

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 2

September 2nd, 2015

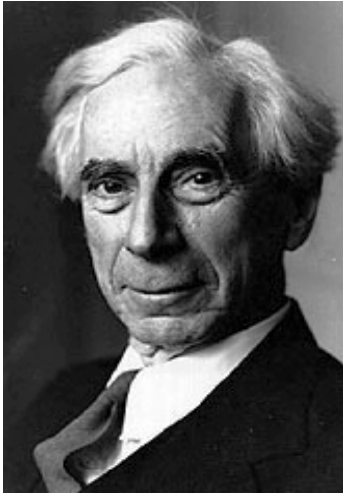


All About Arguments (Part I)

Why Should We Do Philosophy?

- One answer to this question is that **philosophy is a tool to free ourselves** from the limits of our ordinary perspective.

– **Bertrand Russell** (in “The Value of Philosophy”) writes:



- “The man who has no [exposure to] philosophy goes through life *imprisoned* in the prejudices derived from common sense,
- from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation,
- and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason.”

– In other words:

- It is very easy to never bother second-guessing our beliefs, especially those beliefs that have been instilled in us from an early age by our families and culture.

- The ancient Greek philosopher **Plato** (428-348 BCE) illustrated this point through a story known as the “**Allegory of the Cave**” (*in The Republic*)
 - **videos:** bit.ly/1tk5AtZ, bit.ly/1rs4wSw



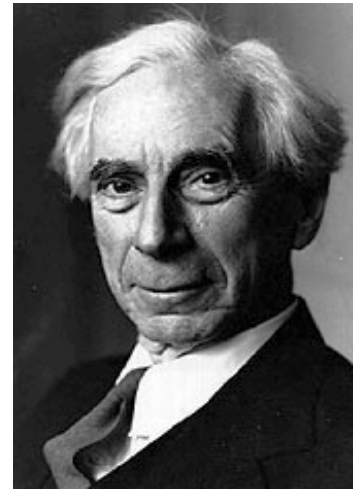
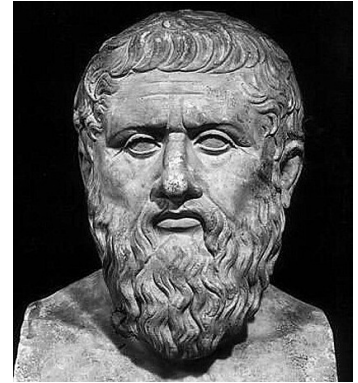
- **People who never question the world around them are like prisoners chained inside a cave**, who see nothing but shadows projected on the cave wall.
 - Since the shadows are all they’ve ever seen, they mistake the shadows for reality – and thus miss out on an informed perspective on the world.



- **Doing philosophy is like escaping the cave**, learning about the world, and trying to share one’s insight with those who are still imprisoned.
 - Plato says “it is the task of the enlightened” (i.e., students of philosophy) “not only to ascend to learning . . . but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners,” fulfilling a duty to help them understand.

Why Should We Do Philosophy?

- Plato & Russell both agree that philosophy **helps us to escape the imprisonment of our own ignorance.**
- As Russell says, philosophy:
 - “is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom,”
 - “removes the somewhat arrogant *dogmatism* of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt,”
 - **dogmatism** = persistent and unwavering belief in an idea or set of ideas (a dogma)
 - “and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”



Philosophy's Demographic Problem

- Philosophers often aims to derive universal truths about humanity, which generalize across the experiences of people at all times and places.
 - **But though philosophy purports to be *for everyone*,**
 - **it historically has not been done *by everyone*.**

– Philosopher **Kristie Dotson** shares this story in “How is this Paper Philosophy?” (2009):

My younger sister, Alexis Ford, once had the following conversation with her Guidance Counselor, while she was a college student at a Historically Black College.

Counselor: Why don't you major in Social Work?

Alexis: Social Work sounds good, but I am interested in philosophy.

Counselor: (Snorts) Philosophy is not for black women. That's a white man's game.

Alexis: My older sister is a philosophy professor.

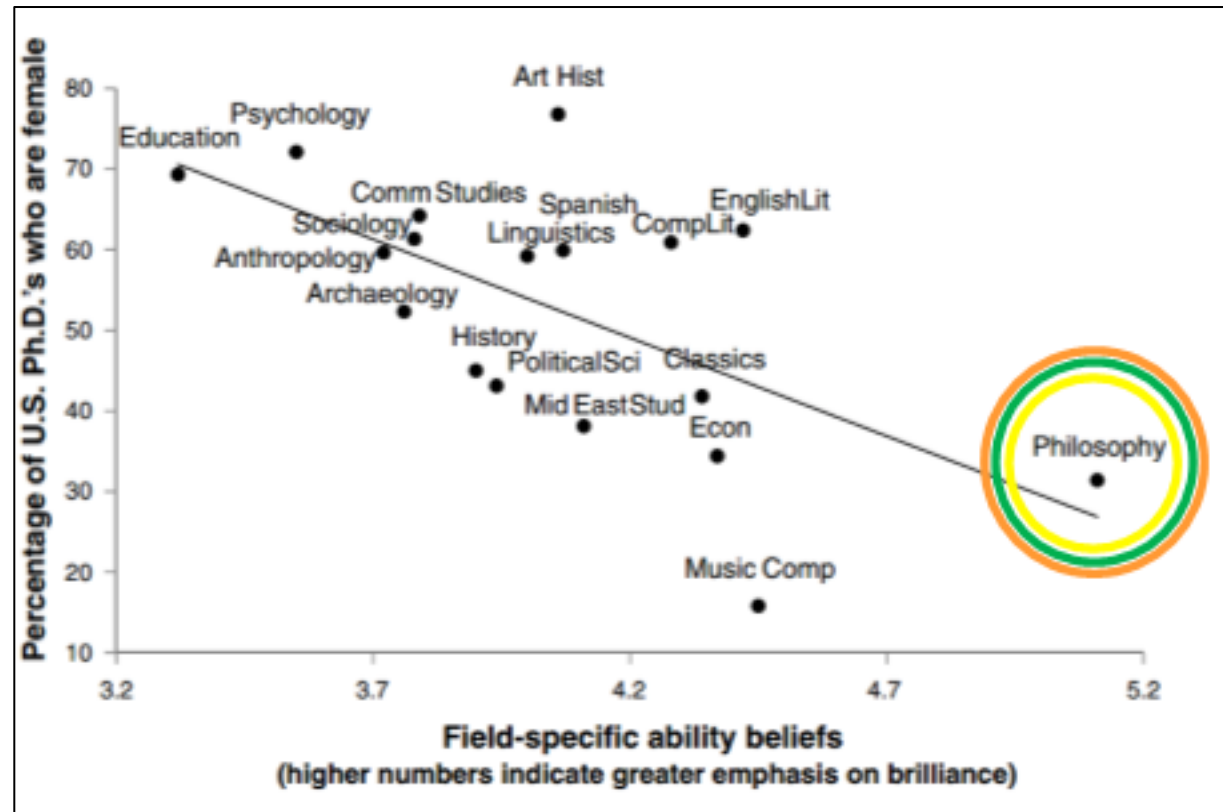
Counselor: Well, she's probably the only one and that should tell you something. (2009)

- ***What is it about philosophy that makes people think that it's only “a white man's game”?***

- ***Is it because the vast majority of professional philosophers today are white men (and most famous philosophers from the past were, too)?***
 - But the fact that something *has always been* a certain way is no reason to believe that it *must always be* that way.
 - Also, there's no evidence that it is (and has always been) that way *for any good reason*.
 - We *cannot* conclude that white men are more likely to be professional philosophers because they are any better at philosophy than women and non-whites.
 - » Instead, white men could be overrepresented in philosophy because other types of people are/were systematically excluded from institutions of professional philosophy.
- ***Is it because most of the works that appear on philosophy course syllabi are written by white men?***
 - That's no reason to conclude that white men write better philosophical works than other people.
 - It only goes to show that works by white men are more likely to be recognized in the philosophical 'canon'.

– *Is it because doing philosophy requires certain traits that white men are more likely to have?*

- A common **stereotype** about philosophy is that you must have *innate talent* or ‘brilliance’ to do it (Leslie et al, 2015)
 - But that’s purely **a myth.**



- Philosophy involves a broad array of skills,
 - all of which can (and will!) be developed with time, practice, and hard work.

- *My view is on the demographics problem is that:*
 - There are *no* good reasons to believe that any group of people are more worthy of being philosophers than any other group of people.



- Though many people have tried to explain philosophy's racial & gender imbalances by attributing greater ability to white men,
 - another viable explanation is that social & economic obstacles have made it difficult for women & non-whites to:
 - a) gain entry into philosophical institutions, and
 - b) get recognition for the great philosophical work they do.

- **Philosophy should be *by & for* people of all genders, races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations, etc.**
 - » We can all combat philosophy's reputation as a "white man's game" by playing the game, changing its demographics, and welcoming *all* perspectives.

- **Philosophy is challenging, but anyone can do it well** – *as long as they put in the time and effort to develop their skills.*
 - It is absolutely normal, and absolutely ok to feel confused:
 - Studying philosophy is like learning *a whole new language* in which to think.
- Consult the “Strategies for Success” page on the course website for suggestions for how to approach the course material and assignments.
 - My **top recommendations** are to:
 - **make study guides** for yourself, which summarize the material in your own words
 - **start essays early** so you have plenty of time to think about your topic, discuss it with me if necessary, and make revisions
 - **test your understanding** by explaining what you have learned to a classmate, friend, parent, pet, etc.
- The Office of Services for Students with Disabilities may be able to offer reasonable accommodation to eligible students
- ***Email me and/or schedule a meeting if you are having trouble, or just want to talk about what you can do to improve.***

What is an argument?

Arguments are like the *currency of philosophy*:

they are what philosophers exchange to 'do business' with each other

- An argument is a **structured defense of a claim** (statement, assertion) about some topic
 - This claim can express one's **positive view** about that topic, when it is *offered as a good answer to a philosophical question* (ideally, the best answer among many alternatives)
 - It can also express a **negative view** about a topic, when it *states that some claim is not a good answer*.



– E.g., for the philosophical question “*What is art?*”,

- a *positive view* could be expressed in the claim ‘Artworks mirror the the natural world’
- a *negative view* could be expressed in the claim ‘The view according to which artworks mirror the natural world *fails* to account for abstract and nonvisual art’



- **To make an argument**, you must:
 - 1) **choose a claim to defend**, and
 - 2) **provide at least one reason in support** of that claim.
 - When you state a *reason* in the form of a **proposition** (*a phrase that can stand alone as a sentence*), it is called a **premise**.
 - The *claim you are defending* is called the **conclusion**, because it is supposed to be the result of the reasoning you provide to defend it.
- ***An argument must include at least one premise and a conclusion.*** E.g.:

A. Baruch College is the best school in the CUNY system.

– \wedge is *not* an argument, but *merely a claim*.

– We can make an argument by adding any of the following potential *premises*:

» It has the most dedicated student body.

» It has excellent instructors.

» It sends the most students to business school.

– ...which are supposed to make A the obvious and indisputable *conclusion* of one's reasoning about this issue.



The premises and conclusion of an argument might be laid out very clearly, or they might be buried within the author's writing.

- Fortunately, authors often *signal* premises and conclusions with particular *key words* that come immediately before.

- **premise-flags:** *because, since, given that, for*

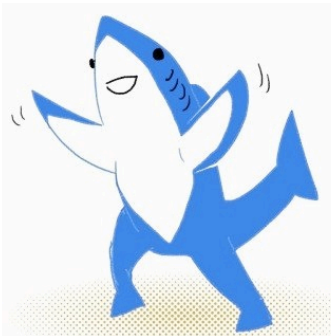
A. Baruch College is the best school in the CUNY system

- » given that **it has the most dedicated student body.**
- » because **it has excellent instructors.**
- » since **it sends the most students to business school.**
- » for _____ [your premise of choice] _____.



- **conclusion-flags:** *thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, so, consequently*

- **Katy Perry's Super Bowl halftime show had dancing sharks,**
 - » therefore **it was an unforgettable performance.**
 - » hence **it was an artistic travesty.**
 - » consequently, **next year's show must be even more absurd.**



There's a **simple convention for organizing arguments** into a form which makes them easier to analyze:

- stack the premises on top of a solid line,
 - and write the conclusion underneath.
- 1) If you study philosophy, then your critical thinking skills will improve.
 - 2) If your critical thinking skills improve, then you are more likely to do well on the LSAT, GMAT, GRE, etc.
-
- 3) Therefore, if you study philosophy, you are more likely to do well on the LSAT, GMAT, GRE, etc

Organizing an argument this way will help you to evaluate whether the argument actually supports its conclusion.

- Just because an author has provided a premise in defense of their conclusion doesn't mean that:
 - the premise *actually does support* their claim,
 - or that the premise *is a philosophically-acceptable type of reason* to accept a conclusion.

Any philosophical work will have a **main argument** defending the author's central conclusion, which is basically the work's *thesis statement*.

- *But* if an author feels that a reader may not automatically agree that one of the premises in the main argument is true, or that it is a good kind of premise,
- they may need to provide an **auxiliary argument** (an additional, supplementary one) to defend that premise.

» “For instance, the author's discussion may have the form:

- The conclusion I want you to accept is **A**. My argument for this conclusion is as follows: **B** and **C** are true, and if **B** and **C** are true, then **A** must also be true. It is generally accepted that **B** is true. However, it is controversial whether **C** is true. I think you ought to accept **C** for the following reasons...

» Here the author's *main argument* is for the conclusion **A**, and in the process of arguing for **A** he advances an *auxiliary argument* in support of **C**.” (Pryor 2006)

➤ ***So, one text may contain multiple arguments.***



Evaluating Arguments

One of your duties as a philosophy student is not to take anything an author says for granted.

- Instead, you must take a *critical stance* while reading & listening to arguments,
- and *pay careful attention to the reasoning used* to support conclusions.

➤ The arguments *we will be focusing on* in this class will mostly be **deductive arguments**,

- which *intend to support a conclusion by supplying premises whose truth guarantees that the conclusion is true.*

• (In contrast, **inductive arguments** intend to support a conclusion by supplying premises whose truth *make it more likely*, but do not guarantee that the conclusion is true. E.g.:

1) Every swan I have ever seen was white.

2) Therefore, all swans are white.

- The truth of 1) *makes it likely, but does not guarantee* the truth of “all swans are white”. It could be just a fluke that you never encountered a black swan.

» **the problem of induction:** experience does not guarantee insight into what is true in reality.)



A **good (deductive) argument** gives us adequate reason to believe that its conclusion is true. It supports its conclusion well because:

- I. its premises are worthy of our belief,
- II. its premises are true, and
- III. its conclusion follows logically from the truth of the premises.

» Let's consider how an argument could fail to meet **criterion I**.

- Premises are worthy of our belief when they a) support the conclusion with good logic and b) 'play by the rules' of rhetoric.
 - A premise that either a) uses bad logic or b) breaks one of the rules of rhetoric is **fallacious** – or in other words, **commits a fallacy**.
 - » There are *dozens* of fallacies.
 - » We'll get acquainted with some of the most frequent ones, organized into rough categories.

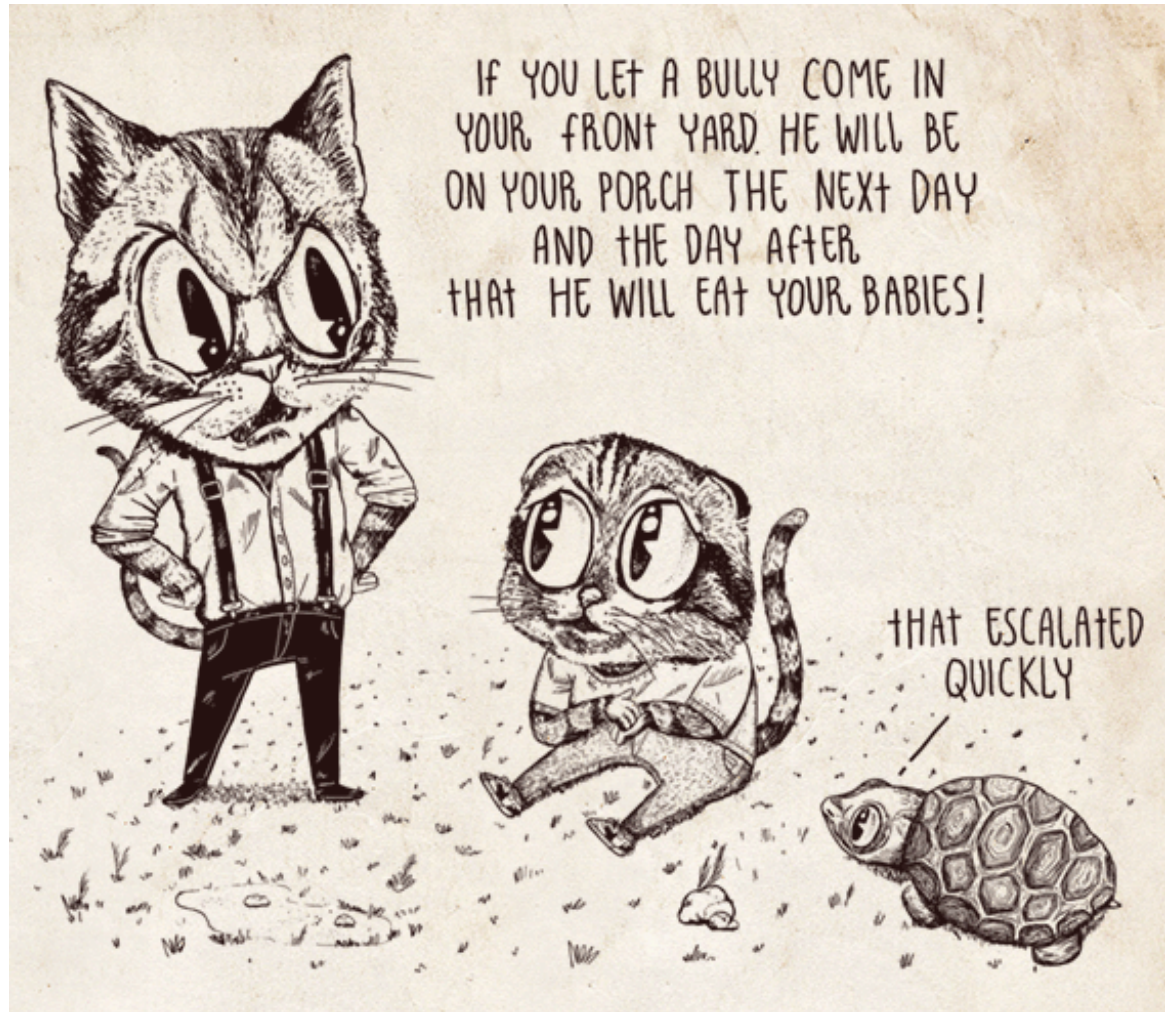
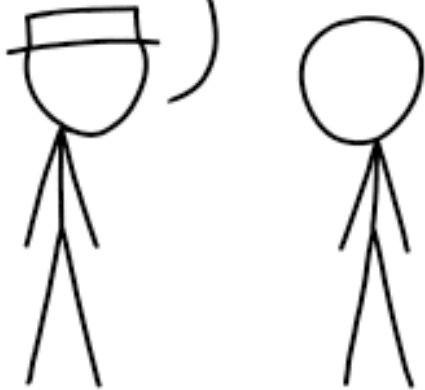
Information Manipulations misrepresent the facts at hand to try to convince readers of something that is not necessarily true.

- **Hasty Generalizations** (including **Stereotypes**) draw conclusions about an entire group after observing just a small (and not necessarily representative) sample of its members.
 - » *Asian students are good at math.*
Therefore, an Asian student should manage our organization's budget.
- **Confirmation Bias** is when an author cherry-picks sources and pieces of evidence that confirm the view they already hold, while ignoring or suppressing evidence to the contrary.
 - » *Of course cake is better than pie:*
not one person on cakelovers.com says they prefer pie over cake.
- **Slippery Slope Arguments** claim that one small step will inevitably lead to much more drastic (and typically undesirable) consequences.
 - » *We can't let people of the same sex marry each other:*
next thing you know, people will be marrying their dogs!
- **Strawman Arguments** misrepresent an opponent's view, thereby making it easier to defeat.
 - » *It's ridiculous to say that all human beings are created equal:*
if that were true, we'd all be able to dunk like LeBron!

YEAH, BUT IF I'M CONSIDERATE
TOWARD ONE PERSON ABOUT
ONE THING, WHAT'S NEXT?

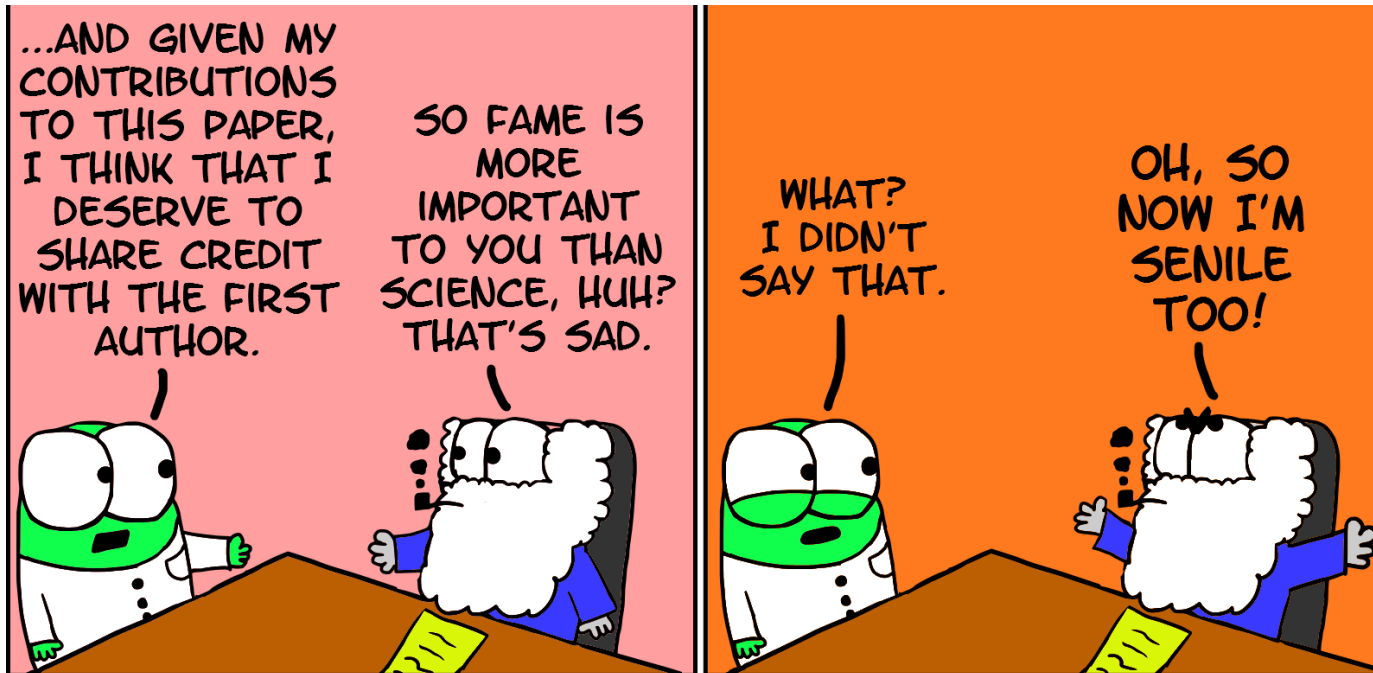
BEING NICE TO *OTHER* PEOPLE
ABOUT *OTHER* THINGS?

WHERE DOES IT *END*?



➤ *Which fallacy are these comics joking about?*

➤ *Which fallacy does the person on the right commit in each of these comics?*



Off-Limits Appeals give reasons involving information that should be irrelevant to the matter at hand.

- **Ad Hominem Attacks** criticize the author of an opposing claim, instead of criticizing the claim itself.
 - » *Voldemort says the sky is blue, but we can't trust anything Voldemort says because he's evil.*
- **Anecdotal Evidence** is an appeal to one's own limited experience, or hearsay about someone else's limited experience.
 - » *The G train is very reliable: it came right away the one time I took it.*
- **Appeals to Authority** claim something is true merely because an expert (or someone who purports to be an expert) says so.
 - » *The correct way to eat a slice of New York-style pizza is with a knife and fork: if Donald Trump says so, it must be true.*
- **Appeals to Emotion** try to convince the reader that something is true by arousing their emotions instead of appealing to their reason.
 - » *Petroleum is a terrible energy source: just think of all the cute baby sea animals that were harmed in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill!*



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➤ which fallacy do these advertisements commit?

Off-Limits Appeals (continued)

- **Appeals to Emotion** (including **Scare Tactics**) try to convince the reader that something is true by arousing their emotions instead of appealing to reason.
 - » *Petroleum is a terrible energy source: just think of all the cute baby sea animals that were harmed in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill!*
- **Appeals to Popularity** (or **Bandwagon Fallacies**) assume that a claim is true just because many or most other people believe it (or false just because few others believe it).
 - » *Few of Galileo's contemporaries believed his claims that the earth revolves around the sun – so he must have been a total quack.*
- **Appeals to Tradition** claim that something is correct just because it's what has always been done.
 - » *Marriage should only be between a man and a woman, because that's how we've done things for thousands of years.*
- **Red Herrings** distract the reader by introducing information that isn't pertinent to the topic at hand.
 - » *Baruch is the best CUNY college, because that's the school I go to.*



➤ Which fallacy do all of these ads commit?



If you drink like a man you might end up looking like one.

(What *other* fallacy do these both commit?)

- **Logical Errors** are – no surprise – errors in logical reasoning.
 - **Begging the Question (Circular Argumentation)** is when an author assumes the truth of conclusion of their argument in the reasoning they provide in defense of that conclusion
 - » *God must exist, because nature clearly exhibits intelligent design by a divine creator.*
 - **Equivocation** is when an author uses an ambiguous word (one with multiple meanings) and depends upon the word being understood with different meanings at different points in the argument.
 - » *Nightmares are a type of dream. Exams are a nightmare. Therefore, exams are a type of dream.*
 - **Non Sequitur** (Latin for ‘it doesn’t follow’) is when an author draws a conclusion that simply isn’t supported by the reasoning they have given to support it.
 - » *Dorothy is wearing red shoes today, so obviously red is her favorite color.*

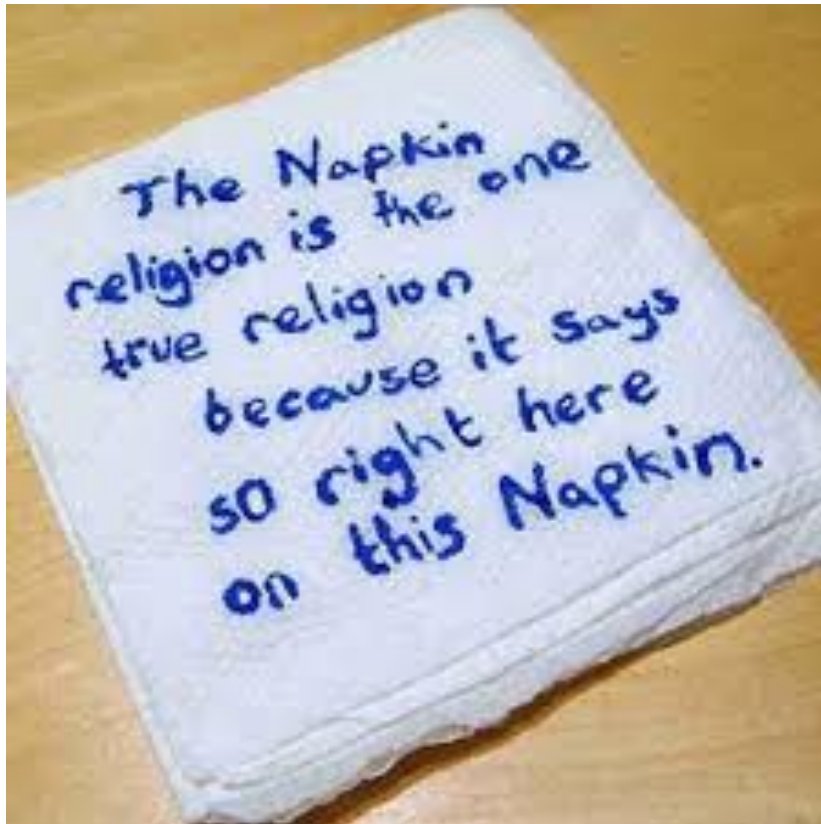
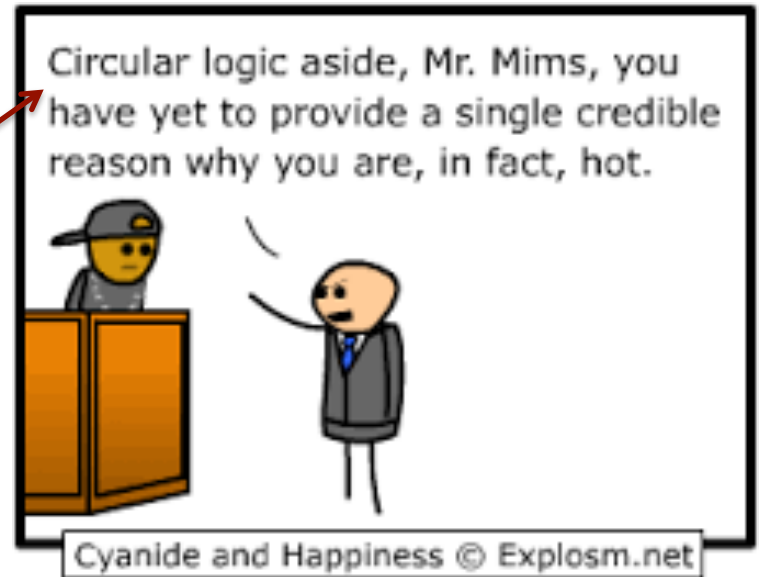


THE QUEEN TOLD THE CURIOUS LITTLE CRANE THAT SHE COULD HAVE JAM EVERY OTHER DAY, BUT NEVER TODAY, SINCE TODAY WAS NOT ANY OTHER DAY.

Which fallacy does the queen commit?

➤ Which fallacy is exemplified in the statements below?

(hint)



- **Logical Errors** (continued)

- **Confusing Chronology with Causation (Post Hoc Fallacy)** is when an author mistakenly assumes that since one event comes after another, the first event must have *caused* the second to occur.

- This is an invalid inference, because one event can follow another in time without there being *any* relationship between the two.

- » *It rained a few hours after I performed a rain-summoning dance: so I must have supernatural rain-summoning powers!*

- **Confusing Correlation with Causation** is when an author mistakenly takes an *apparent relationship between two factors* as support for the conclusion that one of those factors is the *cause* of the other.

- This is an invalid inference, because two things can be correlated without having *any causal* relation to one another:

- they could merely seem to be related due to random coincidence, or both things could be caused another unacknowledged factor.

- » *Both ice cream consumption and crime rates go up in the summer: so eating ice cream must instigate criminal behavior.*

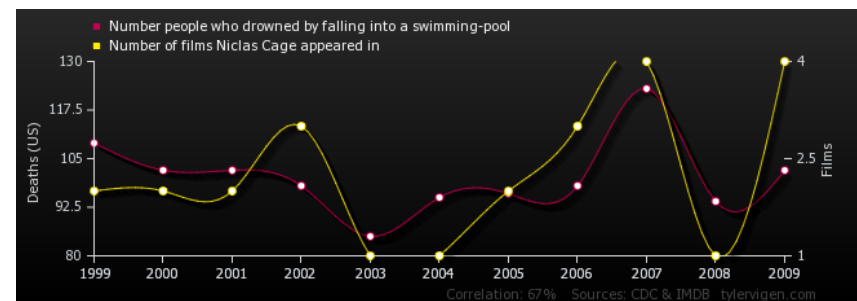
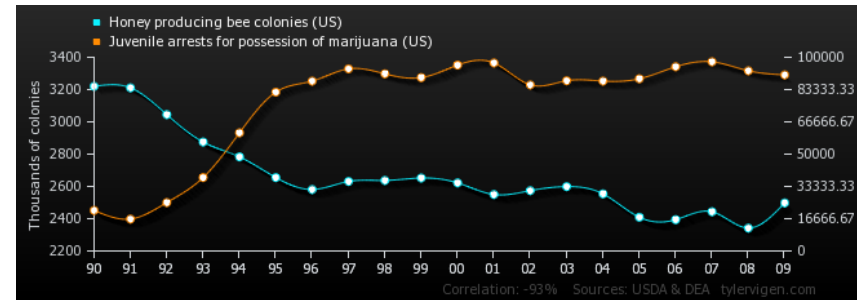
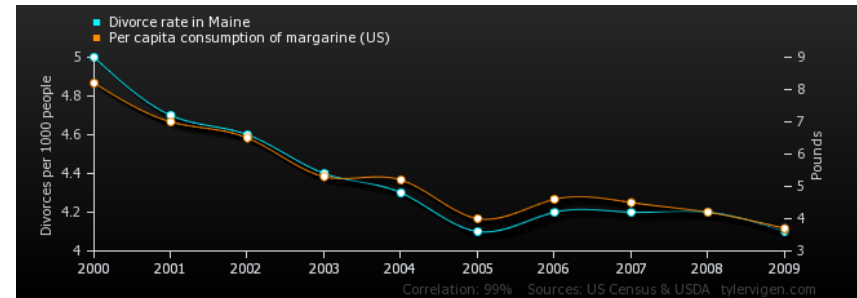
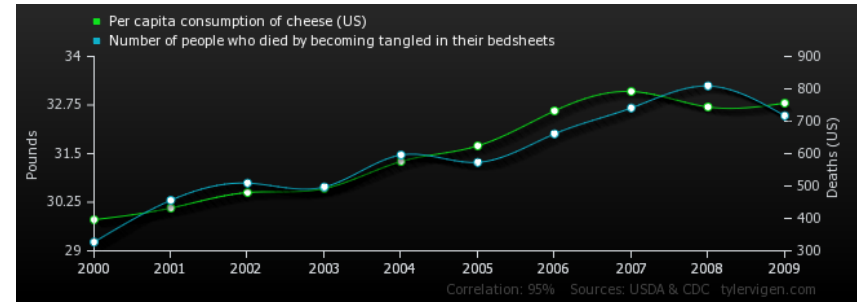
- (The actual explanation for this is that higher temperatures are the cause of both increased ice cream consumption and increased crime rates; there's no direct link between ice cream & crime.)

Some *purely coincidental* correlations:

- per capita cheese consumption & deaths by getting tangled in bedsheets
- divorce rates in Maine & per capita consumption of margarine
- honey-producing bee colonies & juvenile arrests for marijuana possession
- number of people who drowned by falling into a swimming pool & number of films Nicolas Cage appeared in

➤ The take-away is that:

Correlation ≠ causation.



THE ADVENTURES OF:

FALLACY MAN!

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY,
LORD OF DEBATE,
SULTAN OF REASON!

♪ DUN DUN DUN
DUN DUN DUNN
DUNNNNNN! ♪



WHEREVER SOMEONE IS ILLOGICAL...
I WILL BE THERE.
WHENEVER SOMEONE IS *WRONG*,
I WILL TELL THEM WHY.



YEAH, I DON'T KNOW MAN,
PEYTON MANNING SAYS
THIS IS THE MOST TALENTED
ROSTER HE'S BEEN ON, I THINK
THIS MIGHT BE THEIR YEAR.



APPEAL TO
AUTHORITY!

DUDE, WHAT
THE HELL...



YEAH, BUT GLENN
BECK IS AN IDIOT,
YOU SHOULDN'T
LISTEN TO ANYTHING
HE SAYS.



AD HOMINEM!!!



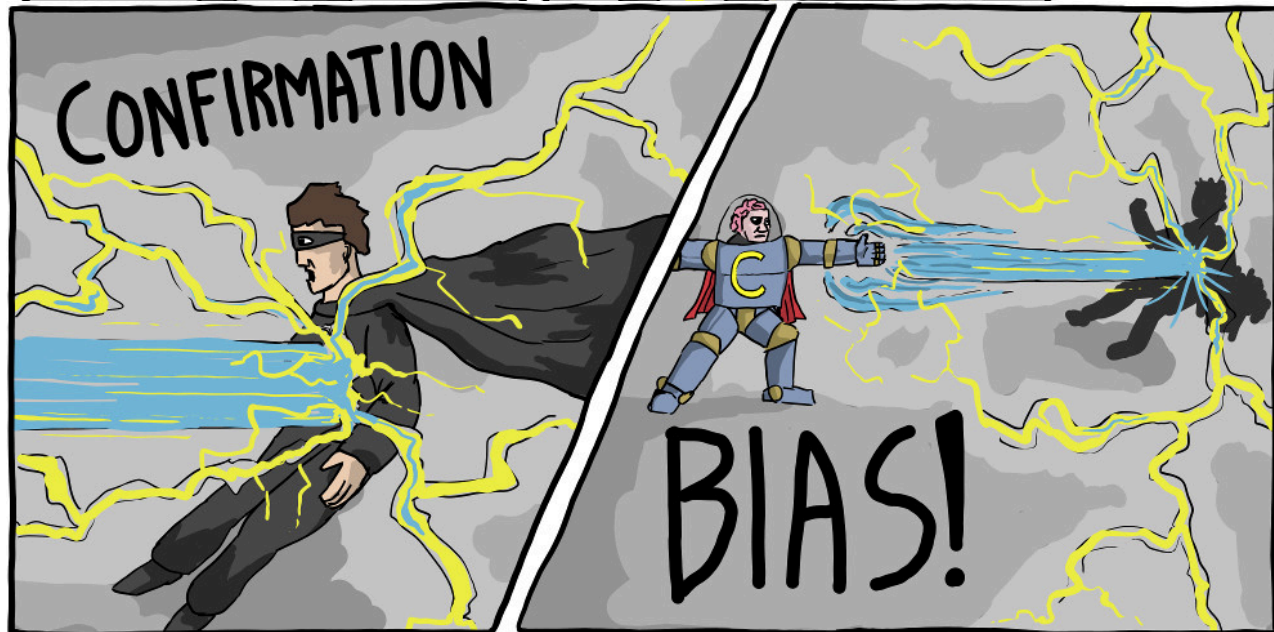
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AD HOMINEM!
AD HOMINEM AD HOMINEM AD
HOMINEM AD HOMINEM!!!



AHH



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moral of the story:
We're all guilty of committing fallacies sometimes!

...but the more you learn about them, the more likely you are to detect them in your own thinking.