

The Three Acts of the Intellect

A woman once found herself in the middle of the garden filled with a spectacular orchard. A stunning array of many beautiful trees had been given to her to eat from, to her hearts' content. While she was there, someone approached her and asked her a question. The question sowed the seed of an incorrect thought, and although she had been given a myriad of gifts and a share of the garden itself, she began to doubt the generosity and wisdom of her benefactor. Because of this doubt she committed an act of ingratitude toward her benefactor, by which she forfeited the best of gifts she had been given. The question that sowed the doubt was, "Did God say you may not eat of all of the trees in the garden?" The questioner was the serpent, the woman was Eve, and the question that sowed the doubt is an example of a type of mistake in reasoning; one of ten classic errors in reasoning, called the informal logical fallacy of "special pleading" - A clever error in logic, that if identified, could have prevented a disaster.

Today we are going to discuss Logic and a few errors to avoid if we want to use our minds correctly be logical. We will rely heavily on notes from Dr. Dennis McNerny's Logic course at seminary, though if you would like to read more about logic, I highly recommend Dr. McNerny's book Being Logical. Logic is the science of correct thinking. To understand how to think correctly we have to know what the three acts of the intellect are. The three acts of the intellect are three basic operations of the human mind: they are **simple apprehension, judgment and reasoning**. We will explain each of them.

The first act of the intellect is called simple apprehension. **Simple apprehension** is *that mental act whereby we form ideas*. Ideas, which are those intellectual images whose job is to carry a meaning, are formed by the mind by the act of the mind called simple apprehension. Through simple apprehension we come to know the natures of individual things, and when we know the nature of something we can put a name to the thing. But although one may know the idea of something, and know the name of that thing he has an idea of, he may not know of any real thing out there that corresponds to that idea he has formed of something by simple apprehension. For example, we might have the idea of a horse with wings in our mind, but that doesn't mean that any such animal exists. This leads to the second act of the intellect.

The second act of the intellect is called judgment. **Judgment** is *that intellectual act by which real existence is discovered*. Through simple apprehension we can know what something is, but the act of the intellect that we call judgment tells us when an idea we have actually corresponds to something that really exists. For example, a child knows the idea of a horse by simple apprehension. Once the child knows the nature of the animal that we call a horse, by an act of judgment, the child can then see a horse that it has never seen before, point to it and say, "horse", because the child knows enough about the nature of a horse to recognize that this really existing animal that he is now seeing actually corresponds to the *idea* of "horse" that he has in his mind. It is the job of judgment to bear witness to a reality that exists outside of our mind; in the real world. Some ideas that we may have in our minds don't *actually* exist – that is, they may have no existence in *reality*, and the act of the intellect called judgment tells us whether or not an idea actually corresponds to something in the real world.

It is this act of judgment, by the way, that our conscience should use, because by our conscience, we are supposed to tell whether an idea we have about the morality of something actually does correspond to something that really exists – that is, does this act correspond to an objective standard of morality that exists outside of our mind. This is the act of judgment. So the next time someone asks, “Who are you to judge?” as long as you are using an *accurate* moral standard to judge an act by (that is, God’s standard), by the act of judgment you are simply measuring an act to see if it sizes up to God’s moral standard, which is what every human being must do.

The third act of the intellect is called reasoning. **Reasoning** is that mental act by which the mind begins with a statement which it knows to be true, and proceeds to a second statement which it then accepts as true on the basis of the truth of the first statement. Reasoning is the process by which we move from judgment to judgment to discover new truths. In reasoning we start with one true statement and using something that we know is true, we can proceed to another conclusion that is true. For example, starting with the statement, “person X is a mother” we can apply the truth that “all mothers are women”, therefore person X is a woman.

That is not a difficult conclusion to reason to, but if one reasons incorrectly he might come to conclusions which are false. For example, “person X is a woman... women are mothers... therefore person X is a mother.”

Another term in logic that we should define that relates to the act called reasoning is called the argument. An **argument**, as used in logic, is simply the external expression of one’s reasoning.

The Ten Logical Fallacies

What are the common threats to logic, to correct thinking? Another way to ask this is, what are some common logical fallacies? There are two general types of errors when people make mistakes in reasoning. The first is called a *formal* fallacy, and this occurs when an argument has some structural defect which renders it invalid. If an argument is invalid, that means that it is not capable of guaranteeing a true conclusion.

The other type of error people make mistakes in when trying to reason is called an *informal* fallacy. This is any case of erroneous reasoning which is extrinsic to the argument, bringing in something from outside what is actually not pertinent to the argument, and circumvents it. In other words, they attempt to ignore the argument itself and to introduce elements from outside the argument. Here are some common logical fallacies:

- 1) **Begging the Question**: Begging the question is the error in logic whereby one evades the responsibility of making an argument, by assuming to be true what the person needs to prove is true, failing to give evidence for an assumption that requires evidence.
- 2) **Two Wrongs Make a Right**: This fallacy is the error in logic whereby one attempts to use another’s wrongful action to justify one’s own wrongful action. When a child says, “He did it first!” as a defense, the child is using this fallacy in reasoning, as if the repetition of a disordered act transforms the bad act into a good one. It is the same fallacy that people try to use to justify aborting a child after a rape.

- 3) **The Ad Hominem Fallacy**: This is an error in argument whereby one ignores the argument and attacks the person behind the argument, when it is clearly irrelevant to do so.
- 4) **The Straw Man**: This is an error in logic whereby one deliberately distorts the other person's argument in order to weaken it, thereby making it easy to dispose of. This is usually done when one does not have an adequate, logical response to an argument, so puts words in another's mouths which the other never intended to gain an unfair superiority over the other person's argument. The fallacy gets its name from the idea that a man made out of straw can easily be pushed over.
- 5) **The Red Herring**: This is an error in argument whereby one introduces an issue into an argument which, though perhaps important in itself, has nothing to do with the matter under discussion, and because of the issue's emotional provocativeness, it distracts away from the argument.
- 6) **The Hasty Conclusion**: This is the error in logic whereby one comes to a conclusion which has insufficient evidence behind it. Another name for this fallacy is "jumping to conclusions".
- 7) **The Improper Appeal to Authority**: This is the error in logic whereby one justifies a position based upon a supposed authority that the source of the justification has. "But it is legal." Authority is *properly* appealed to when 1) the authority appealed to is competent in the matter at hand, and 2) the purpose of the appeal is to establish or confirm a truth which could in fact be confirmed by invoking the order of things.
- 8) **The Appeal to Ignorance**: This is the error in argument whereby one relies on the ignorance of another and uses the opponent's inability to *disprove* an argument one is making, relying on this inability as if it were a proof.
- 9) **The False Dilemma**: This is the error in logic whereby one tries to persuade an audience that they are faced with only two choices, when in fact there are more than two.
- 10) **Special Pleading**: This is the error in argument whereby one presents to the audience a decidedly distorted picture of reality, putting forward only evidence that supports one's view, while one ignores pertinent evidence that opposes that view. This is the fallacy that the serpent used on Eve, distorting her view of reality with the question, "Did God say you may not eat of all of the trees in the garden?", implying that He was being unfair when He had actually given her so much.

Conclusion

This week, try to identify the illogical 'catch-phrases' that the world has gotten us to learn and repeat. Some examples: 'That's true for *you*... *Just* follow your conscience...

By being logical and avoiding logical errors, we can *receive* the light of truth which we pray God to send forth at every Holy Mass at the Prayers at the foot of the Altar.