



Monty Python and the Quest for the Perfect Fallacy

Teacher's Guide: **Sample Fallacies and Booby Traps**

1. Lewis Carroll, in *Through the Looking Glass*: “ ‘You couldn’t have [jam] if you did want it,’ the Queen said. ‘The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday — but never jam *today*.’ ‘It must sometimes come to jam today,’ Alice objected. ‘No it can’t,’ said the Queen. ‘It’s jam every *other* day: today isn’t any *other* day, you know.’ ”

Equivocates on ‘other.’ Uses the word to mean “alternate” in the first mention and “not this one” in the second mention.

2. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, look at the bloody clothes, the murder weapon. Imagine the helpless screams of the victim. Such a crime deserves no verdict except guilty, guilty!

Red herring. The fact that the crime was horrible doesn’t imply the defendant’s guilt.

3. I’m not a doctor, but I play a doctor on TV, and I wouldn’t dream of using anything but Tylenol for my toughest headaches.

Appeal to inappropriate authority. More commonly (in this case) known as quackery.

4. According to Freud, your belief in God stems from your need for a strong father figure. So don’t you see that it’s silly to continue believing in God?

Genetic fallacy. The origin of your belief in God has nothing to do with whether or not God exists.

5. How can you possibly believe in evolution? That would mean that you believe that an elephant evolved from a mouse, and that’s just ridiculous.

Straw man. Reducing the (very complex) theory of evolution to “elephants evolved from mice” is to create a distorted and oversimplified view of the theory.

6. The nuthatch was discovered by Tilly Turnow in the woods, while hopping from branch to branch of an elm tree, singing happily.

Vagueness. Who was hopping from branch to branch singing happily?

7. You can hardly blame President Clinton for having extramarital affairs. Many presidents, when faced with similar situations, have yielded to the same temptations.

Red herring. The fact that others have had affairs is not really relevant to whether or not Clinton ought to be blamed for having affairs.

8. There are more laws on the books than ever before, and more crimes are being committed than ever before. Therefore, to reduce crime, we must eliminate the laws.

False cause. The mere fact that more crime followed the creation of more laws does not entail that the new laws caused more crime. (Interestingly, the argument does work in one sense: Eliminating laws would reduce crime since, by definition, something is a crime only if it is against the law. So no laws would equal no crime.)

9. We should pass a constitutional amendment making it illegal to burn the American flag. Anyone who thinks otherwise just hates America.

Straw man. Many who oppose a constitutional amendment banning flag burning do so for fairly sophisticated reasons (e.g., a belief in the importance of free speech even when the speech is unpopular).

10. Radio talk show host, on learning that an association of critical thinking professors had suggested his show as a source of fallacious reasoning: "Who are these people? They talk to maybe 30 people at a time. I talk to 5 million people every day. They could not begin to do what I do. They are just gnats flying around getting in the way."

Red herring. The number of people whom one talks to has nothing to do with whether or not one is guilty of reasoning fallaciously.

11. U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn says that lesbianism is rampant in the Oklahoma schools. This must, indeed, be true, because surely the senator couldn't be mistaken about the schools in his own state.

Appeal to inappropriate authority. It's not clear that Coburn is an expert on lesbianism or on life in public schools.

12. Do most Americans believe in God? To find out, we asked over 10,000 scientists at colleges and universities throughout America. Less than 40 percent said they believed in God. The conclusion is obvious: Most Americans no longer believe in God.

Questionable use of statistics (unrepresentative sample). The sample is pretty unrepresentative of the general American public.

13. Before he died, poet Allen Ginsberg argued in favor of legalizing pornography. But Ginsberg's arguments are nothing but trash. Ginsberg was a pot-smoking homosexual and a thoroughgoing advocate of the drug culture.

Genetic fallacy. Rejects the argument based on the fact that Ginsberg is unsavory.

14. Many people criticize Thomas Jefferson for being an owner of slaves. But Jefferson was one of our greatest presidents, and his Declaration of Independence is one of the most eloquent pleas for freedom and democracy ever written. Clearly these criticisms are unwarranted.

Red herring. The fact that Jefferson was a great president has nothing to do with whether he ought to be condemned for owning slaves.

15. Miller Lite is cheap beer, so the Guinness will be cheap, too.

Questionable use of statistics (small sample). One would need to analyze far more prices to make a conclusion about prices.

16. Wife: "I see Mr. Smith is cooking out on his new barbecue grill." Husband: "So his wife finally got fed up with his unfaithfulness!"

Vagueness. Is Mr. Smith doing the cooking or is Mr. Smith being cooked?

17. Jake, Kyle and Rolf are all members of the UNCP Young Republicans, and they are all planning to be Roman Catholic priests. Emma is also a member of the UNCP Young Republicans, so she is probably planning to be a Roman Catholic priest, too.

Questionable use of statistics (unrepresentative sample). Also suppressed evidence. Leaves out the fact that Roman Catholic priests are all male. The argument looks a little bit like an **undistributed middle**, but the form is slightly different. Here the form is

A is a C and a D.

B is a C.

Therefore B is probably also D.

This is an argument from analogy rather than a deductive argument. The deeper problem is that the analogy is bad (A and B are unlike in an importantly different way).

18. I have a right to speak. What is right ought to be done. So I ought to speak.

Equivocation. Uses the word 'right' in two different senses.

19. Poetry is based on rhythm, and music is based on rhythm, so isn't poetry a kind of music?

Undistributed middle. Has the form A is B and C is B so A is C.

20. The Soviet Union collapsed after taking up atheism. Therefore, we must avoid atheism for the same reasons.

False cause. The speaker assumes that taking up atheism caused the collapse of the Soviet Union without providing any evidence of a causal connection.

21. You're a vegetarian? You do realize that Hitler was a vegetarian, too?

Genetic fallacy. The fact that Hitler held a particular belief doesn't make that belief wrong.

22. Most heroin users started out smoking pot. If you start smoking pot, you'll end up a heroin user, too.

Undistributed middle. The claim is that heroin users smoke pot and you smoke pot, so you'll be a heroin user. That's the A is B and C is B so A is C pattern again.

23. Really exciting novels are very rare. And since rare books are expensive, I can't afford to buy any really exciting novels.

Equivocation. The word "rare" has different meanings in the two sentences. The first sentence is really saying that most novels aren't exciting. The second premise is saying that hard-to-find books are expensive to purchase.

24. Middle-class families are paying more taxes than ever.

Vagueness. The claim is unclear between three very different sorts of interpretations. (1) Individual families have a higher tax bill than they used to, or (2) Middle-class families are paying a larger percentage of the tax bill than they used to even though their individual tax bills are lower than they used to be, or (3) Middle-class families are paying a higher percentage of their income in taxes than they used to even though their total tax bills and their share of the total tax burden are lower.

25. The war in Iraq has been a complete success. After all, Saddam Hussein is dead, and the Iraqis had their first free election in years.

Suppressed evidence. The argument leaves out the fact that Iraq is on the brink of a civil war.