HOW TO WIN EVERY ARGUMENT

THE USE AND ABUSE OF LOGIC

MADSEN PIRIE
PUBLISHER’S WARNING: IN THE WRONG HANDS THIS BOOK IS DANGEROUS. WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU ARM YOURSELF WITH IT WHILST KEEPING IT OUT OF THE HANDS OF OTHERS. ONLY BUY THIS BOOK AS A GIFT IF YOU ARE SURE THAT YOU CAN TRUST THE RECIPIENT.
IN THIS WITTY and infectious book Madsen Pirie provides a complete guide to using — and indeed abusing — logic in order to win arguments. He identifies with devastating examples all the most common fallacies popularly used in argument. We all like to think of ourselves as clear-headed and logical — but all readers will find in this book fallacies of which they themselves are guilty. The author shows you how simultaneously to strengthen your own thinking and identify the weaknesses in other people’s arguments. And, more mischievously, Pirie also shows how to be deliberately illogical — and get away with it. This book will make you maddeningly smart: your family, friends and opponents will all wish that you had never read it.
MADSEN PIRIE is President of the Adam Smith Institute and the author or co-author of numerous books including *Boost Your IQ* and *The Sherlock Holmes IQ Book*, as well as *The Book of the Fallacy* (on which this book was originally based). He was formerly Distinguished Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Logic at Hillsdale College, Michigan.
How to Win Every Argument

The Use and Abuse of Logic
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The Use and Abuse of Logic

Madsen Pirie
To Thomas, Samuel and Rosalind
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Introduction

Sound reasoning is the basis of winning at argument. Logical fallacies undermine arguments. They are a source of enduring fascination, and have been studied for at least two-and-a-half millennia. Knowledge of them is useful, both to avoid those used inadvertently by others and even to use a few with intent to deceive. The fascination and the usefulness which they impart, however, should not be allowed to conceal the pleasure which identifying them can give.

I take a very broad view of fallacies. Any trick of logic or language which allows a statement or a claim to be passed off as something it is not has an admission card to the enclosure reserved for fallacies. Very often it is the case that what appears to be a supporting argument for a particular contention does not support it at all. Sometimes it might be a deduction drawn from evidence which does not sustain it.

Many of the fallacies are committed by people genuinely ignorant of logical reasoning, the nature of evidence, or what counts as relevant material. Others, however, might be committed by persons bent on deception. If there is insufficient force behind the argument and the evidence, fallacies can add enough weight to carry them through.

This book is intended as a practical guide for those who wish to win arguments. It also teaches how to perpetrate fallacies with mischief at heart and malice aforethought. I have described each
fallacy, given examples of it, and shown why it is fallacious. After any points of general interest concerning the history or occurrence of the fallacy, I have given the reader recommendations on how and where the fallacy may be used to deceive with maximum effect.

I have listed the fallacies alphabetically, although a full classification into the five major types of fallacy may be found at the end of the book. It is well worth the reader's trouble to learn the Latin tags wherever possible. When an opponent is accused of perpetrating something with a Latin name it sounds as if he is suffering from a rare tropical disease. It has the added effect of making the accuser seem both erudite and authoritative.

In the hands of the wrong person this is more of a weapon than a book, and it was written with that wrong person in mind. It will teach such a person how to argue effectively, even dishonestly at times. In learning how to argue, and in the process of practising and polishing each fallacy, the user will learn how to identify it and will build up an immunity to it. A working knowledge of these fallacies provides a vocabulary for talking about politicians and media commentators. Replacing the vague suspicion of double-dealing will be the identification of the precise crimes against logic which have been committed.

Knowledge of fallacies can thus provide a defensive as well as an offensive capability. Your ability to spot them coming will enable you to defend yourself against their use by others, and your own dexterity with them will enable you to be both successful and offensive, as you set about the all-important task of making arguments go your way.

Madsen Pirie
Abusive analogy

The fallacy of abusive analogy is a highly specialized version of the *ad hominem* argument. Instead of the arguer being insulted directly, an analogy is drawn which is calculated to bring him into scorn or disrepute. The opponent or his behaviour is compared with something which will elicit an unfavourable response toward him from the audience.

*Smith has proposed we should go on a sailing holiday, though he knows as much about ships as an Armenian bandleader does.*

(Perhaps you do not need to know all that much for a sailing holiday. Smith can always learn. The point here is that the comparison is deliberately drawn to make him look ridiculous. There may even be several Armenian bandleaders who are highly competent seamen.)

The analogy may even be a valid one, from the point of view of the comparison being made. This makes it more effective, but no less fallacious, since the purpose is to introduce additional, unargued, material to influence a judgement.

*If science admits no certainties, then a scientist has no more certain knowledge of the universe than does a Hottentot running through the bush.*

(This is true, but is intended as abuse so that the hearer will be more sympathetic to the possibility of certain knowledge.)

The fallacy is a subtle one because it relies on the associations which the audience make from the picture presented. Its perpetrator need not say anything which is untrue; he can rely on the associations made by the hearer to fill in the abuse. The abusive analogy is a fallacy because it relies on this extraneous material to influence the argument.
In congratulating my colleague on his new job, let me point out that he has no more experience of it than a snivelling boy has on his first day at school.

(Again, true. But look who's doing the snivelling.)

While politicians delight in both abuse and analogies, there are surprisingly few good uses of the abusive analogy from that domain. A good one should have an element of truth in its comparison, and invite abuse by its other associations. All other things being equal, it is easier to be offensive by making a comparison which is untrue, than to be clever by using elements of truth. Few have reached the memorable heights of Daniel O'Connell's description of Sir Robert Peel:

...a smile like the silver plate on a coffin.

(True, it has a superficial sparkle, but it invites us to think of something rather cold behind it.)

The venom-loaded pens of literary and dramatic critics are much more promising springs from which abusive analogies can trickle forth.

He moved nervously about the stage, like a virgin awaiting the Sultan.

(And died after the first night.)

Abusive analogies take composition. If you go forth without preparation, you will find yourself drawing from a well-used stock of comparisons which no longer have the freshness to conjure up vivid images. Describing your opponents as being like 'straightlaced schoolmistresses' or 'sleazy strip-club owners' will not lift you above the common herd. A carefully composed piece of abusive comparison, on the other hand, can pour ridicule on
the best-presented case you could find: ‘a speech like a Texas longhorn; a point here, a point there, but a whole lot of bull in between’.

Accent

The fallacy of accent depends for its effectiveness on the fact that the meaning of statements can change, depending on the stress put on the words. The accenting of certain words or phrases can give a meaning quite different from that intended, and can add implications which are not part of the literal meaning:

*Light your cigarette.*

(Without accent it looks like a simple instruction or invitation.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Rather than the tablecloth, or whatever else you feel in the mood to burn.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Instead of everyone else’s.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Instead of sticking it in your ear.)

Even with so simple a phrase, a changed accent can give a markedly changed meaning.

*We read that men are born equal, but that is no reason for giving them all an equal vote.*
(Actually, we probably read that men are born equal. *Born* equal carries an implication that they do not remain equal for long.)

Accent is obviously a verbal fallacy, for the most part. Emphasis in print is usually given by italics, and those who supply them to a quotation from someone else are supposed to say so. In speech, however, unauthorized accents intrude more readily, bringing unauthorized implications in their wake. The fallacy lies with the additional implications introduced by emphasis. They form no part of the statement accepted, and have been brought in surreptitiously without supporting argument.

The fallacy of accent is often used to make a prohibition more permissive. By stressing the thing to be excluded, it implies that other things are admissible.

*Mother said we shouldn’t throw stones at the windows.*

*It’s all right for us to use these lumps of metal.*

(And mother, who resolved never to lay a hand on them, might well respond with a kick.)

In many traditional stories the intrepid hero wins through to glory by using the fallacy of accent to find a loophole in some ancient curse or injunction. Perseus knew that anyone who looked at the Medusa would be turned to stone. Even villains use it: Samson was blinded by the king of the Philistines who had promised not to touch him.

Your most widespread use of the fallacy of accent can be to discredit opponents by quoting them with an emphasis they never intended. (‘He said he would never lie to the American people. You will notice all of the things that left him free to do.’) Richelieu needed six lines by the most honest man in order to find something on which to hang him; with skilful use of the fallacy of accent you can usually get this down to half a line.
It is particularly useful when you are advocating a course of action which normally meets with general disapproval. Accent can enable you to plead that your proposed action is more admissible. (‘I know we are pledged not to engage in germ warfare against people in far-away lands, but the Irish are not far away.’)

When trying to draw up rules and regulations, bear it in mind that there are skilled practitioners of the fallacy of accent quite prepared to drive a coach and six through your intentions. You will then end up with something as tightly worded as the old mail monopoly, which actually spelled out that people shouting across the street could be construed as a breach of the mail monopoly. (They did only say the street, though.)

**Accident**

The fallacy of accident supposes that the freak features of an exceptional case are enough to justify rejection of a general rule. The features in question may be ‘accidental’, having no bearing on the matter under contention, and may easily be identified as an unusual and allowable exception.

_We should reject the idea that it is just to repay what is owed. Supposing a man lends you weapons, and then goes insane? Surely it cannot be just to put weapons into the hands of a madman?_

(This fallacy, used by Plato, lies in not recognizing that the insanity is an ‘accident’, in that it is a freak circumstance unrelated to the central topic, and readily admitted to be a special case.)

Almost every generalization could be objected to on the grounds that one could think of ‘accidental’ cases it did not cover. Most of the general statements about the consequences
which follow upon certain actions could be overturned on the
grounds that they did not cover the case of a meteorite striking
the perpetrator before the consequences had occurred. To
maintain this would be to commit the fallacy of accident.

It is a fallacy to treat a general statement as if it were an
unqualified universal, admitting no exceptions. To do so is to
invest it with a significance and a rigour which it was never
intended to bear. Most of our generalizations carry an implicit
qualification that they apply, all other things being equal. If other
things are not equal, such as the presence of insanity or a
meteorite, the exceptions can be allowed without overturning
the general claim.

'You say you have never met this spy. Can you be sure he was never near
you in a football crowd, for example?'
'Well, no.'
'When was this occasion, and what papers passed between you?'
(If I did meet him, it was an accident.)

Accident is a fallacy encountered by those in pursuit of uni-
versals. If you are trying to establish watertight definitions of
things like 'truth', justice' and 'meaning', you must not be sur-
priised if others spend as much energy trying to leak the odd
accident through your seals.

Plato was searching for justice. John Stuart Mill, trying to
justify liberty except where there is harm, or serious risk of harm,
to others, found himself forever meeting objections which
began, 'But what about the case where . . .?' It is an occupational
hazard. If you are to avoid accidents, avoid universals.

Promises should not always be kept. Suppose you were stranded on a
desert island with an Austrian count who was running an international
spy-ring. And suppose there was only enough food for one, and you promised him...

(The only amazing feature of these lurid stories is that anyone should suppose such freak cases to make the general rule any less acceptable.)

One of the famous examples of the fallacy is a schoolboy joke:

What you bought yesterday you eat today. You bought raw meat yesterday, so you eat raw meat today.

(With the generalization referring to the substance, regardless of its 'accidental' condition.)

The fallacy of accident is a good one for anarchists because it appears to overturn general rules. When it is claimed that you are breaking the rules, dig up the freakiest case your imagination will allow. If the rule does not apply in this case, why should it apply in yours? ('We all agree that it would be right to burn down a tax office if this were the only way to release widows and orphans trapped in the cellar. So what I did was not inherently wrong...')

**Affirming the consequent**

To those who confuse hopelessly the order of horses and carts, **affirming the consequent** is a fallacy which comes naturally. An occupational hazard of those who engage in conditional arguments, this particular fallacy fails to recognize that there is more than one way of killing a cat.

When cats are bitten by rabid hedgehogs they die. Here is a dead cat, so obviously there is a rabid hedgehog about.
(Before locking up your cats, reflect that the deceased feline might have been electrocuted, garrotted, disembowelled, or run over. It is possible that a rabid hedgehog got him, but we cannot deduce it as a fact.)

The arguer has mixed up the antecedents and consequents. In an ‘if . . . then’ construction, the ‘if’ part is the antecedent, and the ‘then’ part is the consequent. It is all right to affirm the antecedent in order to prove the consequent, but not vice versa.

If I drop an egg, it breaks. I dropped the egg, so it broke.

(This is perfectly valid. It is an argument called the modus ponens which we probably use every day of our lives. Compare it with the following version.)

If I drop an egg, it breaks. This egg is broken, so I must have dropped it.

(This is the fallacy of affirming the consequent. There could be many other incidents leading to a broken egg, including something falling upon it, someone else dropping it, or a chicken coming out of it.)

For valid logic we must affirm the first part in order to deduce the second. In the fallacy we affirm the second part in an attempt to deduce the first. Affirming the consequent is fallacious because an event can be produced by different causes. Seeing the event, we cannot be certain that only one particular cause was involved.

If the Chinese wanted peace, they would favour cultural and sporting exchanges. Since they do support these exchanges, we know they want peace.

(Maybe. This conclusion might be the most plausible, but there could be other, more ominous reasons for their support of international exchanges. The cat can be killed in more ways than one.)

This fallacy receives a plentiful airing in our law-courts, since it is the basis of circumstantial evidence. Where we have no
eyewitness evidence, we work back from what is known to those actions which might have caused it.

If he had been planning murder, he would have taken out extra insurance on his wife. He did take out extra insurance.

If he intended poison, he would have bought some. He did buy some weedkiller.

If he had wanted to cut up the body, he would have needed a big saw. Such a saw was found in his toolshed.

(There could be alternative explanations, innocent ones, for all of these actions. It would be fallacious to say that any of them proved him guilty. But as they mount up, it becomes progressively easier for twelve good persons and true to eliminate reasonable doubts about coincidence. No doubt they are sometimes wrong and thereby has hanged many a tale, together with the occasional innocent man.)

This is an extremely good fallacy to use when you wish to impute base motives to someone. Motives do not show, but the actions caused by motives do. You can always gain a hearing for your suggestion of less-than-honourable motives, by use of a skilfully affirmed consequent.

She's just a tramp. Girls like that always flaunt themselves before men, and she did appear at the office party wearing a dress that was practically transparent!

(We can all see through this one.)

**Amphiboly**

Amphiboly is the fallacy of ambiguous construction. It occurs whenever the whole meaning of a statement can be taken in
more than one way, and is usually the fault of careless grammar.

*The Duchess has a fine ship, but she has barnacles on her bottom.*

(This is a duchess who requires especially careful handling.)

The fallacy is capable of infinite variation. Many excellent examples of amphiboly make use of the confused pronoun: does the ‘she’ refer to the ship or to the Duchess? Similar confusion may occur with animals.

*I met the ambassador riding his horse. He was snorting and steaming, so I gave him a lump of sugar.*

(Would that all diplomats were so cheaply entertained.)

Misuse of the word ‘which’, or its omission for brevity, both produce many classic examples. (‘On the claim form I have filled in details about the injury to my spine which I now enclose.’) There are innumerable versions of the advertisement:

*FOR SALE: Car by elderly lady with new body and spare tyre.*

The mistake usually consists in the failure to appreciate that an alternative reading is possible. Sometimes the punctuation is misplaced; sometimes there is not enough of it to eliminate the ambiguity. Press headlines, with their need for both punch and brevity, are favourite long grasses from which the occasional delightful amphiboly will bounce into view. Legendary World War II masterpieces include:

*MACARTHUR FLIES BACK TO FRONT*

(With more variations still if the second word is taken to be a noun.)
The analogical fallacy

The analogical fallacy consists of supposing that things which are similar in one respect must be similar in others. It draws a comparison on the basis of what is known, and proceeds to assume that the unknown parts must also be similar.

The body politic, like any other body, works best when there is a clear brain directing it. This is why authoritarian governments are more efficient.
(None of these false analogies likening the state to a human body ever seem to say much about its liver, pancreas, or waste-disposal mechanism.)

Analogy is a useful way of conveying information. They enable us to talk about the new concept in terms which the audience already have experience of. The fallacy comes in the assumption of further similarities in the future on the basis of the ones already identified.

Babies are like the weather in their unpredictability.
(They are also wet and full of wind.)

It is fallacious because analogies are tools of communication more than sources of knowledge. An analogy may suggest lines of enquiry to us, but it does not provide a basis for establishing discoveries.

She had skin like a million dollars.
(Green and crinkly?)

Analogue fallacies abound in the interpretation of history. In the attempt to make history mean something, all kinds of comparisons emerge. Past civilizations all have it in common that they are now past, once were civilizations, and before that were not. These three utterly commonplace facts lead many historians into a 'life-cycle' analogy. The simple sequence 'not alive, alive, no longer alive' irresistibly invites comparison with living organisms. Before our defences are ready, there we are with civilizations 'blooming' and 'flowering', soon to be engaged in the act of 'withering and dying'.
The analogical fallacy

As our culture ripens, it is only natural that it should, like any organism, put out seeds to reproduce itself in distant places.

(An argument for colonialism which should be nipped in the bud.)

The fact is that civilizations are not flowers. If you fall into the analogical trap, you will soon be having them drawing strength from the soil, and perhaps even exhibiting their blooms in turn.

Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, has the earnest Cleanthes compare the universe to a delicate mechanism, like a watch. And, just as we can deduce from a watch the necessary existence of a watchmaker, so from the universe . . . But the sceptical Philo kills the argument at this point by saying that the universe seems to him much more like a cabbage.

The analogical fallacy is devastatingly effective when used against the person who first produced the analogy. Everyone uses analogies of sorts; all you have to do is seize upon one used by an opponent and continue it in a way more conducive to your own line of argument. With luck, your opponent will be forced into the admission that his own analogy was not a very good one and will lose points with the audience.

‘As we sail forth on our new committee, may I express the hope that we can all pull together for a smooth voyage.’

‘The chairman is right. But remember that rowers were usually put in chains and whipped. And if the ship sank, they went down with it.’

You will go far in any organization by likening it to a family. Family life evokes a pleasant glow, and the analogy will enable you in practice to argue for almost anything, including giving pocket money to the members and sending the naughty ones supperless to bed.
**Antiquitam, argumentum ad**

Students of political philosophy recognize in the *argumentum ad antiquitam* the central core of the arguments of Edmund Burke. Put at its simplest, it is the fallacy of supposing that something is good or right simply because it is old.

*This is the way it’s always been done, and this is the way we’ll continue to do it.*

(It brought poverty and misery before, and it will do so again . . .)

There is nothing in the age of a belief or an assertion which alone makes it right. At its simplest, the *ad antiquitam* is a habit which economizes on thought. It shows the way in which things are done, with no need for difficult decision-making. At its most elevated, it is a philosophy. Previous generations did it this way and they survived; so will we. The fallacy is embellished by talk of continuity and our contemplation of the familiar.

While the age of a belief attests to experience, it does not attest to its truth. To equate older with better is to venture into the territory of the fallacy. After all, human progress is made by *replacing* the older with the better. Sometimes men do things in a particular way, or hold particular beliefs, for thousands of years. This does not make it right, any more than it makes it wrong.

*You are not having a car. I never had a car, my father never had one, and nor did his father before him.*

(Which is probably why none of them got anywhere.)

The Conservative Party is the home of the *ad antiquitam*. They raised it and by golly they are going to keep it. The old values must be the right ones. Patriotism, national greatness, discipline – you name it. If it’s old, it must be good.
The commercial world is sensitive to the prevalence of the fallacy, and modifies its actions accordingly. A cigarette brand called Woodbine, with a large market share, feared its image was becoming dated, but did not wish to shatter the instinctive preference for the traditional. A science fiction magazine called *Astounding* feared that its name reflected an earlier era and might hold back its development. In both cases the decision was made to effect gradual change, with the cigarette-packet design and the magazine name both changing imperceptibly over the weeks. *Astounding* made it into *Analog*, but Woodbines seem to have disappeared without trace. Perhaps cigarette customers are more conservative than science-fiction readers?

Skilful use of the *ad antiquitam* requires a detailed knowledge of China. The reason is simple. Chinese civilization has gone on for so long, and has covered so many different provinces, that almost everything has been tried at one time or another. Your knowledge will enable you to point out that what you are advocating has a respectable antiquity in the Shin Shan province, and there it brought peace, tranquillity of mind and fulfilment for centuries.

*We make our furniture in the best way; the old way.*

(And it's every bit as uncomfortable as it always was.)

**Apriorism**

Normally we allow facts to be the test of our principles. When we see what the facts are, we can retain or modify our principles. To start out with principles from the first (*a priori*) and to use them as the basis for accepting or rejecting facts is to do it the wrong way round. It is to commit the fallacy of apriorism.
We don’t need to look through your telescope, Mr Galileo. We know that there cannot be more than seven heavenly bodies.

(This was a short-sighted view.)

The relationship between facts and principles is a complicated one. We need some kind of principle, otherwise nothing presents itself as a fact in the first place. The fallacy consists of giving too much primacy to principles, and in not permitting them to be modified by what we observe. It makes an unwarranted presumption in favour of a theory unsupported by the evidence, and therefore rejects evidence relevant to the case.

*All doctors are in it for themselves. If yours really did give up all that time for no payment, then all I can say is that there must have been some hidden gain we don’t know about.*

(In addition to the less well-hidden fallacy we do know about.)

Aprioristic reasoning is widely used by those whose beliefs have very little to do with reality anyway. The fallacy is the short brush which sweeps untidy facts under a carpet of preconception. It is a necessary household appliance for those determined to keep their mental rooms clean of the dust of the real world. Engraved on the handle, and on the mind of the user, is the legend: ‘My mind’s made up. Don’t confuse me with facts.’

Many of us might be unimpressed with a patent medicine for which the claim was made that recovery proved that it worked, and lack of recovery was proof that more of it were needed. We might point out that the facts were being used to support the medicine, whichever way they turned out. Yet every day precisely the same claim is made for overseas development aid to poorer countries. If there is development, that shows it works. If there is no development, that shows we must give more of it. Heads they win, tails logic loses.