

Shermer Debate

As we watched the presentation by Michael Shermer at the most recent UT Skeptics Forum, we were surprised to find simple fallacies dispersed throughout his presentation. Having had some high-school-level Logic courses, we challenged ourselves to respectfully bring out and examine the most blatant of the fallacies we noticed.

Straw-man Fallacy

Definition: Attempting to disprove an opponent's argument by presenting it in an unfair, inaccurate light.

Example: Dr. Shermer represented Reasons' position as being an attempt to fill in the gaps of science by using God.

Reply: The scientists at Reasons to Believe are not simply trying to fill in the 'gaps' left by modern science. They *are* making a biblical case for why the presence of God solves these gaps, but they also use instances that are 'proven' to support God as creator as well. This is seen in Dr. Rana's arguments, in which he uses the similarity of cells and their parts to modern day machines to indicate an intelligent designer.

This is the construction that we noticed most often.

Ad Hominem

Definition: Accusations that distract from the issue at hand by focusing attention to negative aspects of the opponent himself. Ad Hominem Abusive is a particular branch centered on ridiculing an opponent. Ad Hominem Circumstantial focuses on discrediting an opponent's view by casting light on the opponent's background.

Example: "Good Science, Bad Science...Non-Science and nonsense. You've heard some (nonsense) tonight in my opinion."

Dr. Shermer did not use the blatantly obvious version of Ad Hominem Abusive. However, instead of outright using degrading names, his entire demeanor spoke disdain of his opponents, as seen in the quote above, and seen numerous other instances.

Reply: This is not a form of argument that you can effectively argue against. Drs. Ross and Rana spoke respectfully and ignored the ridicule from some of the other scientists, to which we tip our hats.

Begging the Question

Definition: When an opponent assumes what he is trying to prove. Circular Reasoning is also a branch of Begging the Question.

Example: Dr. Shermer assumes that supernatural and natural cannot coexist. He demands 'natural' explanations be brought before him. He rejects certain evidences on the basis that they are 'supernatural'.

Reply: What RTB is trying to prove at the debate, at the basest level, is that 'natural' science and 'supernatural' God coexist, and that natural things were created by supernatural events. Dr. Shermer cannot fairly reject certain things because they are supernatural. Logically, he must prove that God and Science cannot coexist, before using it as one of his premises.

Bifurcation (also called *either/or*)

Definition: An argument that frames the debate such that only two options are possible, when other possibilities may exist.

Example: Dr. Shermer claimed that what cannot be naturally explained by creation scientists must be attributed to supernatural intervention.

Reply: This argument limits events to being explained naturally or supernaturally, but not both, and leaves out the option where God works miracles *through* His chosen physical laws.

According to Reasons to Believe:

"Supernatural interventions, according to the Bible, are not always transcendent miracles (those only explained by a God acting independent or outside of matter, energy, space, and time). ...Far more frequent are the miracles God performs within His chosen physical laws."

(-quoted from *Origins of Life*, pg. 208)

Sweeping Generalization

Definition: Arguments that take a generalization and apply it to cases that can be legitimate exceptions to it.

Example: Dr. Shermer compares Christianity to several other religions. He implies that religions are ridiculous and cites many cases of absurd religions. Dr. Shermer makes the case that Christianity is just like these religions.

Reply: While there certainly are many absurd religions, and most of them are wrong, Christianity does not have to be either. The generalization that religious people are irrational and unscientific, we believe, does not apply in this case.

Irrelevant Goals or Functions

Definition: Arguments that distract by measuring the opponent's plan or policy according to things it wasn't intended to do.

Example: At the end of his presentation, Dr. Shermer has compiled a list of questions, which he asks RTB to answer, based on their model and the Bible.

Reply: Not only were some of the questions irrelevant (why doesn't God heal amputees?), most of them could not be answered without the help of the gift of prophesy. Drs. Ross and Rana did not compile their model in order that it would answer every philosophical question known to man; they compiled it as a biblio-scientific hypothesis arguing for an intelligent creator.

So, after all of that, who won? Was it Dr. Ross and Dr. Rana, who formulated a strong biblio-scientific case for an intelligent designer, specifically the God of the Bible? Was it Dr. Shermer, who, while committing many fallacies, was an excellent showman and clever rhetorician?

We personally believe that, if the purpose of the debate was a structured intelligent search for truth, no one won. The flippant way Dr. Shermer seemed to view the debate was quickly transferred to the audience, who began to turn polite applause into a battle to see who could be the loudest. We left Gregory Gymnasium disappointed, not because we lost, not because our faith was in danger of being shattered, but because we heard our beliefs presented to the audience in an unfair, biased light. We left disappointed because the search for truth was abandoned in favor of sarcasm and disrespect.

We left disappointed because many of the crowd left without any respect for either position, and that is a pity.