The Thinker's Guide

To

Fallacies:

The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation

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The Foundation for Critical Thinking

To understand the human mind, understand self-deception.
Anon

The word 'fallacy' derives from two Latin words, fallax ("deceptive") and fallere ("to deceive"). This is an important concept in human life because much human thinking deceives itself while deceiving others. The human mind has no natural guide to the truth, nor does it naturally love the truth. What the human mind loves is itself, what serves it, what flatters it, what gives it what it wants, and what strikes down and destroys whatever "threatens" it.

The study of fallacies can be pursued in at least two different ways. It can be approached traditionally: in which case one defines, explains, and exemplifies ways in which unsound arguments can be made to appear sound. Or it can be approached deeply, in which case one relates the construction of fallacies to the pursuit of human interests and irrational desires. Using the first approach, students gain little by memorizing the names and definitions of fallacies. They soon forget them. Their minds are left largely untouched and therefore unmoved. On the other hand, the second approach makes possible the acquisition of lifelong insights into how the mind – every mind – uses unsound arguments and intellectual "tricks" to further its ends.

When we look closely at human decisions and human behavior, we can easily see that what counts in human life is not who is right, but who is winning. Those who possess power in the form of wealth, property, and weaponry are those who decide what truths will be trumpeted around the world and what truths will be ridiculed, silenced, or suppressed. The mass media of the world generate an unending glut of messages that continually sacrifice truth to "spin." When we reach beneath the surface of things, we find a world in which the word 'communication' and the word 'manipulation' collapse into virtual synonyms.

Students need seminal insights and intellectual tools that enable them to protect themselves from becoming intellectual victims in a world of swarming media piranhas, or, just as bad, from joining the swarm as a junior piranha in training. Insights and tools, grounded in intellectual integrity, should be the ultimate aim of the study of "fallacies." They have been our aim in this guide.

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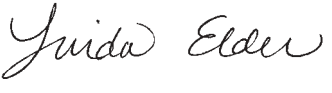

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Truth and Deception in the Human Mind

The human mind is a marvelous set of structures and systems. It is a center of consciousness and action. It forms a unique identity. It creates a view of the world. Rich experience emerges from its interactions with the world. It thinks. It feels. It wants. It apprehends truths and suppresses errors. It achieves insights and fabricates prejudices. Both useful truths and harmful misconceptions are its intermixed products. It can as easily believe what is false as what is true.

It can see beauty in right conduct and justify what is flagrantly unethical. It can love and hate. It can be kind and cruel. It can advance knowledge or error. It can be intellectually humble or intellectually arrogant. It can be empathic or narrow-minded. It can be open or closed. It can achieve a permanent state of expanding knowledge or a deadening state of narrowing ignorance. It both transcends the creatures of lessor ability and insults their innocence and nobility by its self-deception and cruelty.

How can humans create within their own minds such an inconsistent amalgam of the rational and the irrational? The answer is self-deception. In fact, perhaps the most accurate and useful definition of humans is that of "the self-deceiving animal." Deception, duplicity, sophistry, delusion, and hypocrisy are foundational products of human nature in its "natural," untutored state. Rather than reducing these tendencies, most schooling and social influences redirect them, rendering them more sophisticated, more artful, and more obscure.

To exacerbate this problem, not only are humans instinctively self-deceptive, they are naturally sociocentric as well. Every culture and society sees itself as special and as justified in all of its basic beliefs and practices, in all its values and taboos. The arbitrary nature of its folkways is known to its anthropologists (if it has any), but not to its overwhelming majority.

Uncritical Persons (intellectually unskilled thinkers)

The over-whelming preponderance of people have not freely decided what to believe, but, rather, have been socially conditioned (indoctrinated) into their beliefs. They are unreflective thinkers. Their minds are products of social and personal forces they neither understand, control, nor concern themselves with. Their personal beliefs are often based in prejudices. Their thinking is largely comprised of stereotypes, caricatures, oversimplifications, sweeping generalizations, illusions, delusions, rationalizations, false dilemmas, and begged questions. Their motivations are often traceable to irrational fears and attachments, personal vanity and envy, intellectual arrogance and simple-mindedness. These constructs have become a part of their identity.

Such persons are focused on what immediately affects them. They see the

world through ethnocentric and nationalistic eyes. They stereotype people from other cultures. When their beliefs are questioned — however unjustified those beliefs may be — they feel personally attacked. When they feel threatened, they typically revert to infantile thinking and emotional counter attacks.

When *their* prejudices are questioned, they often feel offended and stereotype the questioner as "intolerant" and "prejudiced." They rely on sweeping generalizations to support their beliefs. They resent being "corrected," disagreed with, or criticized. They want to be re-enforced, flattered, and made to feel important. They want to be presented with a simple-minded, black-and-white, world. They have little or no understanding of nuances, fine distinctions, or subtle points.

They want to be told who is evil and who is good. They see themselves as "good." They see their enemies as "evil." They want all problems to admit to a simple solution and the solution to be one they are familiar with — for example, punishing those who are evil by use of force and violence. Visual images are much more powerful in their minds than abstract language. They are overly impressed by authority, power, and celebrity. They are eminently ready to be directed and controlled, as long as those doing the controlling flatter them and lead them to believe that their views are correct and insightful.

The mass media are structured to appeal to such persons. Subtle and complex issues are reduced to simplistic formulas ("Get tough on crime! Three strikes and you're out! Adult crime, adult time! You are either for us or against us!") Spin is everything; substance is irrelevant.

Skilled Manipulators (weak-sense critical thinkers)

There is a much smaller group of people who are skilled in the art of manipulation and control. These people are shrewdly focused on pursuing their own interest without respect to how that pursuit affects others. Though they share many of the characteristics of uncritical thinkers, they have qualities that separate them from uncritical persons. They have greater command of the rhetoric of persuasion. They are more sophisticated, more verbal, and generally have greater status. On average, they have more schooling and achieve more success than uncritical persons. They typically acquire more power and occupy positions of authority. They are accustomed to playing the dominant role in relationships. They know how to use the established structure of power to advance their interests. Since they are fundamentally concerned, not with advancing rational values, but with getting what they want, they are careful to present themselves as sharing the values of those they manipulate.

Skilled manipulators are rarely insightful dissenters, rebels, or critics of society. The reason is simple. They cannot effectively manipulate

members of a mass audience if they appear to that mass to be invalidating their beliefs.

Manipulators do not use their intelligence for the public good. Rather they use it to get what they want in alliance with those who share their vested interests. Manipulation, domination, demagoguery, and control are their tools.[1]

Persons skilled in manipulation want to influence the beliefs and behavior of others. And they have insight into what makes people vulnerable to manipulation. As a result, they strive to appear before others in a way that associates themselves with power, authority, and conventional morality. This impetus is evident, for example, when politicians appear before mass audiences with well-polished, but intellectually empty, speeches.

There are a number of alternative labels for the roles that "manipulators" play, including: the spin master, the con artist, the sophist, the propagandist, the indoctrinator, the demagogue, and often, the "politician." Their goal is always to control what others think and do by controlling the way information is presented to them. They use "rational" means only when such means can be used to create the appearance of objectivity and reasonability. The key is that they are always trying to keep some information and some points of view from being given a fair hearing.

Fair-Minded Critical Persons

(strong-sense critical thinkers)

Finally, there is an even smaller group of people who, though intellectually skilled, do not want to manipulate and control others. These are the people who combine critical thought, fair-mindedness, self-insight, and a genuine desire to serve the public good. They are sophisticated enough to recognize how self-serving people use their knowledge of human nature and command of rhetoric to pursue selfish ends. They are acutely aware of the phenomenon of mass society and of the machinery of mass persuasion and social control. Consequently, they are too insightful to be manipulated and too ethical to enjoy manipulating others.

They have a vision of a better, more ethical, world, which includes a realistic knowledge of how far we are from that world. They are practical in their effort to encourage movement from "what is" to "what might be." They gain this insight by struggling with their own egocentric nature and coming to see (in deeper and deeper ways) their own involvement in irrational processes.

No one becomes a fair-minded thinker first and a selfish person later.

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[1] A demogogue is never a true critic of society but a sophist, for he/she "tries to stir up the people by appeals to emotion, prejudice, etc. in order to win them over quickly and so gain power." *(Webster's New World Dictionary).*

There is No Exhaustive List of Fallacies

It is not possible to create an exclusive and exhaustive list of fallacies. The intellectual tricks, traps, and snares humans so commonly engage in (or fall prey to) can be described from many differing standpoints and in a variety of differing terms. In this guide, we deal only with those most common or most easily recognized. There is nothing sacred about our list or our analysis. Here is a list of common problems in human thinking. See if you can add to this list. It is common for people (in their thinking) to:

- be unclear, muddled, or confused
- jump to conclusions
- fail to think-through implications
- lose track of their goal
- be unrealistic
- focus on the trivial
- fail to notice contradictions
- use inaccurate information in their thinking
- ask vague questions
- give vague answers
- ask loaded questions
- ask irrelevant questions
- confuse questions of different types
- answer questions they are not competent to answer
- come to conclusions based on inaccurate or irrelevant information
- use only the information that supports their view
- make inferences not justified by their experience
- distort data and represent it inaccurately
- fail to notice the inferences they make
- come to unreasonable conclusions
- fail to notice their assumptions
- make unjustified assumptions
- miss key ideas
- use irrelevant ideas
- form confused ideas
- form superficial concepts
- misuse words
- ignore relevant viewpoints
- fail to see issues from points of view other than their own
- confuse issues of different types
- lack insight into their prejudices
- think narrowly
- think imprecisely
- think illogically
- think one-sidedly
- think simplistically
- think hypocritically
- think superficially
- think ethnocentrically
- think egocentrically
- think irrationally
- be incompetent at problem solving
- make poor decisions
- lack insight into their own ignorance

Dirty Trick # 1

Accuse Your Opponent of Doing What He is Accusing You of (or worse)[6]
This is sometimes called, "Pointing to another wrong." When under attack and having trouble defending themselves, manipulators turn the tables. They accuse their opponent of doing what they are being accused of. "You say that I don't love you! I think it is you who does not love me!" Manipulators know this is a good way to put their opponents on the defensive. You may want to up the ante by accusing your opponent of doing something worse than what he is accusing you of. "How dare you accuse me of being messy? When was the last time you even took a shower?"

Dirty Trick # 2

Accuse Him of Sliding Down A Slippery Slope (that leads to disaster)
The slippery slope is used when a person implies that if someone does one thing (A), it will inevitably lead to a domino effect of negative things that, in the end will result in something terrible. In other words, "A" is not so bad, but A leads to B and B leads to C and C is horrible! Imagine a mother lecturing her teenage daughter: "OK, maybe there is nothing wrong with a kiss, but remember where kissing leads and where that leads and that. Before you know it you'll be the mother of an unwanted baby! Your young life will be ruined forever!" Manipulators who use this argument conveniently forget that many people walk carefully on slippery ground and don't fall down.

Dirty Trick # 3

Appeal to Authority[7]
Most people are in awe of those with power, celebrity, or status. In addition, there are many sacred symbols (flags, religious images, sacred words, etc.) to which people feel intense identification and loyalty. Though power, celebrity, and status rarely correlate in any way with knowledge and insight, people are mesmerized by them.

Demagogues that successfully manipulate people know that most people are readily tricked in this way. So they wrap themselves in the flag and associate themselves with power, celebrity, or status (in any way they can). This includes looking for scientists and other "knowledgeable" persons to "support" their views.

Cigarette companies once hired scientists who were (in effect) prepared to say that there was no PROOF that cigarettes caused lung cancer — though they knew (or should have known) that the proof was there. Cigarette

6 Traditionally called "Tu Quoque" – literally, "you also"

7 Traditionally called "Argumentum ad Verecundiam"

