Handout: Argument Fallacies

Ad Hominem (literally "argument to the man"): attacking a person's character instead of the content of that person's argument. Not simply name-calling, this argument suggests that the argument is flawed because of its source. For example, David Horowitz as quoted in the *Daily Pennsylvanian*: "Anyone who says that about me [that he's a racist bigot] is a Nazi."

Ad Hominem Tu Quo Que (or, "you're one too"!): attacking an argument based on the arguer's character rather than their argument. For example, "Pat's a smoker, so his arguments that smoking is bad for your are just wrong. What a hypocrite! "

Argument From Ignorance (argumentum ad ignorantiam): concluding that something is true since you can't prove it is false.

Example "God must exist, since no one can demonstrate that she does not exist."

Appeal To Pity (argumentum ad misericordiam): appealing to a person's unfortunate circumstance as a way of getting someone to accept a conclusion. For example, "you need to pass me in this course, since I'll lose my scholarship if you don't." "I implore you to find Mrs. Bobbit not guilty of mutilating her husband, since her home life was so traumatic." "Please don't arrest me, I have a wife and kids to support."

Argumentum Ad Populum (argument to the people): going along with the crowd in support of a conclusion. For example, "The majority of Americans think we should have military operations in Afghanistan, therefore it's the right thing to do."

Appeal to Authority (argumentum ad verecundiam): appealing to a popular figure who is not an authority in that area. For example, "Einstein believed in God, so God must exist." "Bruce Willis supports Save the Whales International, so it must be a good cause."

Non Sequitur: drawing a conclusion which does not follow from the evidence. For example, "I lost my job last week, so Bush must be a really poor President." "My shoe string broke; I guess that means it's time to buy a new car."

False Cause (post hoc ergo procter hoc): inferring a causal connection based on mere correlation. For example, "Murder rates correlate with ice cream sales, therefore eating ice cream makes people homicidal." "Successful people have expensive clothing; hence the best way to become a success is to buy expensive clothing."

Begging The Question (petitio principii): implicitly using your conclusion as a premise. For example, "God must exist since the Bible says that God exists, and the Bible is true because God wrote it."

Division: assuming that the parts of a whole must have the properties of the whole. For example, "Penn is one of the nations elite universities, therefore each student at Penn must be an elitist snob."

Red Herring: introducing an irrelevant or secondary subject and thereby diverting attention from the main subject. For example, "air bags in cars do not really increase safety, and, besides, most cars with air bags are Japanese imports. We all know that foreigners cannot be trusted."

Straw Man: distorting an opposing view so that it is easy to refute. For example, "vote against gun control, since gun control advocates believe that no one should own any type of fire arm." "The pro-choice position on abortion is wrong since pro choice advocates are actually pro-abortion and believe that women should use abortion freely and frequently."

Slippery Slope: A string of "if-then" statements that form what may seem like a valid argument, but typically draw a conclusion that predicts unfounded dire consequences. A classic example:

If we don't stop the Communists in South Vietnam, they'll take over the whole country.

If they take over Vietnam, next they'll conquer Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand.

Once they have Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand - they'll overrun Indonesia and the rest of the Pacific Rim.

Once they conquer the Pacific Rim, they'll take Japan - and the next thing you know, they'll be off the coast of California!

The implicit conclusion here is that if we don't stop the North Vietnamese from invading South Vietnam, America will become communist, a typical slippery slope argument.

False Dilemma/Dichotomy: an argument that suggests only two possible alternatives, neither of which are typically very appealing. In fact, many other alternatives may exist. For example, "To stop the spread of AIDS we must either quarantine all infected people or ban same sex marriage. Since the first option is clearly impossible, we should make same sex marriage illegal."

Note that this also commits a straw man fallacy and a bit of a red herring. It is possible for an arguer to use many of these forms.

False Analogy: just as it sounds, a false analogy draws an inappropriate comparison between two ideas or situations. At some level, all analogies can be broken down with good arguments, but some are weaker than others.

The following record of exchange from *Newsweek* provides an interesting example:

Tobacco companies continue to deny that nicotine is addictive as they defend lawsuits over smokers' deaths. The most famous was brought in 1983 by the family of Rose Cippollone. Soon after Philip Morris quashed its nicotine studies, James Johnston of RJR Tobacco told a House panel that calling nicotine addictive meant "characterizing virtually any enjoyable activity as addictive, whether it is eating sweets, drinking coffee, playing video games or watching TV."

"You and I know that Twinkies don't kill a single American a year," Rep. Henry Waxman responded. "The difference between cigarettes and Twinkies . . . is death."

The key question to ask when analyzing an argument from analogy is whether the relevant differences outweigh the relevant similarities of the analogy.