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# Fallacies

C.L. Hamblin


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C. L. (Charles Leonard) Hamblin (1922–1985) received his undergraduate degree in philosophy, mathematics, and physics and an M.A. in philosophy at Monash University. He received a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics in language and information theory. From 1955 to 1985 he was Lecturer then Professor in the School of Philosophy of the University of New South Wales, making lasting contributions to both philosophy and computer science.

> Hamblin's *Fallacies* "was the first full-length scholarly book on fallacies since the Middle Ages, and arguably since Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* itself.
>
> Jim Mackenzie, *Informal Logic*

> As important as it is as a historical study, Hamblin's *Fallacies* is even more important today for its signal contribution to our understanding and analysis of informal arguments. . . . with its extensive historical overview and sharp analyses of the logical fallacies.
>
> John Plecnik and John Hoaglund

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CHAPTER I

# *The Standard Treatment*

There is hardly a subject that dies harder or has changed so little over the years. After two millennia of active study of logic and, in particular, after over half of that most iconoclastic of centuries, the twentieth A.D., we still find fallacies classified, presented and studied in much the same old way. Aristotle's principal list of thirteen types of fallacy in his *Sophistical Refutations* – the Latin title is *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (from Greek *Περὶ Τῶν Σοφιστικῶν Ἐλέγχων*) whence they have often been called 'sophisms', and sometimes 'elenchs' – still appears, usually with one or two omissions and a handful of additions, in many modern textbooks of logic; and though there have been many proposals for reform, none has met more than temporary acceptance. Such set-backs as Aristotle's treatment has had have been as much due to irrelevant vicissitudes of history as to any kind of criticisms of its shortcomings. Thus, although current in the ancient world in Athens, Alexandria and Rome it was 'lost' to western Europe, for some centuries during the monastic period; but was rediscovered with enthusiasm about the twelfth century, when it began to form a section of the logic curriculum in the emerging universities. Since that time until the present century textbooks of logic not containing a short chapter on fallacies have been the exception; and since, for most of the period, all students took Logic, Europe's men-of-affairs have generally regarded a nodding acquaintance with a standard version of Aristotle's doctrine as a routine necessity of the same character as knowledge of the multiplication table. Quite a few of these men, in fact, have written accounts of fallacies themselves; they include at least one Pope, two saints, archbishops in profusion, the first Chancellor of the University

of Oxford, and a Lord Chancellor of England. The tradition has repeatedly proved too strong for its dissentients. Ramus, in the sixteenth century, led an attack on Aristotle and refused to consider fallacies as a proper subject for Logic on the grounds that the study of *correct* reasoning was enough in itself to make their nature clear; but within a few years his own followers had reinstated the subject and one of them, Heizo Buscher, actually published a treatise entitled *The Theory of the Solution of Fallacies . . . deduced and explained from the logic of P. Ramus.*[1] Bacon and Locke also dropped the Aristotelian treatment, but only to replace it with treatments of their own which, in due course, became partially fused with it again. During the past century some of the more mathematically minded of logicians, starting with Boole, have dropped the subject from their books in apparent agreement with Ramus; but it is possible to discern a trend back.

What about other traditions than our own? Constantinople, in the interval between the decline of Rome and its own fall to the Turks, continued the Greek tradition that was in decline further west; and some Arab logicians also inherited Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* and wrote their own commentaries on it. But these traditions were mere outposts of our own. Further east, we find an apparently independent logical tradition in India which, starting with the *Nyāya sūtra*, has its own doctrine of fallacies as an adjunct to its own theory of inference. Indian logicians have displayed the same concern to explore the forms of faulty reasoning, and the same inability either to move outside their original tradition or to dispense with it. The study of the Indian tradition is of especial interest here in providing us with a control on which to test our woollier historical generalizations.

Strangely, in a certain sense, there has never yet been a book on fallacies; never, that is, a book-length study of the subject as a whole, or of incorrect reasoning in its own right rather than as an afterthought or adjunct to something else. Schopenhauer's *Art of Controversy* is too short, and Bentham's *Book of Fallacies* too specialized, to qualify. A book entitled *Fallacies: a View of Logic from the Practical Side*, by Alfred Sidgwick, belies its title and is in large part concerned with a particular theory of non-fallacious logical reasoning. The medieval treatises, though some of them

[1] Buscherus, *De ratione solvendi sophismata* (3rd edn. 1594).

run to enormous length – that of St Albert the Great, for ex-example, has 90,000 Latin words – are mere commentaries on Aristotle even when, as in the case of Peter of Spain's *Treatise on the Major Fallacies*, they do not indicate the fact in their titles. And all the others, including the wordy treatment by J. S. Mill, must be counted as short treatments in longer works. (Mill is just as wordy in the rest of his volume.) Even Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* is properly only the ninth book of his *Topics*.

There are, of course, works on fallacy of a slightly different kind; namely, less formal works such as Thouless's *Straight and Crooked Thinking*, Stebbing's *Thinking to Some Purpose* and, perhaps, Kamiat's *Critique of Poor Reason* and Stuart Chase's *Tyranny of Words* and *Guides to Straight Thinking*, which aim to induce in the reader an appreciation of and feeling for faulty reasoning by giving discussions based mainly on examples. Some of these books – I am not going to say which – are good, but they do not supply the need for a critical theoretical survey. Into the same category – or, perhaps, into the space between the two stools – I consign a book entitled *Fallacy – the Counterfeit of Argument*, by W. Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther. This is described on the back cover as '51 fallacies named, explained and illustrated'. The gratifyingly large bag of fallacies has been arranged in a system of categories partly resembling the traditional ones but not, it is to be presumed, intended either as exhaustive or as non-overlapping. These books have their place; but their place is not here. What is needed, above all, is discussion of some unresolved theoretical questions, which these books do not include in their terms of reference.

The truth is that nobody, these days, is particularly satisfied with this corner of logic. The traditional treatment is too unsystematic for modern tastes. Yet to dispense with it, as some writers do, is to leave a gap that no one knows how to fill. We have no *theory* of fallacy at all, in the sense in which we have theories of correct reasoning or inference. Yet we feel the need to ticket and tabulate certain kinds of fallacious inference-process which introduce considerations falling outside the other topics in our logic-books. In some respects, as I shall argue later, we are in the position of the medieval logicians before the twelfth century: we have lost the doctrine of fallacy, and need to rediscover it. But

it is all more complicated than that because, these days, we set ourselves higher standards of theoretical rigour and will not be satisfied for long with a theory less ramified and systematic than we are used to in other departments of Logic; and one of the things we may find is that the kind of theory we need cannot be constructed in isolation from them. What I shall suggest is that interest in fallacies has always been, in part, misplaced in that the function of their study has been to remind the student (and his teacher) of features of the scope and limitations of the other parts of Logic. What the logicians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries made of the study of fallacies is especially interesting in this connection.

This is, however, for later chapters. To start with, let us set the stage with an account not of what went on in the thirteenth century, or even of what Aristotle wrote, but of the typical or average account as it appears in the typical short chapter or appendix of the average modern textbook. And what we find in most cases, I think it should be admitted, is as debased, worn-out and dogmatic a treatment as could be imagined – incredibly tradition-bound, yet lacking in logic and in historical sense alike, and almost without connection to anything else in modern Logic at all. This is the part of his book in which a writer throws away logic and keeps his reader's attention, if at all, only by retailing the traditional puns, anecdotes, and witless examples of his forbears. 'Everything that runs has feet; the river runs: therefore, the river has feet' – this is a medieval example, but the modern ones are no better. As a whole, the field has a certain fascination for the connoisseur, but that is the best that can be said for it.

A fallacious argument, as almost every account from Aristotle onwards tells you, is one that *seems to be valid* but *is not* so. Two different ways of classifying fallacies immediately present themselves. First, taking for granted that we have arguments that seem to be valid, we can classify them according to what it is that makes them not so; or secondly, taking for granted that they are not valid, we can classify them according to what it is that makes them seem to be valid. Most accounts take neither of these easy courses. Aristotle's original classification tries to be both sorts at once, and there are writers even in modern times who adopt it without criticism. Of those who invent their own classi-

fications many share this uncertainty of purpose; and, in any case, their most noteworthy characteristic is that they disagree not only with the Aristotelians but also extensively with one another, and have quite failed to establish any account for longer than the time it takes a book to go out of print. In fact, though everyone has his classification, it is commonly argued that it is impossible to classify fallacies at all. De Morgan (*Formal Logic*, p. 276) writes:

> There *is* no such thing as a classification of the ways in which men may arrive at an error: it is much to be doubted whether there ever *can be*.

and Joseph (*Introduction to Logic*, p. 569) says

> Truth may have its norms, but error is infinite in its aberrations, and they cannot be digested in any classification.

but even they frequently express doubts. Cohen and Nagel (*Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method*, p. 382) say

> It would be impossible to enumerate all the abuses of logical principles occurring in the diverse matters in which men are interested.

They go on to consider 'certain outstanding abuses'.

Despite divergences of arrangement, there is a considerable overlap in raw material as between one writer and another: the individual kinds of fallacy are much the same, even down to their names. It will suit us, therefore, to forget about arrangement and describe the raw material. I shall start by running through the traditional list, and then discuss some additions. I am mainly concerned with recent accounts[1] but draw here and there on older ones.

## EQUIVOCATION

Aristotle classified fallacies into those Dependent on Language and those Outside Language. (The traditional Latin terms are

[1] The recent books that I have especially consulted are: Cohen and Nagel, *Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method*; Black, *Critical Thinking*; Oesterle, *Logic: The Art of Defining and Reasoning*; Schipper and Schuh, *A First Course in Modern Logic*; Copi, *Introduction to Logic*; Salmon, *Logic*. Two dozen others could have been included. Oesterle is a strict traditionalist and the others all partly invent their own classifications.

*in dictione* and *extra dictionem*, from the Greek παρὰ τὴν λέξιν and ἔξω τῆς λέξεως.) Fallacies of the first category are those that arise from ambiguity in the words or sentences in which they are expressed. Those of the second category will occupy us later.

In the simplest case of Fallacies Dependent on Language the ambiguity can be traced to double-meaning in a single word. This is the Fallacy of Equivocation.

The word 'equivocation' refers literally to pairs of words that are the same in pronunciation. Ralph Lever,[1] one of the earliest writers on logic in English, translated *aequivoca* as 'lykesounding wordes', and its opposite *univoca* as 'playnmeaning wordes'. The term commonly has a pejorative sense, in that an equivocal argument is one *deliberately intended* to deceive; though, in spite of a distinction made by Max Black, this is not usually a part of the logician's meaning. At its lowest level Equivocation is plain punning: at least three modern American books I have consulted think it worth while to give the example 'Some dogs have fuzzy ears; my dog has fuzzy ears; therefore my dog is some dog!'; and Oesterle is only graver, not more in earnest, in quoting the traditional 'Whatever is immaterial is unimportant; whatever is spiritual is immaterial; therefore, whatever is spiritual is unimportant'. One of Abraham Fraunce's examples in Elizabethan times (*Lawier's Logike*, f. 27) was.

All the maydes in Camberwell may daunce in an egge shell.

He explains:

> Of a little village by *London*, where *Camberwell* may be taken for the Well in the towne, or ye towne it selfe.

And again:

> So lastly, the Mayre of *Earith*, is the best Mayre next to the Mayre of *London*. Where the towne, God knowes, is a poore thing, and the Mayre thereof a seely fellow, in respect of the Mayres of divers other cities, yet it is the very next to *London*, because there is none betweene.

These examples serve to introduce us to different kinds of ambiguity. They do not, however, provide good examples of fallacies since, whatever our feelings about maids in Camberwell

[1] *The Arte of Reason, rightly termed Witcraft* (1573), pp. 2–3.

or the Mayor of Erith, we are hardly capable of being deceived by any serious chain of reasoning exploiting the double-meanings in the statements about them.

If we try to find better examples we meet another kind of difficulty, in that what is non-trivial may be controversial. Joseph attempts to illustrate Equivocation with discussion of an example as follows (p. 579):

> 'A mistake in point of law,' says Blackstone, 'which every person of discretion not only may, but is bound and presumed to know, is in criminal cases no sort of defence'; the State must perhaps presume a knowledge of the law, and so far we are bound to know it, in the sense of being required under penalty; but a criminal action done in ignorance of the law that a man is *legally* bound to know is often considered *morally* discreditable, as if the knowledge of the law on the matter were a plain moral duty. How far that is so in a particular case may be a very doubtful question; the maxim quoted tends to confuse the moral with the legal obligation.

All that Joseph claims, however, is that it is doubtful that moral and legal duty must be identified; not that it is clear that they must be distinguished. If moral words were not slippery there would be little need for the study of moral philosophy. For this to be a clear example of Equivocation there needs to be a clear distinction between moral rectitude and obedience to the law of the land. We know, of course, that there is *sometimes* a case for saying that the law is wrong and should be altered or even disobeyed. But the law of the land is interpreted by the courts, and the courts are inevitably and properly influenced to some extent by moral factors; and, on the other hand, it could be argued that a certain conformity to law, in so far as it promotes the general good through stable government, is morally commendable on its own account. We do not need to resolve these questions here, but it must be clear that there is at least room for debate. In many contexts the two subsenses of moral words can be conflated without risk, so that a charge of Equivocation needs to be backed up with a demonstration that the context is one in which the distinction is necessary.

The more satisfactory accounts of Equivocation are those which – usually at some length – give us hints and practice in looking for those slight shifts of direction which may lay a

detailed argument open to objection. Max Black, for example, discusses four types of meaning shift which he calls 'Sign: Referent', 'Dictionary meaning: Contextual meaning', 'Connotation: Denotation' and 'Process: Product'. (See his Chapter 10.) Any one of these meaning shifts could be unobjectionable in some contexts: in most contexts it is unnecessary to make clear which of the alternative meanings is in use. Equally, these confusions are capable of generating fallacies. None of the books seriously explores the question of how to differentiate valid from unsound arguments in this connection, and we shall have to take it up later.

### AMPHIBOLY

The word *amphiboly* means 'double arrangement': for many years it assumed an extra syllable and became 'amphibology' but this is just bad Greek, presumably short for the unpronounceable 'amphibolology'. Amphiboly is the same kind of thing as Equivocation except that the double-meaning occurs in a construction involving several words unambiguous in themselves. Copi (p. 76) cites the wartime austerity slogan

SAVE SOAP AND WASTE PAPER

and Thomas Gilby (*Barbara Celarent*, p. 254) was set on a train of amphibolous speculation by the sight, in Albermarle Street, of a door-plate announcing *The Society for Visiting Scientists*. The older examples of this Fallacy, some of which are still reproduced in textbooks, often involve fables about ambiguous prophecies, decrees, or inscriptions. To quote Abraham Fraunce again (f. 27):

> . . . Amphiboly, when the sentence may be turned both the wayes, so that a man shall be uncertayne what waye to take, . . . as that olde sophister the Devill deluded *Pyrrhus* by giving him such an intricate answere.
>
> *Aio te, Aeacida, Romanos vincere posse.*
> I now foretell the thing to thee
> which after shalbe knowne;
> That thou, king Pyrrhus, once shalt see, the
> Romaines overthrowne.