# Fallacies of Relevance

**Fallacies of relevance** are informal fallacies that occur when the premises of an argument are *logically irrelevant* to the conclusion. These fallacies often occur when we do the following things:

1. Ignore logically relevant evidence because (a) it disagrees with conclusions to which we are emotionally committed or (b) we have negative feelings about the evidence source.
2. Give too much weight to logically irrelevant evidence because (a) it agrees with conclusions to which we are emotionally committed or (b) we have positive feelings about the evidence source.

People rarely admit (even to themselves) when they are committing a fallacy of relevance, since many of these arguments are obviously bad ways of reasoning. However, this does not mean these fallacies are impossible to detect or avoid—it’s simply a matter of asking yourself why you really believe something, and then considering whether this is actually a good reason. As is the case with all fallacies, the fact that someone has a committed a fallacy of relevance does not necessarily mean that his or her beliefs are false (though it does mean he or she doesn’t have any good reason to think their beliefs are true.).

In this lesson, you’ll learn to identify some of the most prevalent of these fallacies, including the appeal to force, appeal to pity, appeal to the people, ad hominem, straw man, and red herring.

## Appeal to Force and Appeal to Pity

The **appeal to force** involves a premise threatening physical, psychological, or economic harm if a certain conclusion is not accepted. The general form is as follows:

* Premise: You (or someone else) will be harmed if you don’t believe C.
* Conclusion: So, C.really is true.

Some examples are as follows:

* “If I don’t agree with my cousin about the awesomeness of WWF wrestling, he will put me in a headlock. So, WWF wrestling is awesome.”
* “I will get into a lot of trouble (with the police, or the mean kids at school, or my family, etc.) if anyone hears that I doubt the truth of C. So, C really must be true.”

Depending on the way in which they are expressed, appeals to force are often invalid deductive or weak inductive arguments (as is the case with the ones above). However, one could make them deductively valid or inductively strong by including a premise such “If am afraid of not believing C, than C really is true.” The problem now is that this premise is obviously false and so, the argument ends up failing for a different reason. The fact that this is a fallacy means that it can NEVER be sound (if deductive) or cogent (if inductive).This same thing will be true of many of the fallacies we will study—while they are clearly *bad* arguments, the precise nature of their badness will often depend on whether or not certain implicit claims are made explicity.

The **appeal to pity** involves a premise detailing the suffering that will be experienced (usually by an innocent person or group) if a certain conclusion is not accepted as true. The general form is as follows:

* Premise: Believing C will help a person or group worthy of my pity.
* Conclusion: C really is true.

Some examples are as follows:

* “It would break my grandmother’s heart if I stopped believing in God. So, God exists.”
* “My cousin has had a rough life. So, I’m just going to assume that he’s telling the truth when he says he had nothing to do with the crime with which he has been charged, and that all the witnesses are lying.”

In real life, appeals to force and pity are rarely formulated as “arguments.” Instead, they show up as people change their beliefs to reflect their changing social environments. So, for example, many political and religious ideologies were originally spread by use of the appeal to force (“covert or die”), appeal to pity (“I don’t want to upset my parents and friends by disagreeing.”), and to things like appeal to the people (see below). This historical fact is *irrelevant* to the truth or falsity of the claims of these various ideologies. However, it does mean that these people did not convert for good *reasons* (i.e., the truth of the religion may have had little to with their original conversion).

## Appeal to the People

The **appeal to the people** involves a premise (often implicit) stating that belief in the conclusion is necessary to gain or maintain membership in some group.

* Direct version: You will be valued and accepted if you believe C. Therefore, C.
  + “All of my friends think that the Green Bay Packers are the most skilled football team in the NFL. I know that they will like me better if I believe this too. So, the Packers really are the most skilled football team in the NFL.”
* **Bandwagon:** The majority of people [who have no special expertise on C] believe that C. Therefore, C.
  + “In 1800, most people believed slavery was OK. So, slavery really was OK back then.”
* **Appeal to vanity:** Believers in C have some desirable personal attribute [strength, beauty, athletic skill, etc.]. Therefore, C.
  + “People who believe in superiority of Apple products are cool. Therefore, Apple products really are superior.”
* **Appeal to snobbery**: Believers in C form a small, elite group. Therefore, C.
  + “People who own Mercedes-Benzes are a small, elite group. Therefore, Mercedes-Benzes are probably the best cars to buy.”

The appeal to the people fallacy isimportant in explaining why many of us share the political, religious, or scientific views of our parents, family members, and peer groups. Any time we uncritically adopt the beliefs of those around us(without seriously considering the evidence), we have committed this fallacy. Again, it’s worth remembering that the conclusion of these arguments *might* be true (and some of the beliefs people adopt in this way almost certainly are true!)—it’s just that our reason for thinking so is utterly irrelevant. (And so, using these methods regularly can lead to very bad outcomes, since it can easily lead us to believe false, harmful things as easily as true ones).

## Ad Hominen (Against the Person)

The **ad hominem** fallacy (or **argument against the person**) concludes that a certain argument fails because of logically irrelevant features of the person who made the argument.

* **Abusive:** The person arguing in favor of C is a bad person. So, C is false.
  + “Candidate A claims that abortion ought to be immoral because it involves killing innocent humans. But candidate A got an abortion when she was young. So, abortion is perfectly OK.”
* **Circumstantial:** The person arguing in favor of C would personally benefit if C were believed. So, C is false.
  + “The nurse at Mayo said I should go see a specialist. But of course she would say that—after all, she’s an employee of Mayo, and her salary gets paid by people like me seeking treatment. So, I should just ignore her.”
* **Tu quoque (“you too”):** The person arguing in favor of C is a hypocrite who does not really believe that C. So, C is false.
  + “My father says that smoking is unhealthy, and is a major cause of lung cancer. But I caught him smoking last night. So, it’s obvious that smoking doesn’t lung cancer.”

In contrast to the ad hominem fallacy, there are many (perfectly good) arguments concerning the character of people. For example: “Jimmy lies constantly. So, I’m not going to believe the next one of his stories” might be a perfectly good argument, as would “Jenny has repeatedly been arrested for drunk driving. So, I don’t think she should be employed as a school bus driver, and maybe she ought to go to jail.” The ad hominem fallacy only occurs when a person has given you an *argument,* and you decide to ignore the argument for reasons that have to do with the person’s *character.*

## More Fallacies of RElevance

**Three Ways of Changing the Subject.** These three fallacies involve premises that subtly “change the subject” from what is logically relevant. These fallacies more often occur in longer arguments.

* **Straw man:** A misrepresentation of C [or of an argument for C] is false. So, C is false.
  + “Proponents of legalizing physician-assisted suicide argue that we should kill off old people to save money. But this is ridiculous. Clearly, we ought to vote against any policy legalizing physician-assisted suicide.”
* **Missing the Point:** There is good reason to believe C1. Therefore, C2 [a different/stronger conclusion than C1].
  + “There are many good reasons for supposing that a human’s life is worth more than a cow’s. So, there is nothing immoral about eating a hamburger at McDonald’s.”
* **Red Herring:** I will show that C1. Here goes. P1 and P2 entail P3. P3 entails P4 and P5. P5 entails C2. [Confused audience accepts C1 as having been successfully argued for.]
  + “Pascal has given an argument that it is rational to believe in God, regardless of how weak we might think the evidence is. And I agree that the evidence is weak! [Goes on to talk about arguments for/against God for 20 minutes]. So, Pascal is wrong about the rationality of believing in God.”

**“Accidental” Problems.** The fallacy of **accident** occurs when a premise invokes a rule that is irrelevant because of some “accidental” feature of the situation being considered. The basic form is “It is a rule that P [without A] implies C. P and A. Therefore, C.”

* “Since it is illegal to jaywalk, that person committed a crime by running into the street to save the infant from an oncoming car.”
* “Since private citizens have a right to bear arms, private citizens have a right to buy nuclear weapons.”

The fallacy of accident is sometimes invoked by people who *intentionally* misunderstand a rule or law so that they claim that they broke a rule “by accident,” and thus should be not punished too severely. They rely on the fact that others will interpret their words and actions “charitably.” (This raises a problem: How can we tell whether someone is doing this?)

## Solved Problems

Identify which fallacy is committed by the following arguments, if any:

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| Passage | Analysis |
| “When Don Corleone first told me that I should cast his godson in my movie, I thought this would be a terrible idea, since I’ve always thought his godson is a really bad actor. However, then he chopped off my prize horse’s head, and left the bloody head in bed with me as a warning. Now, I’ve changed my mind—the godson is obviously a great actor!” | Appeal to Force—the person changes their mind because of a threat. Note that it is NOT a fallacy to “do what the godfather says” in order to preserve your life. The fallacy occurs only when you begin to *believe* whatever it is that the person threatening you wants you to believe. |
| “I really like my godson, and I know not getting that movie part really upset him. Without a doubt, he has been mistreated by the casting agency.” | Appeal to Pity. It’s crucially important to remember that *liking* someone, or *feeling sorry* for them, doesn’t necessarily mean their arguments are correct. In order to determine whether the conclusion is true, we would need to actually find out what happened during the audition. |
| “Members of the mafia are everything I want to be—rich, powerful, respected, and feared. And they clearly think it is occasionally OK to murder people. So, occasionally murdering people really is OK.” | Appeal to the People. This argument confuses two very different things—a moral conclusion about whether murdering people is OK with premises about how one wants others to see you. |
| “My grandma always said that God helps those who helps themselves. And I clearly helped myself by importing large amounts of heroin and selling it. So, grandma (and God) would approve of my doing this.” | Accident. This involves the misapplication of a general rule/idea (basically, that one should work hard, or something like that) to a situation that it is quite obviously not applicable to. |
| “Tom just told me that it’s probably not the best idea for me to immediately shoot anyone who annoys me. Obviously, Tom thinks I should just passively accept whatever horrible things people do to me. But this is a recipe for disaster! So, I’m going to keep shooting people.” | This looks like a strawman fallacy (and also a bit like a false dilemma, which we’ll be studying later). It’s almost certain that Tom isn’t really saying what the speaker says that he said, and that his real argument is a bit more nuanced. |
| “Marlon Brando made a number of anti-Semitic comments over his life. So, I think we can dismiss any argument about his performance in the Godfather being ‘great.’” | This is a variant of Ad hominem. It’s important to note here that one CAN make arguments about people’s character, and draw conclusions from it (e.g., “we ought not allow this person to receive big awards, or put them in future movies, etc.”). However, the argument needs to spell out the logical connection between the character flaw and the conclusion being drawn. |
| “What do you mean you think the *Godfather* is too violent for your taste? After all, many of the events that happened it are based on real life, and Italian organized crime is actually still quite powerful. I think you’d find the history of the subject really fascinating…” | Red Herring. None of the claims being offered here actually address what seems to be the actual point of contention (e.g., whether the film is too violent). |

## Sample Problems

1. Which fallacy is committed by the following?
   1. Judith deserves to have her teaching position renewed. After all, she has a child with leukemia, and losing her health insurance would be a disaster.
   2. The *Economist* magazine has argued that high marginal tax rates are bad because they hurt growth. But the Economist has to argue for conclusions like this, since its readers are all rich, and they would all cancel their subscriptions if the magazine said anything else. So, we can ignore the argument.
2. Come up with examples of THREE of the fallacies mentioned above.
3. Some psychologists and sociologists have argued that fallacies of relevance can help us understand a variety of facts. Which fallacies of relevance might be involved in each of these? Are there any alternative (non-fallacious) explanations for people behaving in these ways? (You might have different answers for different facts.)
   1. Most people have similar religious and political beliefs to their parents and friend groups.
   2. Having a product promoted by a well-known and physically attractive person increases sales.
   3. Political candidates with known personal failings (even where these aren’t directly related to their performance in office) are less likely to be elected.