3.4: Fallacies of Ambiguity and Grammatical Analogy

Loaded Question Fallacy

(Also known as complex question, fallacy of presupposition, trick question) The fallacy of asking a question that has a presupposition built in, which implies something (often questionable) but protects the person asking the question from accusations of false claims or even slander.

Example: Have you stopped beating your wife yet?

This question is a real 'catch 22' since to answer 'yes' implies that you used to beat your wife but have now stopped, and to answer 'no' means you are still beating her. The question rests on the assumption that you beat your wife, and so either answer to it seems to endorse that idea.

Equivocation

(Also known as doublespeak) A fallacy that occurs when one uses an ambiguous term or phrase in more than one sense, thus rendering the argument misleading. The ambiguity in this fallacy is lexical and not grammatical, meaning the term or phrase that is ambiguous has two distinct meanings. In other words, it happens when one term is assumed to mean the same thing in two different contexts, but actually means two different things. One can often see equivocation in jokes.

Example: Man is the only rational animal, and no woman is a man, so women are not rational.

Example: If you don’t pay your exorcist you can get repossessed.
Example: A feather is light; whatever is light cannot be dark; therefore, a feather cannot be dark.

Amphiboly

A fallacy of ambiguity, where the ambiguity in question arises directly from the poor grammatical structure in a sentence. The fallacy occurs when a bad argument relies on the grammatical ambiguity to sound strong and logical.

Example: I’m going to return this car to the dealer I bought this car from. Their ad said “Used 1995 Ford Taurus with air conditioning, cruise, leather, new exhaust and chrome rims.” But the chrome rims aren’t new at all.

There are other kinds of amphiboly fallacies, like those of ambiguous pronoun reference: “I took some pictures of the dogs at the park playing, but they were not good.” Does ‘they’ mean the dogs or the pictures “were not good”? And there is amphiboly when modifiers are misplaced, such as in a famous Groucho Marx joke: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know.”

Fallacy of the Undistributed Middle

(Also known as undistributed middle term) A formal fallacy that occurs in a categorical syllogism (we’ll look at these next week), when the middle term is undistributed is not distributed at least in one premise. According to the rules of categorical syllogism, the middle term must be distributed at least once for it to be valid.

Example of the form: All X’s are Y’s; All Z’s are Y’s; Therefore, All X’s are Z’s.

Example in words: All ghosts are spooky; all zombies are spooky; therefore all ghosts are zombies.

Weak Analogy

(Also known as faulty analogy, questionable analogy) While arguments from analogy will be covered in more detail later in this work, it is worth covering the fallacy of weak analogies right now. When someone uses an analogy to prove or disprove an argument or position by using an analogy that is too dissimilar to be effective. Two important things to remember about analogies: No analogy is perfect, and even the most dissimilar objects can share some commonality or similarity. Analogies are neither true nor false, but come in degrees from identical or similar to extremely dissimilar or different.

Example: Not believing in the monster under the bed because you have yet to see it is like not believing the Titanic sank because no one saw it hit the bottom.

Vacuity

Vacuous arguments are arguments that say nothing. Here is generally the correct format of argumentation:
- A asserts that p is true.
- B raises objections x, y, and z against it.
- A then offers reasons to overcome these objections.
Vacuous arguments don’t exactly follow this format. Vacuous arguments don’t really make an argument – they don’t add anything to our knowledge. They don’t make a series of statements and point them at something new. For this reason, you can’t exactly argue with them – you can point out the flaw in reasoning, but there isn’t really an argument to refute.

Example: John, “Coconuts are the best food ever.” Jack, “I once had a cat named Coconut.”

False Dilemma

(Also known as false dichotomy, black-and-white fallacy) A fallacy that happens when only two choices are offered in an argument or proposition, when in fact a greater number of possible choices exist between the two extremes. False dilemmas typically contain ‘either, or’ in their structure. They often try to force the person into adopting one of the positions by making one option unacceptable.

Example: Either you help us kill the zombies, or you love them.