

*The Thinker's Guide to*  
**FALLACIES**

The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation

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*To understand the human mind, understand self-deception.*

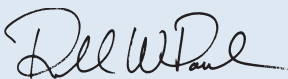
*Anon*

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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## Truth and Deception in the Human Mind

The human mind is a marvelous set of structures and systems. It is a center of consciousness and action. It forms a unique identity. It creates a view of the world. Rich experience emerges from its interactions with the world. It thinks. It feels. It wants. It apprehends truths and suppresses errors. It achieves insights and fabricates prejudices. Both useful truths and harmful misconceptions are its intermixed products. It can as easily believe what is false as what is true.

It can see beauty in right conduct and justify what is flagrantly unethical. It can love and hate. It can be kind and cruel. It can advance knowledge or error. It can be intellectually humble or intellectually arrogant. It can be empathic or narrow-minded. It can be open or closed. It can achieve a permanent state of expanding knowledge or a deadening state of narrowing ignorance. It both transcends the creatures of lesser ability and insults their innocence and nobility by its self-deception and cruelty.

How can humans create within their own minds such an inconsistent amalgam of the rational and the irrational? The answer is self-deception. In fact, perhaps the most accurate and useful definition of humans is that of “the self-deceiving animal.” Deception, duplicity, sophistry, delusion, and hypocrisy are foundational products of human nature in its “natural,” untutored state. Rather than reducing these tendencies, most schooling and social influences redirect them, rendering them more sophisticated, more artful, and more obscure.

To exacerbate this problem, not only are humans instinctively self-deceptive, they are naturally sociocentric as well. Every culture and society sees itself as special and as justified in all of its basic beliefs and practices, in all its values and taboos. The arbitrary nature of its folkways is known to its anthropologists (if it has any), but not to its overwhelming majority.

### Uncritical Persons (intellectually unskilled thinkers)

The over-whelming preponderance of people have not freely decided what to believe, but, rather, have been socially conditioned (indoctrinated) into their beliefs. They are unreflective thinkers. Their minds are products of social and personal forces they neither understand, control, nor concern themselves with. Their personal beliefs are often based in prejudices. Their thinking is largely comprised of stereotypes, caricatures, oversimplifications, sweeping generalizations, illusions, delusions, rationalizations, false dilemmas, and begged questions. Their motivations are often traceable to irrational fears and attachments, personal vanity and envy, intellectual arrogance and simple-mindedness. These constructs have become a part of their identity.

Such persons are focused on what immediately affects them. They see the world through ethnocentric and nationalistic eyes. They stereotype people from other cultures.

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.

sure you have taken the time to accumulate enough facts to support the generalization, and make sure the evidence you have is “representative” of the full range of relevant information. Qualify your generalization whenever necessary (most, many, some, a few, rather than “all”).

Remember that you are a human and speak a human language and that the language you speak is shot-through with generalizations and abstractions. Try to develop the ability to strip off whatever language you are inclined to use in “interpreting” the facts inherent in your experience (i.e., confine yourself to the statement of specific facts without putting a “spin” on those facts). See whether you can be more accurate, precise and less biased in your descriptions by reducing your interpretive generalizations to a minimum.

Consider now the following examples of generalizations commonly made by people, some of which are reasonable, others not:

**EXAMPLE:** “Yesterday I met the most remarkable person. He/she is kind, considerate, sensitive, and thoughtful.”

**COMMENT:** Generalizations about the character of a person after just one day with them are rarely justifiable.

**EXAMPLE:** “Well aren’t you going to stand up for our country? I thought you were a patriot.”

**COMMENT:** The suppressed generalization here is : *one should never criticize one’s country, because such criticism is inconsistent with loyalty.* By the way, people who unconsciously make this (political) generalization often make a similar one about love between humans: “If you really loved me you wouldn’t criticize me.” Both generalizations ignore the fact that reasonable critique is a necessary and healthy element of creating a better world. Many of our greatest critics have also been our greatest patriots. Tom Paine is a case in point.

**EXAMPLE:** “Why do you always have to be so critical? Can’t you just be human for once?”

**COMMENT:** Besides the fact that “so critical” is overly vague, we have the suppressed (and absurd) generalization that *critique is “inhuman.”* Note also the suppressed generalization that you are “always” critical. That you are sometimes critical is probable; that you are often critical is possible, but that you are *always critical* is highly unlikely.

**EXAMPLE:** “No, I’m not a rational person. I have FEELINGS!”

**COMMENT:** These statements imply that being *reasonable and having feelings are incompatible.* Not so. A reasonable person can have feelings as intense as those of an irrational person. The difference is that the emotional responses of a reasonable person make sense. They “fit” the circumstances. A reasonable person is more integrated, lives fewer contradictions, has greater insight. For a rational person,

about some consideration for the poor man?" Use of this ploy enables the manipulator to divert attention from those innocent people harmed by a presidential decision or policy.

## Dirty Trick # 7

### Appeal to Popular Passions<sup>8</sup>

Manipulators, and other masters of counterfeit, subterfuge, and ruse are careful to present themselves as people who share the values and views of *their audience*, especially the "sacred" beliefs of the audience. Everyone has some prejudices and most people feel hatred toward something or someone. Masters of spin stir up prejudices, hatred and irrational fears. They imply that they agree with the audience. They act as if they share their views. They work to convince the audience that their opponent doesn't hold sacred the beliefs they hold sacred.

There are many possible variations on this strategy. One has been called the "Just Plain Folks Fallacy" in which the manipulator says or implies something like this:

*"It's good to be back in my home (city/state/country) and with people I can really trust. It's great to be with people who face things squarely, who use their common sense to get things done, people who don't believe in highfalutin ways of thinkin and actin."*

## Dirty Trick # 8

### Appeal to Tradition or Faith ("the tried and true")

This strategy is closely related to the previous one, but emphasizes what seems to have passed the test of time. People are often enslaved by the social customs and norms of their culture, as well as traditional beliefs. What is traditional seems right. "This is the way we have always done things." Manipulators imply that they hold firm to what their audience is familiar and comfortable with. They imply that their opponent will destroy these traditions and faith. They don't worry about whether these traditions harm innocent people (like the cruel customs and laws against Blacks before the Civil Rights movement). They create the appearance of being independent in their views while the views they "independently" reach just happen to coincide with those of the crowd. They know that people are usually suspicious of those who go against present social norms and established traditions. They know enough to avoid openly opposing the social customs to which people are unconsciously (and slavishly) bound.

## Dirty Trick # 9

### Assume a Posture of Righteousness

People begin with the deep-seated belief that they (their nation, their religion, their motivation) is especially pure and ethical. We sometimes bungle things, but we are always pure of heart. "We hold the highest ideals of any country. Of course, we make mistakes and sometimes commit follies. But our intentions are always good. Unlike others in the world we are innocent of guile. We are good hearted." National and international

<sup>8</sup> traditionally called "Argumentum ad Populum"