or a government led by business minds that understand how to live within a tight budget and generate jobs that put people to work?”

This statement includes the following assumptions that should not be taken for granted:
1. that a liberal government would spend money unwisely.
2. that business people know how to live within a tight budget and generate jobs that put people to work.

One variation on this fallacy has been called “question-begging epithets,” the use of words or phrases that prejudge an issue by the way the issue is put. For example, “Shall we defend freedom and democracy or cave in to terrorism and tyranny?” By putting the question in this way we avoid having to talk about uncomfortable questions like: “But are we really advancing human freedom? Are we really spreading democracy (or just extending our power, our control, our dominance, our access to foreign markets)?” Pay close attention to the words people use when articulating the “facts” with respect to an issue. They will often choose words that presuppose the correctness of their position on an issue.

9 traditionally called “Argumentum ad Hominem”

10 traditionally called “Petitio Principii”
spread stories: “Of course, I don’t believe it, but did you know that there has been some talk of Jack beating his wife and children? Ugly, isn’t it?”

When this trick is used by governmental officials, it is usually called spreading “disinformation” (false charges that the government knows will be believed). For example, planting stories about “atrocities” of one country (which never in fact occurred) is very effective for validating an aggressive attack by another country. Hitler used this strategy effectively. The US government has often spread disinformation — for example, to justify sending Marines into Central or South American Countries to depose one government and put a more “friendly” government into power. The fact that these stories will be discredited years later is of no consequence, of course, to the fabricators of such stories. Disinformation often works. The discrediting of it is usually too late to matter. Years later, people don’t seem to care.

Since most people think in simplistic ways, manipulators and politicians can often get them to reject someone simply by mentioning something about the person that seems inappropriate or that goes against social conventions. For example, “Kevin has already admittedly smoked marijuana. That tells us a lot about him!” Or, “look at that teenage girl wearing that skimpy top. I guess we know what she is after.”

Dirty Trick # 17
Create A Straw Man

Manipulators know the importance of making their opponents look bad. Whatever the views of the opponent, a skilled spin master can make the opponent appear to take another, far less believable, view. The trick of misrepresenting someone’s views to gain an advantage is sometimes called creating a “strawman.” A “straw” man is literally not real, though it may look like it is. A strawman argument, then, is a false or misleading representation of someone’s reasoning.

Suppose someone wanted to reform our criminal justice system (so that fewer innocent people were wrongfully convicted and thrown into prison). His opponent may well retort with the following strawman argument: “So I guess what you want is to free all criminals and leave us even more threatened than we are now!” Of course, no one said or wants that, so he is arguing against a “straw” man. By misrepresenting a person’s position and presenting it in a form that people will reject, he successfully uses the “strawman” strategy. Of course, in addition to misrepresenting the opponent’s argument, he can also claim that the opponent is misrepresenting his. In this case, the spinmaster can then claim that it is the opponent that is attacking a “straw man.” In any case, the manipulator wants to ensure that the best representation of his reasoning is compared with the worse possible representation of his opponent’s reasoning. Manipulators make their opponent look bad at the same time they make their own case look good.

Imagine that an environmentalist makes the following argument:

“Each of us must do our part to reduce the amount of pollution we are creating on the planet. The automobile industry, for example, needs to find alternative forms of
fuel, cleaner forms of fuel. We need to move away from gasoline as our primary automobile fuel source. Otherwise, our planet will needlessly continue to suffer.”

A manipulator who is seeking to discredit the environmentalist might misrepresent him as follows:

“What my opponent is really arguing for is more BIG GOVERNMENT. He wants to take away your right to choose and give bureaucracy more and more power over your life. Don’t let him get away with it.”

**Dirty Trick # 18**

**Deny or Defend Inconsistencies**

Manipulators know one looks bad when appearing to be inconsistent, saying one thing and doing another, or sometimes supporting X and sometimes attacking it. When caught in a contradiction, the manipulator has two choices. He can either deny that there is any contradiction at all (“I didn’t really say that!”) or he can admit the contradiction and defend it as a justifiable change (“The world is changing and we must change with it”). The fact is that human life and society are shot through with contradictions and inconsistencies. Those who have the most integrity are those who admit to contradictions and inconsistencies and work to minimize them. Manipulators work hard to cover them up.

**Dirty Trick # 19**

**Demonize His Side, Sanitize Yours**

Most people are not sophisticated. To manipulate them into accepting your side, systematically use “good” words to characterize it, while you systematically use “negative” words to characterize your opponent. You believe in democracy, freedom, stability, compromise, fairness, strength, peace, protection, security, civilization, human rights, sovereignty, reformation, being open, defending the innocent, honor, God’s comfort, normalcy, pride, independence, a mission, facing hardship, …Your opponent believes in tyranny, suppression, conflict, terrorism, aggression, violence, subversion, barbarism, fanaticism, the spread of chaos, attacking the innocent, extremism, dictatorship, plots, cunning, cruelty, destruction.

A variation on this strategy consists in sanitizing your motives, by explaining your reasons to be “righteous.” “I am not motivated by profit or greed. I do not want to enhance my power and influence. I don’t want to control and dominate. Certainly not. I want to spread the cause of freedom, to share the good life, the blessings of democracy (bla, bla, bla).” You obscure your real motives (that are often selfish and based on considerations of money and power) while playing up motives that sound good and make you appear high-minded. This strategy is sometimes called “finding the good reason” and includes the practice of giving “lip service” to high-minded principles (asserting them loudly, while ignoring them in practice).
44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument

Accuse Your Opponent of Doing What He is Accusing You of (or worse)
Accuse Him of Sliding Down A Slippery Slope (that leads to disaster)
Appeal to Authority
Appeal to Experience
Appeal to Fear
Appeal to Pity (or sympathy)
Appeal to Popular Passions
Appeal to Tradition or Faith (“the tried and true”)
Assume a Posture of Righteousness
Attack the Person (and not the argument)
Beg the Question
Call For Perfection (Demand impossible conditions)
Create a False Dilemma (the Great Either/Or)
Devise Analogies (and Metaphors) That Support Your View (even if they are misleading or “false”)
Question Your Opponent’s Conclusions
Create Misgivings: Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire
Create A Straw Man
Deny or Defend Your Inconsistencies
Demonize His Side Sanitize Yours
Evade Questions, Gracefully Flatter Your Audience
Hedge What You Say
Ignore the Evidence
Ignore the Main Point
Attack Evidence (That Undermines Your Case)
Insist Loudly on a Minor Point
Use the Hard-Cruel-World Argument (to justify doing what is usually considered unethical)
Make (Sweeping) Glittering Generalizations
Make Much of Any Inconsistencies in Your Opponent’s Position
Make Your Opponent Look Ridiculous (“Lost in the Laugh”)
Oversimplify the Issue
Raise Nothing But Objections
Rewrite History (Have It Your Way)
Seek Your Vested Interests
Shift the Ground
Shift the Burden of Proof
Spin, Spin, Spin
Talk in Vague Generalities
Talk Double Talk
Tell Big Lies
Treat Abstract Words and Symbols As If They Were Real Things
Throw In A Red Herring (or two)
Throw in Some Statistics
Use Double Standards (whenever you can)
Avoid Two Extremes

- Finding Fallacies Only in the Thinking of Others (None in Yourself), and
- Finding an Equal Number of Fallacies in Everything you Read.

There are two dangers to avoid as you begin to identify fallacies in daily life. The first consists in an unconscious bias toward identifying fallacies only in the thinking of others (those with whom you disagree) and none in yourself. In this case, you use fallacy labels as a way to attack anyone with whom you disagree, while you avoid a critical scrutiny of your own use of such fallacies. Your “opponent” uses an analogy, you immediately call it a false analogy. Your opponent makes a generalization, you immediately call it a hasty or unrepresentative generalization. Your mind is set against him and therefore you find fallacies in all his thinking. Your mind is so prejudiced in favor of your own thinking, that, as a result, you find no fallacies in it.

The second danger consists in coming to believe that everyone commits an equal number of fallacies, and therefore that there is no reason to concern yourself with fallacies. “The situation is hopeless,” you say to yourself.

The fact is that fallacies are “foul” ways to try to win an argument (or justify a belief) unfairly. Their use is wide spread, especially among those who make it their business to manipulate people. All of us sometimes commit them. But there is often a significant difference in quantity. Compare the problem of fallacy use to the problem of air pollution. All air carries some pollutants, but all air is not highly polluted. It is impossible to think in so careful a way that one never uses a fallacy. But it is possible to minimize that usage.

To protect ourselves we need to be able to recognize when people are trying to manipulate us with fallacious appeals. To maintain our integrity, we must try to avoid using fallacious appeals ourselves. We do this by learning to monitor our own thinking and the thinking of others, using the tools of critical thinking. We must recognize what is encompassed in our own point of view and the limitations of that point of view. We must enter sympathetically into the point of view of others. We must learn how to strip our thinking, and the thinking of others, down to essentials: essential concepts, essential facts, essential inferences, essential assumptions. We must be willing to scrutinize our thinking with the same care and concern we use in scrutinizing the thinking of our opponents and nay-sayers. Our thinking should be in a state of permanent evolution, systematically building on our strengths and removing our weaknesses — hence, rooting out in the process as many fallacies as we have come to use.
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