

Four Logical Fallacies Which Have Thwarted Human Progress

We study logic mostly as an abstraction, similar in many ways to how we study mathematics, knowing that it may have some important applications to our thought processes and academic endeavors, but that these are mostly technical and subtle in nature. One of the highlights of the study of logic is the notice of logical fallacies, which are essentially patterns of deception in our reasoning which, if gone unnoticed, ruin the possibility of productive thought, the kind of thinking that allows us to get closer to the truth and to solutions to our problems.

As long as logical fallacies occur randomly and non-deliberately in human thought, whether individual or collective, the damage they do would be limited and even to a large extent corrected by wider exposure and submission to other thought not affected by the same fallacies. The greater damage comes from the programmatic occurrence of logical fallacies.

The question: "why should logical fallacies ever occur programmatically – that is to say, deliberately and pointedly, rather than by sheerly accidental and innocent error?" is a morally loaded one. For at the heart of it lies the basis of human moral failure: self-deception, thus prompting another question: why do we, a species uniquely identified as possessing not only organismic -that is to say, survival-oriented - awareness, as do all other organisms, but rational awareness as well – that is to say, truth-oriented awareness, all too often misuse our rational awareness to obfuscate or throw ourselves off the track of truth-claims rather than rigorously investigate them. It seems that we are tempted to suppress notice of whatever truth-claim lies within the scope of our conscious mind that we anticipate might be inconvenient to us if duly investigated and taken stock of. The inconvenience of a claim, of course, has nothing to do with its likelihood of being true, but may have a lot to do with the likelihood of our investigating it in good faith. After all, as organisms, we seek survival by resolving all our immediate survival contexts in the most convenient, least taxing way possible. Lions only kill if there is nothing to steal from the hyenas. So, as creatures endowed both with an urge for immediate convenience and truth, we find ourselves in an ongoing existential conflict our overall response to which determines our moral character. One way is the way of truth and suffering; the other way is the way of self-deception and short-term convenience.

As a result, the study of fallacy becomes not just a matter of logic, but of ethics as well. For the programmatic application of fallacies can thwart human progress and has done so over the course of the centuries. Here I want to discuss four fallacies which have thwarted human progress. Three of them are cases of what I call the Contrarian Fallacy; that is, of treating what are in fact contrary claims as if they were contradictories. The fourth is a case of what I call the Contradictarian Fallacy; that is of treating what are in fact contradictory claims as if they were contraries. Each refers to perennial philosophical debates. The first three, in turn, are about Hedonism, Utilitarianism, and Capitalism; the fourth is about Democracy.

Hedonism has been debated since ancient times. It is the metaethical claim that intrinsic goodness is to be identified with pleasure, so that the goodness of anything else besides pleasure is wholly reducible in some manner to pleasure as the source of its goodness.

A proper truth-oriented dialog on this topic should lead us by Aristotelian division to set hedonism against its contradictory, which is non-hedonism, the historic pathway we took and seemingly keep on preferring is to pit hedonism against its contrary theory, one that in fact was invented for just that purpose: stoicism.

The comparison of the contrary of a theory with its contradictory is clear. The contrary is the anti-theory; the antithesis, while the contradictory is only the non-theory. In this case, Stoicism, quite bluntly, is anti-hedonism: pleasures are bad, not to be trusted; whereas the contradictory to hedonism is its mere denial of the thesis. This, despite its harsh sound, keeps the door open to productive dialog leading to reconciliation, whereas contrarian argument can lead only to polemic.

Aristotle's method of Division teaches us that productive argument divides topics by contradiction in order to ensure that the division will be exhaustive and no possibilities would be left out. To be sure, in some cases, it may be possible to make knowledgeable exhaustive divisions in greater than two; but contradiction remains the cleanest way to divide a topic and keep track of the process all the way through.

In such a manner, I might deny hedonism, while admitting that pleasures are good but insisting on the inclusion of other intrinsic goods as well. Over time, the two sides might gradually whittle away the remainder of their difference.

But between hedonism and stoicism, there is no reconciliation. To make matters worse, both could actually be false. Nonetheless, once the sides have been chosen, there is nothing left to do but engage in polemics, or contentious argument.

The fact that this is the way the issue of hedonism has most famously been framed makes it difficult for us to speak of any possibility of reconciliation regarding our opinions about hedonism. The best we can do is simply ignore the hedonism vs. stoicism framework and start Metaethics all over again.

The way of truth in rational awareness is always reconciliation, not polemic. In fact, the will to reconcile is the hallmark of honesty and goodwill. Reconciliation is a sign of drawing nearer to the truth, reconciliation is dialog I good will; good will is the absence of self-deception; under such conditions, as we draw nearer to the subject matter, we all see it more clearly; as we see it more clearly, there is less to disagree about.

The corollary to this is that the stubbornness in us that makes us shy away from working out our existential moral conflicts in both private and public matters leads us to choose polemic argument processes amenable to self-deception over productive reconciliatory processes. We are all complicit in this process.

To be sure there are some who do seek dialog through proper criticism; for example, Plato's treatment of hedonism, whether effective or not, was within such bounds. But after the dust settles, all too often it is the fallacious polemic narrative that becomes the standard account.

Proper criticism of a thesis means criticizing the weakest premise(s) of the original argument or challenging its definitions rather than ignoring it and presenting a counterargument instead.

Although Utilitarianism first emerged as a named theory of normative ethics in the surplus of good over the 18th century, it is hard to imagine that it hasn't in some way been on our minds all along. It claims that an act is right if and only if it maximizes utility – the net surplus of good over evil - among all alternative acts. (Since the first and most famous proponents of utilitarianism were also hedonists, they would define utility as the net surplus of pleasure over pain; I decline to do so, since the possibility of non-hedonist utilitarianism should not be ignored.) Since then, utilitarianism has developed into many interesting varieties, for example in which it is not the act that is directly measured for its utility, but the rule. Despite the fact it seemed to be a theory open to much internal criticism aiming at improvement of the theory, when the external criticism coalesced, it came out as decidedly anti-utilitarian. This is quite a surprise to those who consider mundane decisions – such as while grocery shopping - to be moral decisions, since maximizing utility seems to be exactly what we are doing in those cases. The anti-utilitarian opposition never got one clear name. It was labelled Deontology or rights-oriented moral theory; or sometimes “Kantian Ethics” after its most famed locutor Immanuel Kant. This theory focused on rights, duties, and respect as the criteria of right action, denying utility as banal or inhumane. Once again, this framing of the issue set the stage for a future of polemics with no possibility of reconciliation over time. But it didn't have to be that way, and it doesn't now. We could, for example, as non-hedonists, acknowledge utility as one of our main criteria for determining right action, but not the sole criterion. This would permit a progressive dialog leading us closer to reconciliation and truth, as argued above.

Capitalism came along as an explicit theory of economic morality during the 1800's, and was most famously championed by Adam Smith in his work now known as *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Once again, it is hard to imagine that the idea itself of capitalism does not have a much longer life than that in human thought. Capitalism argues that the human economy, with the help of basic law and goodwill, can largely take care of itself by the intrinsic workings of the free market, such that we ought to refrain from attempting to invent, steer, or command the economy by means of proactive laws and regulations, and content ourselves with reactive regulation of the economy as such actions clearly prove themselves necessary.

Once again, the opposition that coalesced against capitalism was anti-capitalist: socialism. The leading argument was that capitalism as a whole was inherently anti-social and destructive, carrying in fact within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Instead of economy left to be freely developed in the private sector, what was recommended was greater and greater public sector management of the economy. This left a great middle ground left unexplored, which made it all the easier to ignore the fact that all viable economy exists as a blend of some kind between capitalist and socialist methods of economic management.

Historicists theorists of the 1800's took the cue from all this contrarianism and began to see history itself and its processes as cases of progression from a thesis to its antithesis (contrary opposite), followed by some sort of magical resolution to a synthesis which becomes the new theory.

I deride this as a magical theory because the only relationship that can exist between a thesis and its contrary antithesis is polemic, and polemic is non-productive argument; an entirely destructive process.

Now let's turn the tables and discuss a fallacy that takes us in the opposite direction: that of disguising an opposition which is in fact an either-or matter between contradictory claims as a pair of contraries implying a spectrum of possibilities between them: democracy vs. non-democracy. This is done so as not to have to face up to the dire consequences of choosing against democracy in light of how inconvenient and frustrating the choice to be democratic may be.

Since democracy can be defined formally in so many ways according to more or less technical aspects of political theory, it lends itself in such a manner to one theory at the end point of a spectrum of possibilities with many intermediate options in between, suggesting democracy perhaps as an extreme theory that we might at least want to choose a "lighter" version of. The extremeness of democracy might be its promotion of chaos in the form of too many voices and too little control. All this might be considered clearly thought out if democracy were nothing more than some invented, technically defined format of political science.

But in fact, democracy is much more than that. Regardless of the myriad attempts to characterize it as a political format, which is done out of practical necessity, the driving force behind it is always a moral ideal: the ideal of a culture of universal ownership. As a moral ideal, it is intended in a moral sense, not necessarily a legal one; it is not a format to be worked out and followed, step by step, alterable into many versions, but as a virtue to be pursued unconditionally, no matter how challenging. Being honest half the time is not being honest at all. Being faithful except on Saturdays is not being faithful at all. Trick cases aside, an honest person strives always to be honest; a faithful person strives always to be faithful.

The main philosophical case for democracy is as a moral ideal, a great social virtue. Either democracy is a moral ideal or it is not; it is an either-or matter, not a more-or-less matter. If democracy is a moral virtue, then we should all ceaselessly strive for democracy.

As a moral virtue, it is not invented, but ever-ingrained in the human conscience from of old – not necessarily as a lived reality but recognized as an ideal to be striven for. For its denial as an ideal requires the negation of our commitment moral equality of all human beings.

If it is not a moral virtue, then a culture of universal ownership is not a good thing for us and for our organizations; in such a case, we should accept the alienation of the masses to be a normal and healthy thing. For the absence of a culture of universal ownership is a culture of alienation of the masses, which is the bane of organizational and social life.