RICHARD PAUL AND LINDA ELDER

THE THINKER'S GUIDE TO FALLACIES

The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation

THINKER'S GUIDE LIBRARY

The Thinker's Guide to

FALLACIES

The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation

RICHARD PAUL and LINDA ELDER

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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.

Richard Paul
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Contents

Cover

Title

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Contents

Truth and Deception in the Human Mind

Uncritical Persons (intellectually unskilled thinkers)

Skilled Manipulators (weak-sense critical thinkers)

Critical Persons (strong-sense critical thinkers)

The Concept of Fallacies of Thought

Naming Fallacies

Mistakes Versus Fallacies

There is No Exhaustive List of Fallacies

Faulty Generalizations

Analyzing Generalizations

Post Hoc Generalizations

Analogies and Metaphors

44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument

- Accuse Your Opponent of Doing What He is Accusing You of or worse
- Accuse Him of Sliding Down A Slippery Slope (that leads to disaster)
- Appeal to Authority
- Appeal to Experience
- Appeal to Fear
- Appeal to Pity (or sympathy)
- Appeal to Popular Passions
- Appeal to Tradition or Faith (“the tried and true”)

Assume a Posture of Righteousness

Attack the person (and not the argument)

Beg the Question

Call For Perfection (Demand impossible conditions)

Create a False Dilemma (the Great Either/Or)

Devise Analogies (and Metaphors) That Support Your View (even if they are misleading or "false")

Question Your Opponent's Conclusions

Create Misgivings: Where There's Smoke, There's Fire

Create A Straw Man

Deny or Defend Your Inconsistencies

Demonize His Side Sanitize Yours

Evade Questions, Gracefully

Flatter Your Audience

Hedge What You Say

Ignore the Evidence

Ignore the Main Point

Attack Evidence (That Undermines Your Case)

Insist Loudly on a Minor Point

Use the Hard-Cruel-World Argument (to justify doing what is usually considered unethical)

Make (Sweeping) Glittering Generalizations

Make Much of Any Inconsistencies in Your Opponent's Position

Make Your Opponent Look Ridiculous ("Lost in the Laugh")

Oversimplify the Issue

Raise Nothing But Objections

Rewrite History (Have It Your Way)

Seek Your Vested Interests

Shift the Ground

Shift the Burden of Proof

Spin, Spin, Spin

Talk in Vague Generalities

Talk Double Talk

Tell Big Lies

Treat Abstract Words and Symbols As If They Were Real Things

Throw In A Red Herring (or two)

Throw in Some Statistics

Use Double Standards (whenever you can)

44 Foul Ways to Win an Argument (Chart)

Fallacy Detection: Analyzing a Speech from the Past

Fallacy Detection: Analyzing a Current Presidential Speech

Fallacy Detection: Analyzing a Speech from a Presidential Candidate

Avoid Two Extremes:

1) Finding Fallacies Only in the Thinking of Others (None in Yourself), and

2) Finding an Equal Number of Fallacies in Everything you Read.

Conclusion: Fallacies in An Ideal (And in a Real) Worl d

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 oftended 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.