

LECTURE 5

FALLACIES

Generally, fallacies are errors in reasoning which from the surface value looks accurate and convincing but when subjected to rigour of reason one realises that reason has been flawed. One perfect example of fallacious reasoning is to designate any mistaken idea or false belief, like the fallacy of believing that all men are honest or all politicians are deceptive. The two examples are generalised statements without recourse to facts that can establish their truthfulness. Simply put, a fallacy is a type of argument that may seem to be correct but which proves, upon examination, not to be so:- it is a type of incorrect argument.- Fallacies are not mere conceptual problems they have far-reaching implications as they may:

- Misrepresent
- Prejudice leading to animosity
- Used for sloganeering and propaganda to cloud our minds and divert us from the real issues.

-Fallacies deceive because they appear good by appealing to our emotions, prejudice, self-interest or blind faith.

Note: It is a logical error in reasoning as it involves the violation of the conditions of rationally acceptable inference or drawing of a conclusion. Hence whenever we reason invalidly or irrelevantly, accept premises we should not or fail to make appropriate use of relevant facts at our disposal, we commit a fallacy.

Classification of Fallacies

Broadly speaking, fallacies can be divided into two major categories – ***Formal and Informal fallacies***.

Formal fallacies are also known as logical fallacies.

- These mistakes arise through the violation of the logical rules, which govern correct arguments.
- They occur when we misapply a valid rule of inference as they contravene the formal structure of a valid argument.
- They are invalid deductive arguments resulting from bad deductive reasoning.
- They can, therefore, be identified by a mere inspection of the argument form.

Informal fallacies

- Unlike the formal fallacies, the informal mistakes do not relate to the form of the argument in which they occur.
- They are identified through an analysis of the content of an argument.
- These arguments are subdivided into **four** broad categories:

1 Fallacies of relevance

- They occur when the premises of an argument have no bearing upon its conclusion. That is they occur in arguments whose premises have no logical relevance to their conclusion. In addition, such fallacies often involve a distractive element which diverts attention away from this very problem. (Such arguments are often referred to in Latin as *non sequiturs* which means it does not follow).

- The irrelevance here is logical and not psychological. They are deceptive because of the psychological relevance that is often confused with logical relevance. This then defeats the purpose of logic namely, the observance of relevance between the premises and their conclusion in any given argument.

a) **Ad hominem** (attacking the person) arguments try to discredit a conclusion (claim, proposal etc.) by attacking its proponents instead of providing a reasoned examination of the conclusion (proposal) itself. They are divided into several variants with the most pervasive being *ad hominem* abusive and circumstantial.

Ad hominem abusive arguments attack a person's age, character, family, gender, ethnicity, appearance, dress, personality, economic status, behaviour or professional, political, or social affiliations. They employ the principle of transference i.e. what is true in psychology is also true in logic. They are also called the genetic fallacies.

They evoke an attitude of disapproval towards a person. The implication is that there is no reason to take the person's view seriously.

Circumstantial – use the unique or special circumstances of a person to discredit his reasoning. e.g. guilt by association hence “poisoning the well” argument, Vested interest or unique circumstances considerations etc.

b) **Ad populum** arguments (appeal to the people, masses, multitude or gallery) occur when we infer a conclusion merely on the grounds that most people accept it. It tries to invoke the band wagon effect, which asks us to join forces with others often irrationally. Hence assumes that because something is popular, it is therefore good, correct or desirable. This fallacy is evident in populist political speeches demagoguery. Much of advertising is also based on this fallacy as well. ‘The car in front is always a TOYOTA,’ ‘500,000 Kenyans cannot go wrong – AAR’. They usually associate things with people that arouse strong emotional approval from the masses. **Note: popular opinion cannot be taken as a proof that an idea is right or wrong. Remember everyone believed that the world was flat and that the Earth was at the centre of the universe!**

c) **Red Herring** is a fallacy that introduces an irrelevant issue to divert attention from the subject under discussion. A red herring is an extraneous matter used purely to divert

attention away from the issue posed by an argument. Because it is irrelevant, it contributes nothing to an argument, though it misleads its audience into thinking otherwise. Red herring enable those who use them to mask other defects in their arguments and thus to evade the real issue.

-The name of this fallacy comes from an old trick used by farmers in Europe to keep hunters and their dogs from galloping through crops. By dragging a smoked herring with a strong odour along the edge of their fields, farmers threw the dogs off the track by destroying the scent of the fox.

d) Ad Vericundiun (appeal to authority) occurs when we accept (or reject) a claim merely because of the prestige, status, or respect we accord its proponents (or opponents) e.g. Testimonials – exemplified by celebrities who appear on adverts and commercials endorsing products, services or brands of goods. Mariga – UAP, Patrick Njiru with Panadol etc

e) Ad Misericordian (appeal to pity). This occurs when we arouse in the audience sense or feeling of pity or sympathy and appeal to it to win argument. This is used mainly by defence lawyers even the prosecution in cases. The legal systems encourage this.

2 Fallacies of Presumption: arise because the premises presume what they purport to prove.

a) **False dichotomy:** Also called the *Either Or* fallacy

This fallacy forces one to choose between two alternatives when more than two alternatives exist. It oversimplifies a complex issue by reducing it to a simple either or choice. The alternatives it presents do not exhaust all the possibilities

e.g.

Either you are with us or you are against us

You are not with us. Therefore, you must be against us.

b) **Complex question:** Also called the fallacy of many questions, fallacy of interrogation It consists of asking questions in such a way that any single answer involves or implies other answers as well. In a complex question usually two or more questions are rolled into one. In the case of two questions the second presupposes that a definite answer has already been provided to the unasked question. E.g. *did your sales increase as a result of your misleading advertisement? Yes or No*

These devices are exploited by lawyers in cross-examination to have the accused confused, incriminate themselves. Also popular with propagandists

c) **Slippery slope fallacy** occurs when the conclusion of an argument rests upon an alleged chain reaction, suggesting that a single step in the wrong direction will result in a disastrous or otherwise undesirable outcome. In other words it is a fallacy which assumes that taking a first step will lead to subsequent steps that cannot be prevented. *It takes its name from the image of a boulder rolling uncontrollably down a steep hill. Once the boulder gets started, it cannot be stopped until it reaches the bottom.* A person who commits this fallacy assumes that taking a first step will lead inevitably to a second step and so on down the slope to disaster; without providing evidence to

support such a claim. However, to assume that all the later steps will occur without proving that they will is to commit the slippery slope fallacy. E.g. *Passing laws to control the amount of violence on television is the first step in a process that will result in absolute government control of the media and a total censorship of all forms of expression*

3 Fallacies of Ambiguity

Occur in arguments whose formulations contain ambiguous words or phrases and whose meaning(s) shift and change in the course of the argument and thus render them fallacious. They are more subtle; principally involve the use of language, hence also called fallacies of clearness

a) Equivocation

Equivocation arise when we confuse the different senses a word or phrase may have using them in different senses in the same context. In the context of an argument this is called fallacy of equivocation. The main aim is either to hide the truth or to mislead the listener. Examples:

The end of a thing is its perfection. Death is the end of life. Hence death is the perfection of life.

It is silly to fight over mere words. Discrimination is just a word. Therefore it is silly to fight over discrimination.

Men are the only rational creatures on planet earth. No women are men. Therefore, no women are rational

- b) **Amphiboly.** In language this occurs when we cannot readily determine the meaning because of either the words being arranged awkwardly or loosely. In the context of argument fallacy of amphiboly is committed when it is stated as premise on interpretation which makes it true and conclusion is deduced on the basis of interpretation that makes it false. Example:

Croesus king of wanted to go to war with king Cyrus of Persia. He went to consult the oracles who told him; *if you go to war with Persia you will destroy a mighty kingdom- this statement does not explicitly state which kingdom would be destroyed and as such, different interpretations can be made from it.*

c) **Accent** refers to emphases that generate multiple (and often misleading) interpretations. E.g. Newspaper headlines, contracts and deceptive entry forms are frequent sources of fallacies of accent.

- 4 **Inductive Fallacies** occur when the inductive probability of an argument (i.e. the probability of its conclusion given the premises) is low or at least lower than the arguer thinks it is.

- a) **Hasty generalization** means inferring a conclusion about an entire class of things from inadequate knowledge or unrepresentative cases of some of its members. Hasty generalizations are usually fallacious statistical/inductive generalizations and stem from biased, unrepresentative or inadequate sampling techniques. Pollsters, Surveys, marketing gimmicks. Example;

My Pastor is insincere therefore all Christians are insincere.

b) **Faulty analogy**

Analogical reasoning is a powerful tool in reasoning. However, analogical reasoning depends quite sensitively on the degree and relevance of the similarity.

Why Are Fallacies Deceptive?

- 1) Carelessness and being inattentive to detail
- 2) Use of the heart or emotions to think. They appeal to our emotions, prejudice, self interests or blind faith.
- 3) Ambiguity in language – semantics/formulation of the argument
- 4) Not acknowledging the limits of our knowledge, extent of our ignorance
- 5) Mental fatigue/tiredness
- 6) Generally not being critical and creative