"Ruthlessly exposes logical flaws . . . angry and witty." —*Guardian*

CRIMES AGAINST LOGIC

Exposing the Bogus Arguments of Politicians, Priests, Journalists, and Other Serial Offenders

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Preface

All self-help books should begin with a confession. Here is mine: I write letters to the editor. "Outraged of London," that's me. I am getting better, though. I often don't send the letters, and sometimes I don't even write them. If I had a therapist, he would be pleased by my progress.

But I must also confess that there has been no deep reform of my character. I still want to write those letters. It's just that what gets me so riled doesn't seem to be of the least interest to the editor of the *London Times*. Nor to my increasingly fewer friends, who yawn and roll their eyes as I explain my concerns—or "rant," as the less kind among them say.

What bothers me so much?

Errors in reasoning. Fallacies. Muddled thinking. Call it what you like; you know the kind of thing I mean.

Because you have chosen to read a book with the title *Crimes Against Logic*, you may be more sympathetic than my friends and

the editor of the *Times*. And sympathy is called for. The modern world is a noxious environment for those of us bothered by logical error. People may have become no worse at reasoning, but they now have so many more opportunities to show off how bad they are. If anyone cared about our suffering, talk radio and oped pages would be censored. Even Congress is now broadcast, as if no torment were too great.

Why are we protesters so lonely? Why don't the other consumers of all this defective thinking complain to the supplier, and to whoever else will listen, as they would if their washing machines leaked or their cars wouldn't start?

The simple answer is that most people don't notice the problem. When a car breaks down, anyone can see that it has even if he knows nothing about how cars work. Reasoning is different. Unless you know *how* reasoning can go wrong, you can't see that it has. The talking doesn't stop, no steam emerges from the ears, the eyes don't flash red. Perhaps one day someone will design a device whereby logical errors set off some such alarm, and no politician, journalist, or businessperson will be allowed to speak without having the device applied. Until that happy day, however, we must all rely on our own ability to spot errors in reasoning.

Alas, most know next to nothing about the ways reasoning can go wrong. Schools and universities pack their minds with invaluable pieces of information—about the nitrogen cycle, the causes of World War II, iambic pentameter, and trigonometry—but leave them incapable of identifying even basic errors of logic. Which makes for a nation of suckers, unable to resist the bogus reasoning of those who want something from them, such as votes or money or devotion.

Many instead defend themselves with cynicism, discounting everything said by anyone in a position of power or influence. But cynicism is a poor defense, because it doesn't help to tell good reasoning from bad. Believing nothing is just as silly as believing everything. Cynicism, like gullibility, is a symptom of underdeveloped critical faculties.

This book aims to help fill the gap left by the education system. But it is not a textbook. It is the logic equivalent of one of those troubleshooting guides in your car or computer manual. It is aimed at everyday users and consumers of reasoning, which is everyone, and covers those errors in reasoning that are commonly encountered, especially when discussing or debating controversial topics. Each of the twelve chapters is devoted to one such fallacy.

Once pointed out, it is easy to see that they are fallacies. Harder is spotting them in everyday life. Most of the book is therefore devoted to discussing examples. Some are imaginary but of such a familiar kind that you will have no trouble recalling real cases you have encountered. More, however, are real examples, drawn from politics, theology, business, and wherever people engage in reasoned debate—or what passes for it.

The Right to Your Opinion

"Know your rights!"

So we are advised by all sorts of well-meaners. When I was an undergraduate student, activists wanted me to know the rights that protected me against police harassment. Having dutifully learned them, I was disappointed never to encounter the expected harassment. Now I receive pamphlets telling me that I may have a right to various kinds of government assistance, including money. Alas, the result of inquiry is always the discovery that I don't qualify. As with cheap flights, conditions apply, and it seems that I am the citizen's equivalent of someone who wants to fly to Sydney at Christmas.

My poor return from knowing my rights shouldn't put you off. Knowing your rights is usually useful and we could all do better

at it. How many British citizens are aware, for example, that they have a right to a good night's sleep? Well, they do.[1] In a few years, when my newborn daughter has finally got herself a decent job, I plan legal action against her.

Learning your rights can also mean discovering that you do not really have rights you think you do. This can also be useful. Suppose, for example, that you thought you had a right to do to your body whatever you like, provided you injure no one else. Such a delusion could well land you in prison convicted of drug use or assault.[2]

In this spirit, my purpose here is to stop you from believing in another right that you do not really have, namely, the right to your own opinions.

Perhaps you don't believe you have this right; then I am sorry for being presumptuous. But, you would be the first person I have met who doesn't believe it. The slogan "You are entitled to your opinion" is so often repeated that it is near impossible for the brain of a modern Westerner not to have absorbed it.

Like many other views that have at times enjoyed universal assent, however, it isn't true. You don't really have a right to your own opinions. And the idea that you do, besides being false, is forever being invoked when it would be irrelevant even if it were true.

1. The right was confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights in October 2001. The court upheld the claim of people living in the flight path of Heathrow airport that early-morning flights violated this right to a good night's sleep.

2. In December 1990 a group of men who, for the sake of pleasure, volunteered to have each other cut their genitals were convicted of various crimes, including actual bodily harm.

The Irrelevant Right

Before showing that this cliché is false, let's first be clear that its common use in discussion or debate really does amount to a fallacy. It is often used preemptively, when an assertion is prefaced with the acknowledgment that "Of course, you are entitled to your opinion, but . . ." Yet its more basic use, which the above acknowledgment is intended to preempt, is defensive.

Jack has offered some opinion—that President Bush invaded Iraq to steal its oil, let's say—with which his friend Jill disagrees. Jill offers some reasons why Jack's opinion is wrong and after a few unsuccessful attempts at answering them, Jack petulantly retorts that he is entitled to his opinion.

The fallacy lies in Jack's assumption that this retort is somehow a satisfactory reply to Jill's objections, while, in fact, it is completely irrelevant. Jack and Jill disagreed about Bush's motivation for invading Iraq, and Jill gave reasons to believe that Jack was mistaken. She did not claim that he had no right to this mistaken view. By pointing out that he is entitled to his view, Jack has simply changed the subject from the original topic, the reason Iraq was invaded, to a discussion of his rights. For all it contributes to the invasion question, he may as well have pointed out that whales are warm-blooded or that in Spain it rains mainly on the plains.

As with most of our fallacies, once seen, it is obvious. Here is a simple way of putting it. If the opinions to which we are entitled might nevertheless be false, the entitlement cannot properly be invoked to settle a dispute. It adds no new information on the original matter; it does nothing to show that the opinion in question is true.

Interpreting the cliché to exclude the possibility of falsity—that is, to mean that we are entitled to have all our opinions be *true*—has two problems. First, it is ridiculous. Second, it does not in fact make the entitlement to an opinion relevant in deciding who is correct in any dispute. If Jack has a right to his true opinion then presumably Jill has a right to hers too. But then, since Jack and Jill disagree, one of them must be suffering a rights violation; one of them has a false belief. So, even if we had the right to true beliefs, that would only show that it is a right that is violated all the time, on precisely those occasions when our opinions are in fact false. In any dispute, to know whose right to a true belief is being violated we would first need to work out whose belief is false. That is, we would need to settle the *original* dispute—in the case of Jack and Jill, about President Bush's reason for invading Iraq. And a diversion on the matter of rights gets no one any closer to answering that question.

So, even on the strongest, and utterly incredible, interpretation of our opinion entitlement, it is irrelevant to anything else we might be debating. Why then is insisting on one's right to an opinion such a popular argumentative ploy?

In part, it is encouraged by an ambiguity in the word *entitlement*. It has a political or legal interpretation, by which we are all entitled to any opinion we might have, however groundless. But it also has an epistemic interpretation, that is, one related to, or concerned with, truth or knowledge. You are entitled to an opinion, in this epistemic sense, only when you have good reasons for holding it: evidence, sound arguments, and so on. Far from being universal, this epistemic entitlement is the kind you

earn. It is like being entitled to boast, which depends on having done something worth boasting about.

So, the two senses of entitlement could not be further from each other. Yet it is too tempting to muddle them. The implied argument of the muddler runs as follows:

1. If someone is entitled to an opinion then her opinion is well-supported by evidence. (This is precisely what it means to be entitled to an opinion.)
2. I am entitled to my opinion (as is everyone in a democratic society).
3. Therefore, my opinion is well-supported by evidence.

This is a beautiful example of the fallacy of equivocation, i.e., slipping between different meanings of a word in an argument that would be valid only if the word were used with the same meaning throughout. (See the chapter "Equivocation.")

Once pointed out, it's easy to see that this confusion of the political with the epistemic notion of entitlement is a mistake. And though, strictly, that will do for the purposes of this book, I don't want to leave the matter here. Even if the cliché that we are entitled to our opinions is not employed in the truly egregious way so far discussed, it is part of a mindset that increasingly impedes the free flow of ideas and their robust assessment. Many people seem to feel that their opinions are somehow sacred, so that everyone else is obliged to handle them with great care. When confronted with counterarguments, they do not pause and wonder if they might be wrong after all. They take offense.

The culture of caution this attitude generates is a serious obstacle to those who wish to get at the truth. So it is important to strip away any bogus ideas that support the attitude, such as the idea that we all have a right to our own opinions.

Rights and Duties

To see that there is really nothing at all to this idea that we have a right to our opinions we need only understand one basic point about rights, namely, that rights entail duties. I don't mean to endorse the fashionable slogan, "No rights without responsibilities," which is supposed to justify policies whereby the government imposes good behavior conditions on the receipt of social welfare. I mean something much more fundamental about rights: they are *defined* by the duties to which they give rise.[3]

The law gives all citizens a right to life. Your right to life means that everyone else has a duty not to kill you. This is not something that a government may or may not decide to associate with your right to life; it *is* that right. A law that did not impose on others a duty not to kill you would fail to establish your right to life. Does your right to life mean that others have a duty to feed you, to house you, or to provide you with medical care? These are hotly debated questions, but no one doubts that the answers to these questions about others' duties are what define and delimit the right to life.

3. For those interested in a fuller discussion of the connection between rights and duties, see P. Jones, *Rights* (Basingstoke, McMillan, 1994).

So when anyone claims a right, first ask which duties does this right impose on others; that will tell you what the right is supposed to be. And it also provides a good test for whether there is, or should be, any such right. It will often be clear that no one really has the implied duties, or that it would be preposterous to claim they should.

Mary Robinson, in her former role as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, claimed that we have a human right to be healthy. Yet, without qualification it is difficult to know what she could possibly have meant. According to the World Health Organization:

> Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Yet everyone ages and dies. And when they do, their physical, mental, and social well-being are less than complete. So the simple fact of human mortality means that everyone's right to be healthy is ultimately violated, and someone has failed to do his duty. But what could that duty be? To find a remedy for human mortality, presumably. But who could possibly bear this burden? Surely not each of us, who mostly know so little about the mechanics of human aging.

There is, of course, no unqualified human right to good health, any more than there is a human right to all those other things that it would be nice to have—such as long eyelashes and silk sheets—but which no one has a duty to provide. If she wanted to

make sense of her claim, Mary Robinson should have started with the duties rather than the right. What duties does each of us have with respect to others' health or governments with respect to the health of their citizens? Then we would know what this right to good health is supposed to amount to.

Opinion Duties

What then are the duties that the right to your opinions might entail? What am I obliged to do to respect this right? Let's start from the boldest possible demands and work down to the more humble.

Does your right to your opinion oblige me to agree with you?

No. If only because that would be impossible to square with the universality of the right to an opinion. I, too, am entitled to my own opinion which might contradict yours. Then we can't both do our duty toward each other. And think of the practical implications. Everyone would have to change his mind every time he met someone with a different opinion, changing his religion, his politics, his car, his eating habits. Foreign vacations would become as life-changing as the brochures claim.

Does your right to your opinion oblige me to listen to you?

No. I haven't the time. Many people have many opinions on many matters. You cannot walk through the West End of London without hearing some enthusiast declaring his opinions on our savior Jesus or on the Zionist conspiracy or some other topic of pressing concern. Listening to them all is practically impossible and not therefore a duty.

Does your right to your opinion oblige me to let you keep it?

This is closest to what I think most mean when they claim a right to their opinion. They do so at just that point in an argument when they would otherwise be forced to admit error and change their position. And this is also the weakest possible interpretation of the right and thus the most likely to pass the test.

Yet, it is still too strong. We have no duty to let others keep their opinions. On the contrary, we often have a duty to try to change them. Take an obvious example. You are about to cross the street with a friend. A car is coming yet your friend still takes a stride into the road. Knowing that she is not suicidal, you infer that she is of the opinion that no cars are coming. Are you obliged to let her keep this opinion?

I say no. You ought to take every reasonable measure to change her opinion, perhaps by drawing her attention to the oncoming car, saying something like, "Look out, a car is coming." By so doing, you have not violated her rights. Indeed, she will probably thank you. On matters like whether or not a car is about to crush them, everybody is interested in believing the truth; they will take the correction of their errors as a favor. The same goes for any other topic. If someone is interested in believing the truth, then she will not take the presentation of contrary evidence and argument as some kind of injury.

It's just that, on some topics, many people are not really interested in believing the truth. They might prefer it if their opinion turns out to be true—that would be the icing on the cake—but truth is not too important. Most of my friends, though subscribing to no familiar religion, claim to believe in a "superior intel-

ligence" or "something higher than us." Yet they will also cheerfully admit the absence of even a shred of evidence. Never mind. There is no cost in error, because the claim is so vague that it has no implications for action (unlike the case of the oncoming car). They just like believing it, perhaps because it would be nice if it were true, or because it helps them get along with their religious parents, or for some other reason.

But truth really is not the point, and it is most annoying to be pressed on the matter. And to register this, to make it clear that truth is neither here nor there, they declare, "I am entitled to my opinion." Once you hear these words, you should realize that it is simple rudeness to persist with the matter. You may be interested in whether or not their opinion is true, but take the hint, they aren't.

Motives

When my sister was fifteen, she thought she had fat thighs. Occasionally, she would demand to know, "My thighs are fat, aren't they?"

"No darling," my parents would reply, "you have nice thighs; you're a beautiful girl."

Well, that confirmed it. "You're just saying that!" was the constant refrain as my sister took our parents' protestations to the contrary to confirm all her worst fears.

My sister was committing the Motive Fallacy. She thought that by exposing our parents' motives for expressing an opinion—to make her feel better and shut her up—she had shown the opinion to be false.

But she hadn't. It is perfectly possible to have some interest in holding or expressing an opinion and for that opinion to be true. A man may stand to gain a great deal of peace and quiet from telling his wife that he loves her. But he may really love her nev-