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Selections from

Critical Thinking

Sixth ed.

London/Toronto

2001

Mayfield Publishing Company

Ch. 5 selections

149-166

Chapter 5

More Rhetorical Devices

In the previous chapter, we began discussing rhetorical techniques—ways people attempt to influence or persuade by using the rhetorical, or emotive, content of words, phrases, and grammatical constructs. This and the next chapter cover additional rhetorical devices.

The rhetorical devices we talk about here (and in Chapter 6) are especially apt to be dressed up to look like reasonable arguments. For that reason we refer to this type of rhetoric as *pseudoreasoning*. As such, pseudoreasoning comprises a large and varied catalog of emotional appeals, factual irrelevancies, and persuasive devices that sometimes move people to accept or reject claims when they have no good grounds for doing so. Since the techniques discussed here so often are couched in the language of arguments, we also refer to them occasionally as “fallacies”—a fancy word for “defective arguments.”

So don't look for a technical definition of pseudoreasoning; it isn't a technical concept. It's just our name for the grab bag of rhetorical ploys that we cover in this and the next chapter. These techniques include appeals to emotion and other psychological gimmicks, distracting irrelevancies, bogus dichotomies, appeals to vanity, and the like. What they all have in common is that none of them should affect our beliefs. That's because, just like the devices considered in Chapter 4, they lack power to prove or establish what they may seem to prove or establish. A good argument provides us with some justification for accepting its conclusion. A piece of pseudoreasoning may have some connection with an issue, often an emotional connection, but at bottom it provides no grounds for accepting the claim it seems to support.

Finally, bear this in mind: Don't place everything that *reminds* you of a category of “pseudoreasoning” into that category. Many cases that *resemble* pseudoreasoning actually are reasonable arguments, as we'll explain.

Smokescreen/Red Herring

In most devices covered in this chapter, the inducement that erroneously leads one to accept or reject a claim is in fact irrelevant to the truth of the claim. Here's an example:

We admit that this measure is popular. But we also urge you to note that there are so many bond issues on this ballot that the whole concept is getting ridiculous.

A generic red herring (unclassifiable irrelevance) from a California ballot pamphlet.

MOORE: What do you think of coal-fired power plants, Parker? Do you think we ought to have more of them?

PARKER: Well, frankly, I agree with some of the environmentalists . . .

MOORE: Well, we should build more coal-fired plants, and I'll tell you why. I'm sick and tired of these environmentalists, always complaining about something or other. What a bunch of troublemakers. They find something wrong with everything.

PARKER: I hate to tell you, Moore, but you haven't said anything about coal-fired power plants.

Parker is exactly right, of course. Moore hasn't said anything relevant to the issue of whether more coal-fired plants should be built. This sort of irrelevance is typical of most pseudoreasoning. Moore is putting up a **smokescreen**; he's bringing in another topic—one that many people may think of when they consider the coal-fired plants issue, but one that is in fact a wholly separate matter. This irrelevant topic, the "environmentalists," diverts our attention from the original issue, which then gets lost in the fog generated by the irrelevant topic. Hence the label "smokescreen." Another name for an irrelevant consideration brought into a discussion is **red herring**. The term "red herring" has an interesting background: A herring cured in salt (which is reddish in color) has a powerful odor before it is cooked. If one is dragged across the trail of an animal that dogs are tracking, the dogs will give up the original scent and follow the herring.*

Remember, the point of any smokescreen or red herring is to *distract* the reader or listener from the issue at hand. Here's an example from Senator Peckingham, who is dining with some fellow Republicans:

I think this gun-control plan the administration has produced is a pretty good idea. You know, the gun-control issue is getting linked to the crime-fighting issue these days. So if we Republicans are going to keep our reputation as the number-one crime-fighting party, we're going to have to get behind this gun-control plan.

Could somebody please show me one hospital built by a dolphin? Could somebody show me one highway built by a dolphin? Could someone show me one automobile invented by a dolphin?

—RUSH LIMBAUGH, responding to the *New York Times's* claim that dolphins' "behavior and enormous brains suggest an intelligence approaching that of human beings."

Good point. Any one know of a hospital or highway built by Rush Limbaugh, or an automobile invented by him?

*Thanks to Robert Claiborne, *Loose Cannons and Red Herrings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), for this bit of word lore.

Doing the Old Side-Step...

Here's an exchange between Tim Russert, of NBC's *Meet the Press*, and Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut:

Russert: Senator Dodd, can we afford to continue the war [in Yugoslavia]?
Dodd: Can we afford not to?

The Senator's side-step, or dodge, is a case of red herring. But it can also be seen as an attempt to shift the burden of proof from one side of the issue to the other. We'll have a close look at burden-of-proof issues in the next chapter.

Anyone who thinks Peckingham has given a relevant reason for believing the gun-control plan has any merit is mistaken. His statement that Republicans should be in favor of gun control may be true, but it is certainly irrelevant to the merits of the administration's plan. Peckingham's remark may well help support the claim that Republicans should begin to favor gun control, but it doesn't support claims about the *merits* of any particular plan.

Many of the techniques covered in this and the next chapter introduce irrelevant appeals of one kind or another, but we reserve the smokescreen or red herring label for cases in which none of the narrower, more descriptive categories seem to apply and for instances in which the irrelevant issue is intentionally brought up to distract one's audience. The important thing is that you recognize when the subject has been changed and the discussion thrown off course.

The Subjectivist Fallacy

How many times have you heard people say, with a rhetorical flourish, "Well, that may be true for you, but it isn't true for me" when they've been confronted with a claim that they don't want to accept? In almost every case, such a remark provides no reason for rejecting the claim. To think that it does is to commit the **subjectivist fallacy**. All one accomplishes by saying "true for you but not for me" is to say that "maybe you accept the claim, but I don't." That's quite a bit different, of course, from the claim's actually being true for someone else and its being false for you. Claims about factual matters don't work that way, by and large: If they're true, they're true, period. What would it mean for the claim "The door is closed" to be true for one person and false for another? It doesn't make any difference to the door

whether anybody believes that it's closed, the door is simply where it is, and either it's closed or it's not.

Claims may be true *about* one person and false *about* another. Look at this example:

MOORE: You know, I've come to the conclusion that a person really needs at least seven hours of sleep every night in order to feel healthy.

PARKER: That may be true for you, but it certainly isn't true for me.

Parker has made a perfectly reasonable remark, as long as we take him to mean simply that *he* doesn't need seven hours of sleep every night, even though *Moore* may need that much. Notice that Parker has not given a reason for his claim or for anything else. But, once again, people will sometimes use the "true for you, not true for me" remark to insist that it's acceptable for you to believe a claim about a matter of fact and equally acceptable for them to reject the same claim. And when they do, they haven't given a reason for anything at all.

The view that underlies the subjectivist fallacy is sometimes called *relativism*, and it seems to be a common view among many students. Simply put, this view maintains that truth is relative. Now, lots of things are relative among individuals (fear of going to the dentist, for example) and among cultures (e.g., the acceptability of going about without clothes). Some people argue that morality is relative, that what is right and wrong depends on one's culture or society. (This is a controversial point, and there are sophisticated arguments on both sides.) But most claims, certainly those about straightforward matters of fact (provided they are reasonably free of vagueness and ambiguity) are simply true or false independent of any particular person's acceptance of them.

It's likely that people often use some version of the subjectivist fallacy not because they somehow really deny the objectivity of truth, but because they simply want to put an end to rational discussion—they use the fallacy as a conversation stopper. In general, it would be better simply to admit that one doesn't wish to discuss a subject than to cloak one's wish in the subjectivist fallacy.

One source of confusion on this topic is a failure to distinguish *respect* for other people's opinions from a refusal to *question* those opinions. These are very different things. When we say that we should respect the beliefs of others, we are really saying that we should respect the people, and such respect involves taking their views seriously. But taking their views seriously means, among other things, subjecting them to critical assessment. Here's an example: Each year, about two million young women around the world are subjected to painful genital surgery as the result of a variety of cultural belief systems about women and sex. From the fact that we respect *people* from such cultures, does it follow that we should agree with their beliefs about such matters? Of course not. Does it mean we should find it perfectly

acceptable that they continue to hold such beliefs? Not necessarily. If we think the beliefs lead to harm, it is at least acceptable (if not our duty) to try to convince these people to change those beliefs. In brief, we can respect a person and still believe that person is mistaken.

Appeal to Popularity (ad populum)

There are several varieties of appeal to popularity, but all have one thing in common: They encourage the acceptance of a claim (or practice) on the basis of its acceptance by some substantial number of others. Of course, there are times when it's perfectly reasonable to believe what others believe; their belief may be based on truth. But we need to know that at least some of those who believe the claim are credible sources, as we discussed in Chapter 3, or we need independent evidence for the claim. A claim's acceptance by others all by itself does not generally warrant our accepting it; certainly the mere fact that most people believe a claim does not guarantee its truth. When we accept other people's opinions without such reason, we are being taken in by an **appeal to popularity**. Here are a couple of examples:

Free will? Of course, people have free will. Everyone believes that. It hardly seems possible *not* to believe it.

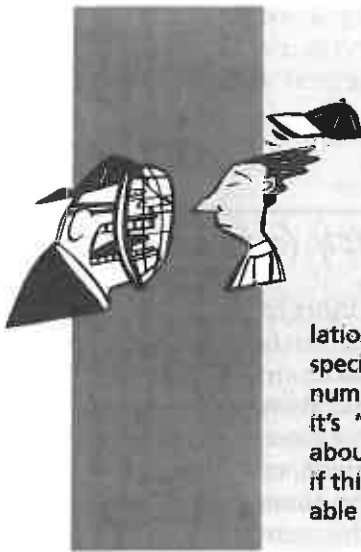
A job in management is surely better than a job as, say, a bus driver. Just ask anybody. They'll tell you that it's better to get an education and go into management.

The fact that nearly everybody believes in free will—or even, were it true, that everybody without exception believes in it—does not assure us there is any such thing. This pseudoreason is no more to the point than the argument in medieval times that because everyone believed the earth was the center of the universe, it had to be true.

Most people seem to assume that bus driving and similar jobs are somehow less desirable than white-collar jobs. The widespread acceptance of this assumption creates its own momentum—that is, we tend to accept it because everybody else does, and we don't stop to think about whether it actually has anything to recommend it. For a lot of people, a job driving a bus might make for a much happier life than a job as a manager.

In *some* instances, we should point out, what people think actually *determines* what is true. The meanings of most words, for example, are determined by popular usage. In addition, it would not be pseudoreasoning to conclude that the word "ain't" is out of place in formal speech because most speakers of English believe that it is out of place in formal speech.

There are other cases where what people think is an *indication* of what is true, even if it cannot *determine* truth. If several Bostonians of your acquaintance think that it is illegal to drink beer in their public parks, then you have some reason for thinking that it's true. And if you are told by several



A Subtle Version of Appeal to Popularity

[M]any baseball people believe that baseball's biggest on-field problem is not the impulsive misbehavior of players in the heat of competition but the incompetence, confrontational surliness and premeditated misbehavior of some umpires, factors that threaten the integrity of the competition.

—GEORGE WILL, in *Newsweek*

The first five words of this passage are a fine piece of subtle manipulation. They are a proof surrogate (Chapter 4), but they also illustrate a specialized kind of appeal to popularity, where the appeal is to a large number (or “many” or “most”) of people in a certain category. In this case, it’s “baseball people,” who, presumably, are especially knowledgeable about the game and who, naturally, agree with the writer. In other words, if this view is popular among the experts, then it certainly should be acceptable to you.

Europeans that it is not gauche to eat with your fork in your left hand in Europe, then it is not pseudoreasoning to conclude that European manners allow eating with your fork in your left hand. The situation here is one of credibility, which we discussed in Chapter 3. Natives of Boston in the first case and Europeans in the second case can be expected to know more about the two claims in question, respectively, than others know. In a watered-down sense, they are “experts” on the subjects, at least in ways that many of us are not. In general, when the “everyone” who thinks that X is true includes experts about X, then what they think is indeed a good reason to accept X.

Thus it would be incorrect to automatically label as a fallacy or as pseudoreasoning any instance in which a person cites people’s beliefs to establish a point. (No “argument” fitting a pattern in this chapter should *unthinkingly* be dismissed.) But it is important to view such references to people’s beliefs as red alerts. These are cautionary signals that warn you to look closely for genuine reasons in support of the claim asserted.

There are several variants of the appeal to popularity. We’ll describe three of them in the following pages: common practice, peer pressure, and bandwagon pseudoreasoning. As its name implies, common practice always involves a defense of a *practice* rather than a claim. Peer pressure results from our desire to be accepted by our friends (whether they be right or wrong!), and bandwagon rests on our preference for winners over losers, even sometimes when the winners are in the wrong and the losers in the right.

■ *Common Practice*

Common practice pseudoreasoning is the justification or defense of an action on the grounds that it is a common *practice*—that everybody does it, that

most people do it, or that most people in a particular category do it. (Thus, most people must believe that it's all right to do it.) Some people might argue that they shouldn't be given a ticket for speeding because almost everybody drives over the limit or that they shouldn't be punished for fudging on their taxes because nearly everybody does it. But the fact that other people do X doesn't make X an acceptable thing to do, of course. Now, there is something to watch out for here: When a person defends an action by saying that other people do the same thing, we can take the claim as a request for fair play. And, indeed, if others *are* doing the same thing, we must remember that *their* actions are as wrong as those of the person we're criticizing. If it's proper to criticize *one* person for doing X, then, lacking any relevant difference between the two, it's proper to criticize another for doing X as well.

■ *Peer Pressure*

We all want to be accepted by our friends and associates, and there is often nothing wrong with doing things to win their approval. But sometimes we do things because we desire the approval of others even though it is not reasonable to do those things—when the desire for approval is irrelevant to the issue. In other words, we succumb to **peer pressure**. Here are two examples; pay careful attention to what issues the desire for approval *is* relevant to and what issues it is *not* relevant to.

You're trying to decide whether you're a good enough skier to tackle the South Face. You're pretty sure that you are not, but then one of your friends changes your mind. "C'mon," he says, "you don't see any of the rest of us holding back, do you?" You decide that you're as good as your friends, and they're going to tackle it, so you figure you're good enough to give it a try.

You and your friends are talking about an upcoming concert at which the opening band is Pavement. You think they're a good group, but when you express your opinion, your friends burst out laughing. "They've been around forever, and they just never make it," one friend says. You make a mental note to hide your Pavement CDs before anyone comes over on the weekend.

In the first of these examples, you have been given no reason at all for altering your initial assessment of your skiing abilities; you've been induced to alter them through peer pressure—that is, through rhetoric—which plays on a person's desire not to be disliked or disrespected. But your abilities are what they are, and what they are is not affected by what your friends think or do. (If your initial assessment of your skiing ability was right, and it's true that you ski as well as your friends, there may be a busy hour ahead for the ski patrol.)

In the second example, you do have a reason for hiding your Pavement CDs, assuming you don't want your friends laughing at you again (though in fact you could well win some respect for independence if you stick with your preference). But if you are like many of us, you may do more than hide your

CDs; you may conclude that Pavement isn't that great after all. You may even start looking for reasons for thinking that they're inferior, though your friends haven't given you any reasons for that opinion. In this case, you have been peer pressured. (And if you are like a lot of people, you'll feel peer pressure on issues much more important than this.)

■ *Bandwagon*

In times gone by in the United States, political rallies used to be preceded by a wagon carrying a band drawn through the center of town to attract people to the rally. When a candidate looked as though he or she (generally "he" in those days) was going to be successful, a lot of people would join in support just because they wanted to be on the side of a winner. This was—and still is—known as "jumping on the bandwagon." Our notion of **bandwagon** pseudoreasoning is similar: If you try to win support for a candidate, a position, or a policy merely on the grounds that he or she or it is going to win (rather than on whatever merits he or she or it may have), then you commit bandwagon pseudoreasoning.

Our desire to be on the winning side functions like our desire for approval. It is usually irrelevant to the merits of a position, and, generally speaking, we should judge a position on its merits. However, there are times when the opportunity to vote for a candidate or proposal that has a chance of winning can take on more importance. Let's say, for example, that there are three candidates running for office. You believe that Abercrombie is the best candidate, slightly better than Burkhart, and that Chislink is absolutely awful. Unfortunately, Abercrombie is given very little chance of winning, trailing far behind Burkhart and Chislink, who are neck-and-neck in the polls. In such a case, it might be quite reasonable to vote for Burkhart rather than Abercrombie simply because the former has a chance of winning and the latter does not. Notice that this is not a case of bandwagon pseudoreasoning; we fall for bandwagon rhetoric when it's our *desire* to be on the winning side (whatever side that is) that motivates us.

Wishful Thinking

Sometimes the idea of a claim's being false is so unpleasant that we decide the claim must be true simply because the alternative is so awful. For example:

I don't believe that we cease entirely to exist when our bodies die. I mean, if I thought it was all going to be over, I just couldn't stand it.

Unfortunately, our fear of its "being over," or our desire not to contemplate such a thing, is not evidence that it isn't over when we die. To think that the awful consequences of a claim's being true—or our believing it to be true—

provide a reason for rejecting it is to fall prey to what everybody recognizes as **wishful thinking**. It happens the other way too: To think that the awful consequences of its being false—or our *not* believing it—provide a reason for accepting it is the other side of this pseudoreasoning coin.

Not only do our concerns about a claim's wonderful (or awful) consequences not provide reasons for accepting (or rejecting) it, but they also cannot make the claim the least bit more or less likely. Consider:

It would be so *great* to win the lottery. I've imagined all week how I would spend the money! I just really think I've got a chance this week.

He does have a chance, the same chance as everybody else—in our state, that's about one in fourteen million. So, the basic idea is simple: Wanting something doesn't make it so, unfortunately, nor even more likely.

This kind of error is very obvious when discussed in the abstract or observed in another person, but it is much more difficult to recognize and admit to when we ourselves are guilty of it. Most of us are willing to go to some lengths to avoid discomfort, after all, and that's what this kind of pseudoreasoning achieves for us, at least in the short run. A desire for an afterlife helps convince a person that there is one; a smoker discounts reports on smoking's ill effects because she finds it so unpleasant to contemplate coming down with them; an individual with a serious disease refuses to get treatment because he refuses to believe that he has the disease. All such thinking is designed to promote comfort, but it does not promote good reasoning, and it can be dangerous.

We typically perpetrate this variety of pseudoreasoning on ourselves rather than on one another, but even this kind of comfort can be packaged and sold. Wishful-thinking pseudoreasoning underlies much of the empty rhetoric of "positive thinking"—rhetoric that claims "you are what you want to be" and other such slogans. To believe in your dreams—that is, to believe that they will come true *for no better reason than that you hope they will*—may provide solace to the soul, but it is not to think critically.

Scare Tactics

Dear Professor Moore:

I'd like to make an appointment to see you tomorrow about my final grade. I think it was unfair and I should have gotten a better one. My telephone number is below, so please call me.

By the way, I believe you know my aunt. She's your dean.

Sincerely yours,
Cassandra Petrel

Impeachment Fallout

We need to send a strong signal to the president by impeaching him.

—DAN QUAYLE

[That would get his attention, all right.]

Clinton should be removed from office, and speedily. He perjured himself and that makes it impossible for him to deal effectively with foreign and domestic issues.

—Representative BILL MCCOLLUM

[Of course, removal from office might make it even more difficult to deal with those issues.]

When they are considering whether Bill Clinton should be impeached, Republicans should be wary of what voters will say when they get their chance.

—JAMES CARVILLE, Democratic strategist

[Just good, old-fashioned scare tactics here.]

In this example, the student provides no reason for believing she was misgraded, but she does manage to threaten Professor Moore with retaliation via her aunt, the dean. She's using **scare tactics** to induce fear in her professor to get him to revise her grade.

The underlying structure of this example, and of all pseudoreasoning based on psychological inducements, is the same. Something is said in connection with a claim that elicits or is intended to elicit a psychological response of some sort—a desire, a fear, some feeling or emotion—that may well induce acceptance of the claim. But neither what is said nor the psychological response elicited is a reason for accepting the claim because neither is logically related to the claim. To accept a claim on the basis of such irrelevant psychological inducements is to fall victim to pseudoreasoning.

The distinction may be obvious, but we still want to point out the difference between scare tactics on the one hand and warnings on the other. If someone says, "You should be careful of that snake—it's deadly poisonous," we might be scared, all right, but that doesn't mean we have a case of scare tactics in our sense of the phrase. Only when the scare is irrelevant to the issue do we get pseudoreasoning, and the scare and the issue here (i.e., whether one should be careful of the snake) are very closely connected indeed.

Here is another, somewhat more subtle, example of scare tactics. Imagine that you've been shopping for a house. You find one that comes close to suiting your needs, but the kitchen is much too small and the house needs

more repairs than you would care to contend with. So you conclude that you really don't want this house. When you explain your concerns to the real estate agent, she observes that the seller already has four offers that he is considering and will probably sell very soon. This moves you to make an offer on the house after all. "The kitchen isn't that small," you think. "And not that many things really need repairing." The real estate agent in this example is using a form of scare tactic to get you to make an offer. Let's identify the issues to which her assertion is relevant.

What you have learned is that the value of the house as determined by what others might pay for it may be greater than you had previously believed. This new information is indeed a reason for considering whether to try to live with the defects you have identified in the house. It isn't a very good reason, of course, for you have no information on the amount that has been offered, if indeed anything has been offered (mentioning "other offers" is a common sales gimmick). Still, it is a reason for considering whether to try to live with the defects of the house. *But the new information is not a reason, not even a bad one, for changing your mind about the size of the kitchen or the need for repairs.* To avoid pseudoreasoning, you need to recognize to which issues your feelings are relevant and to which they are not. Fear of the house being sold to someone else is not a reason for thinking that the kitchen is acceptably large or that the repairs are less serious than you first believed. Learning that the house *may* be more valuable than you thought is a reason for reconsidering whether you wish to put up with the problems of the house.

Appeal to Pity

Helen is running for a seat on the city council. Though you like her, you have doubts about her qualifications and in fact believe that an opposing candidate would make a better member of the council. When you communicate your concerns about her qualifications to a mutual friend, the friend counters by saying that Helen would be terribly hurt if she were to lose the election. After thinking this over, you conclude that maybe Helen's qualifications are not so bad after all.

The mutual friend has evoked compassion in you for Helen, but she has not given you a reason for changing your opinion of Helen's qualifications. This pattern of pseudoreasoning is called **appeal to pity**. Clearly, the issue—whether Helen's qualifications are sufficient—is unaffected by the fact that her feelings will be hurt if she loses the election.

Notice that even if the mutual friend had told you Helen would be terribly hurt to learn what you think of her credentials, she would still have failed to give you a reason for changing your evaluation of *them*—though she would have given you a reason for not sharing your opinion with Helen.

Scare Tactics?

Does your compassion for Helen enter the picture at all? Certainly, but only in this way: You now have to weigh Helen's hurt at losing the election against the consequences of having her as a council member instead of the better-qualified candidate. Which, you have to decide, is more important?

Let's look at another example:

ROOFER: I'm positive that my work will meet your requirements.
I really need the money, what with my wife being sick
and all.

The roofer seems to be giving a reason for thinking that his work will meet your requirements. But of course he is not; that issue is unaffected by the fact that he really needs the money. This fact is not a reason, not even a bad reason, for concluding anything at all about the quality of his work.

Notice, though, that actions performed out of concern for others are often rationally and ethically justified. Indeed, in some instances they count as among the noblest of human deeds. If the roofer is qualified and needs the money for his wife's illness, and you are willing to take a chance on his work, then by all means hire him! Just don't think that he has given you a reason for thinking that his work will meet your specifications; whether it will or not is something you must establish on other grounds.

Apple Polishing

Hannah, I'd be proud if you'd support me in my campaign for city council. People know they can trust you, and I know it too. I need an honest, reliable person on my side, and they don't come much better than you.

This is an old-fashioned case of **apple polishing** (there are more graphic names for it, too). We can hope that Hannah doesn't think she's been given a *reason* for supporting the speaker.

Dear Professor Parker:

If it's not too much trouble, please send my final grade on the attached postcard and drop it in the mail. I've already addressed the card.

I certainly enjoyed your course. You are a wonderful instructor and did an excellent job of making the class interesting and useful. There is one thing, though: Would you mind taking another look at my grade on the second exam? With one more point I would have made an A.

Sincerely,
Fawn Wheedle

The issue, whether the student earned an A, is unaffected by the fact that he likes (or gives the appearance of liking) his professor. So that fact is no reason for changing his grade. Again, the attempted inducement is through an appeal to the instructor's vanity.

You shouldn't think, of course, that you have spotted a case of apple polishing every time somebody says something nice about another person. Apple polishing occurs only when the nice words are illegitimately used in connection with an issue to which they are irrelevant.

Appeal to Anger or Indignation

"It's your money," the political ad begins, "and the folks in Washington want to spend it on—midnight basketball leagues!"

What's going on here? The people who wrote this ad want you to get angry. They want you to rise up in indignation and declare yourself mad as heck.

This is a typical example of an **appeal to indignation**, which is just another word for anger, especially the type of anger you feel when you think you have been treated unjustly. By arousing your anger, a politician (or anyone, for that matter) may hope that you won't think too clearly.

But now, look. If someone else is wasting your money, then you have a right to get angry; there's no pseudoreasoning involved in doing so. However,

Sleaze and Anger



One of the more startling (that's sometimes a euphemism for "sleazy") political ads of recent times was a fifteen-second television spot by one Tim LeFever attacking incumbent Representative Vic Fazio of California. In the ad, harsh black-and-white footage of Richard Allen Davis appeared on the screen, while a voice identified Fazio as one of those "who have built their entire political career defending people like Richard Allen Davis from the death penalty." California viewers knew well the face of Davis, who had recently been found guilty of kidnapping and murdering teenager Polly Klaas. Few criminals in the history of the state had offended public sensibilities to a greater degree than Davis, who calmly made a gesture with his middle finger at Polly

Klaas's family during the trial.

The ad was a fairly obvious attempt to direct public outrage about the Polly Klaas case against Fazio. In fact, Fazio had voted on several occasions to expand the death penalty, though he had expressed doubts about capital punishment as a matter of principle. But opposing the death penalty as a matter of principle is not quite the same as defending some particular individual from execution. In their anger at Davis, however, viewers might take scant notice of such a subtle—but vitally important—distinction.

when we are angry (especially if we are in a "blind rage"), it is easy to become illogical, in various ways. For one thing, we may think that we have been given a reason for being angry when in fact we have not. Is spending money on midnight basketball leagues a waste of money? Well, let's talk about it and see. If a midnight basketball league reduces crime in a neighborhood, then maybe it isn't such a waste of money. It is illogical to think that something is wrong simply because it makes us angry: Presumably we are angry because it is wrong, not the other way around.

Another mistake we can make is to let the anger we feel as the result of one thing influence our evaluation of an unrelated thing. That one person has done something to anger us isn't normally in itself a reason for upgrading our evaluation of another person or that person's deeds. Nor is it a reason for downgrading the first person's performance on some other matter.

Suppose, for example, a coworker didn't recommend you for a promotion and now is up for one herself. It may anger you that she didn't recommend you, but the fact that she didn't isn't logically related to the question of whether she has earned a promotion herself. Similarly, if she had recommended you, that too would be logically unrelated to the question of whether she deserved a promotion herself. Notice how it is that people we don't like

have to be exceptionally good for us to praise them, whereas a friend wins our admiration for being merely competent. It takes careful thinking to keep our general feelings about others from coloring our evaluation of some specific accomplishment or action on their part.

Radio talk show hosts often seem to attempt to arouse and feed indignation (and even outrage) on the part of listeners; some politicians do the same. Regardless of who does it, if we find ourselves rising up in righteous indignation, it's probably good to remember that anger does not provide the clearest lens through which to view the world.

Two Wrongs Make a Right

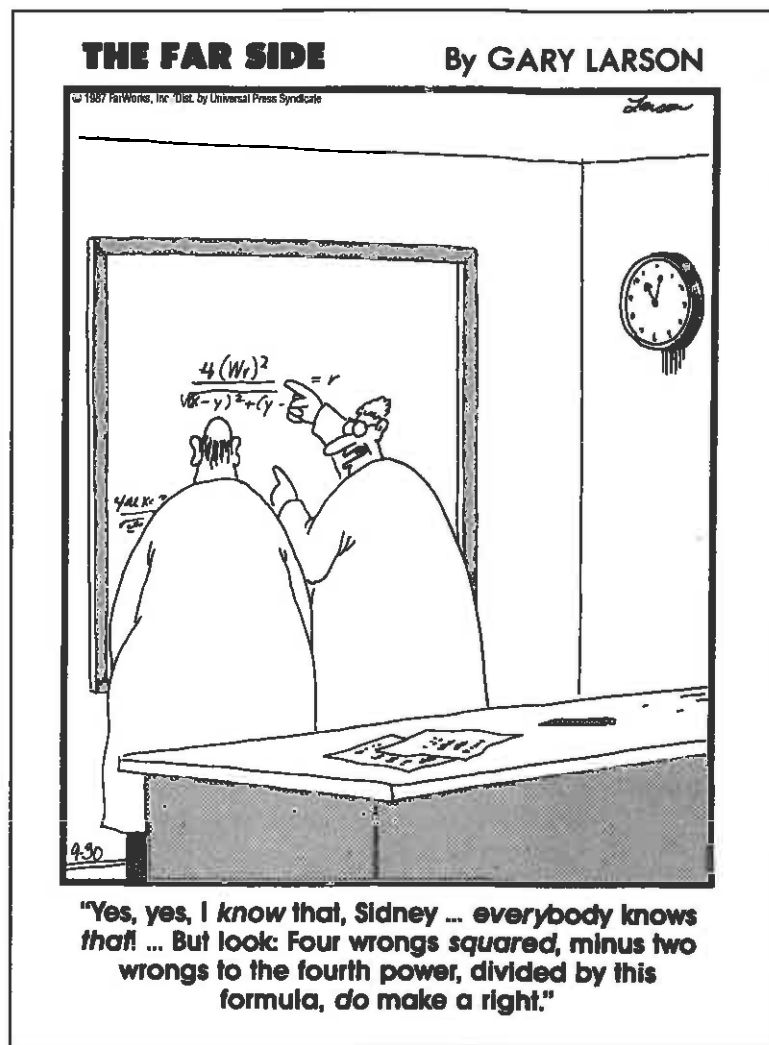
Two wrongs make a right is a form of pseudoreasoning that is intended to justify the claim that it is all right for A to do something harmful to B. It occurs when somebody tries to justify illegitimate retaliation. It is somewhat controversial whether every case of this type of "two wrongs make a right" thinking should be classified as pseudoreasoning. There is a well-known and widely held theory known as *retributivism*, according to which it is acceptable to do harm to someone in return for a similar harm he or she has done to you. But we certainly may distinguish between what may be legitimate retaliation, as for instance in the case of capital punishment, which retributivists may be able to defend successfully, and what is illegitimate retaliation.

Pseudoreasoning clearly occurs when we are urged to consider a wrong to be justification for *any* retaliatory action, as would be the case if Moore burned down Parker's house to repay him for denting the fender of his car. It is also pseudoreasoning when the second "wrong" is misdirected—if, for example, A does wrong to B, so B then does wrong to C. B may say rhetorically that he has "evened his scorecard," but here the second wrong is clearly illegitimate. We also use "two wrongs" pseudoreasoning to defend A's doing harm to B on the grounds that B *would* (or might) do the same to A. An example:

After leaving the local supermarket, Serena notices that the sales clerk has given her too much change. "Oh well," she says, "if I had given him too much money, he wouldn't have returned it to me."

Serena is indeed rationalizing. She is trying to excuse her dishonesty with a pseudoreason. Even assuming that the clerk wouldn't have returned the money to her had the situation been reversed, that fact does not justify a similar action by another person, herself included.

Notice, though, another scheme very similar to this pattern of pseudoreasoning that is not pseudoreasoning but is, rather, quite acceptable: It is *not* illogical or "pseudoreasoning" to defend A's doing X to B *on the grounds that doing so is necessary to prevent B from doing X to A*. Thus, for instance,



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most people would agree that it is not wrong for you to injure a mugger if doing so is necessary to prevent that person from injuring you. To take another example, near the end of World War II, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities, killing tens of thousands of civilians. It was argued that the bombing was justified because it helped end the war and thus prevented more casualties from the fighting, including the deaths of more Americans. People have long disagreed on whether this argument provides *sufficient* justification for the bombings, but there is no disagreement about its being a real argument and not empty rhetoric.

Recap

People can be moved to take a position on an issue by language that plays on feelings such as fear, compassion, guilt, loyalty, pride, wishful thinking, or what-have-you. In many cases the feelings are irrelevant to the issue at hand. Using language in this way, when the feelings have no bearing on the issue, counts as what we call pseudoreasoning; language so used is really just empty rhetoric.

In this chapter, we examined twelve categories of pseudoreasoning:

Smokescreen/red herring—bringing up an irrelevant topic to draw attention away from the issue at hand

Subjectivist fallacy—asserting that a claim may be true for one person but not for another

Appeal to popularity—urging acceptance of a claim simply because some selection of other people believe it (when those believers have no more knowledge or expertise in the subject than you do). Variants of appeal to popularity include

Common practice—justifying an action or practice on the grounds that lots of people (or a significant number within a certain category) engage in it

Peer pressure—urging acceptance of a claim on the grounds it will gain the listener approval from friends or associates, where that approval is irrelevant to the truth of the claim

Bandwagon—supporting a position, candidate, or policy on the grounds it is going to win or become the dominant alternative

Wishful thinking—urging acceptance of a claim on the basis of the listener's desire that it be true

Scare tactics—accepting or urging acceptance of a claim on grounds of fear, when the threat is not relevant to the issue addressed by the claim

Appeal to pity—accepting or urging acceptance of a claim on grounds of pity, when the appeal is not relevant to the issue addressed by the claim

Apple polishing—accepting or urging acceptance of a claim on grounds of vanity; allowing praise of oneself to substitute for judgment about the truth of a claim

Appeal to anger or indignation—substituting anger or indignation for reason and judgment when taking a side on an issue

Two wrongs make a right—justifying doing X to somebody because they would do X to you given the chance, or justifying an action against someone as “making up” for something bad that happened to you. Instances of this occur that are not pseudoreasoning.

Having read this chapter and the chapter recap, you should be able to

- ▲ Identify the kinds of pseudoreasoning we cover in this chapter when you encounter it, whether in someone else’s writing or speaking, or in your own writing, speaking, or thinking
- ▲ Explain and give examples of the types of pseudoreasoning described in this chapter

Exercises

In daily life it is not terribly important that you be able to label a case of pseudoreasoning as, say, “subjectivist fallacy” or “appeal to popularity.” What is important is being able to identify pseudoreasoning wherever it occurs and to recognize why the would-be reasons are irrelevant to the point at issue. Nevertheless, in the exercises that follow, we will ask you to name patterns of pseudoreasoning, and your instructor may do the same on an exam. The objective is to help you become familiar with and remember *these* common patterns so that you will be alert to pseudoreasoning when it occurs in daily life.

Exercise 5-1

Working in groups, invent a simple, original, and clear illustration of each pattern of pseudoreasoning covered in this chapter. Then in the class as a whole select the illustrations that are clearest and most straightforward. Go over *these* illustrations before doing the remaining exercises in this chapter, and review them before you take a test on this material.

Exercise 5-2

Identify any instances of pseudoreasoning that occur in the following passages, either by naming them or, where you think they do not conform to any of the patterns we have described, by explaining in one or two sentences why the pseudoreasons are irrelevant to the point at issue. (There are a few passages that contain no pseudoreasoning. Be sure you don’t find it where it doesn’t exist!)