

Tool 9



Five Tips on How Not to Debate a Motion

What constitutes a strong argument? It is useful to understand some of the common lines of argumentation that weaken an argument but, unfortunately, are often heard. These are called fallacies, and one Internet site lists 172 common fallacies! Fallacies are deceptive or misleading arguments. They can be part of one's reasoning. Recognizing them can lead our reasoning from being a weak argument to becoming a stronger one. Here are five common fallacies. How many have you heard lately?

1. In an appeal to authority, an attempt is made to strengthen our position by referring to a famous name or something that is not really much of an authority. For example, I overheard a ruling elder say that he looks to see how Rev. L. Wey's Wright votes and does the same. "If Mr. Wright sees it that way, it must be true!" The problem is that we are called to discern God's will and not to defer our decisions to someone we might respect.
2. When we appeal to the authority of the group, trying to make people believe what everyone else supposedly believes, we have used the fallacy known as the *ad populum* or "to the people." A sentence that begins "Wouldn't most people agree ..." should make us suspicious of what is coming next. Even if we agree with the statement, it is a weak support or opposition of a motion or argument.
3. When we want to disagree with a position because we can point to some fault of the person, we use the *ad hominem*, "against the person," or *tu quoque*, "you too," fallacy. In the first case, one speaks against a point made by someone because the person is seen as bad and, therefore, everything the person says is unreliable. In the second case, the person speaking out against an issue may have committed the same act and might be accused of hypocrisy. Imagine God's people at Sinai saying to Moses, "Don't tell us not to commit murder, you murderer!" Does the fact that Moses committed murder take away from the fact that it is wrong and against God's will?
4. When we speak in favour of (or against) an issue by predicting dire circumstances as a consequence (of accepting or rejecting the motion), we are using the "slippery slope" fallacy. The predicted chain of events, which is not supportable, assumes there is only one direction that cannot be halted or altered half-way. "People will leave the church if we ordain women" is, perhaps, an example of such a fallacy from a previous generation.
5. A common fallacy occurs when a speaker uses a very important word or phrase but moves between different meanings of that word or phrase. Equivocation can be used positively to expand our understanding of a concept, word or phrase but it weakens our argument. Religious language and concepts are ripe for wide interpretation, and it is important to be clear and consistent when speaking publicly in support of or against an issue.

Many other fallacies can weaken our arguments, and it is only through careful listening that we will begin to recognize them. We may find we are supportive of the intention of the motion but not of the way in which it is worded or in its manner of implementation. In this case, we could try to change the motion through an amendment.

Any questions or comments? Please contact the Elders' Institute for information.

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