

Episode 4. Informal fallacy: unwarranted generalization/stereotyping.

Welcome to Philosophy for the Real World. I'm Professor Thomas White.

The simplest way I can describe my aim with these podcasts is that I want to help you make sure that your decisions are *yours*. I want your decisions about what to think, believe, do, buy, or vote to be the result of your clearly understanding an issue, looking at relevant evidence, and grasping all the implications of your decision. That is, I don't want your decisions to be the result of someone having gotten you to do *their* bidding by using anything from lies to deceptive thinking. In this episode, we're going to start the process of looking at *illogical arguments* commonly used against us.

Logicians call logical mistakes fallacies. Some fallacies lie in the structure of the argument. Those are called formal fallacies, and we'll look at those at some point. Today, we're looking at what's called an informal fallacy—a logical mistake based in the language used or the kind of claims made.

When used properly, human language is a great tool. It lets us communicate with others, build relationships and communities, pursue inquiries in an infinite number of areas, invent, record, and preserve our findings. When language is used properly, it clarifies issues, unifies us as a community, and gives us a firm basis for making decisions. Just think of how language makes it possible for us to help each other, and how many medical and scientific discoveries have been possible because of it. *However*, if there is one area more than any other in which language is regularly *misused* and potentially does a good deal of harm, it's *politics*.

The problem is that in today's culture, at least, politics rejects truth, reason and logic. Political rhetoric has nothing to do with truth. It's about *persuasion*, not facts. *Manipulation*, not letting people make their own decisions. More than anything else, contemporary politics is about *scaring* people and making us *afraid* of each other based on *lies, exaggerations or half-truths*.

One of the most common informal fallacies used in political rhetoric—which we're looking at today—is *unwarranted generalization and stereotyping*.

There's an interesting line in the old movie *The Big Chill* in which one of the characters claims that rationalizations are more important than sex. He says something to the effect that none of us could go a day without *rationalizing* something. I'd say the same thing about the fallacy of "unwarranted generalization and stereotyping and any politician or political commentator." I defy you to find one politician or commentator who can get through one day without it.

In the fallacy of "unwarranted generalization and stereotyping," the speaker claims that everyone who belongs to a certain group has the same trait. Given that contemporary politics is all about getting people to vote *against* someone or something, it should be no surprise that the trait at issue is *negative*.

Here's a slight exaggeration—sadly, only *slight* exaggeration—of the most common examples of this fallacy you'll hear every day in political speeches and commentary.

From one corner, ...

Liberals are dangerous socialists with no sense of ethics. Atheists, they want to destroy religion and the family. They have no respect for authority, patriotism,

personal responsibility, and traditional values. They want to discriminate against Whites—especially White men—and give unfair advantages to less competent women and non-Whites. They want to reward laziness, irresponsibility, and incompetence. They want the state to provide for everything, and they don't care about the cost to all the *good* people who have to pick up the tab. When you see a liberal coming, be afraid—be very afraid!

And from the other corner ...

Conservatives are dangerous religious extremists who reject the idea of personal liberty (unless it applies to owning guns and getting rich) and want to impose their ideas on everyone else. They are White nationalists biased against women and non-Whites desperately trying to hold on to wealth and power they got only because they kept everyone else out of the game. They are frightened, authoritarian fascists who are blindly loyal to anyone they think will advance their interests. They reject science and truth and embrace self-serving ideologies instead. When you see a conservative coming, be afraid—be very afraid!

As you see, the fallacy of “unwarranted generalization and stereotyping” is nothing more than *mean-spirited name calling*. Frankly, it's embarrassing to give a formal label to something that's no more than the expression of fear, anger, and prejudice.

The *first* problem with this fallacy, of course, is that it's *false*. Hardly any trait—positive or negative—is true of every member of a group.

But—and here's the more *serious* second problem with the fallacy. People who use this fallacy *know* it's false. They aren't stupid. They're deliberately using it as a tactic to get you on their side by making you angry and afraid. And that's nothing

more than *manipulation*. But more insulting than that, it's manipulation based on the idea that *you're too stupid, gullible, or lazy* to realize what they're doing. If they had a defensible position and any respect for your intelligence, they'd present objective evidence in a logical argument. If the best they can do is a fear-based logical fallacy, they should be embarrassed—and you should be insulted.

Now if it seems like I'm picking on the world of politics, it's because I am. But I have no ideological agenda. My problem is that no matter the party, virtually every politician, speechwriter, pundit, author of an opinion piece, or would-be political 'influencer' on the internet fills their remarks with logical fallacies. As any logic teacher will tell you, when we want examples of bad thinking, our first choice is the world of politics. In fact, an election year gives us so many examples that every day feels like Christmas morning. Today's fallacy is just a taste of what we'll look at in other episodes.

So, what's today's practical take away about the logical fallacy of *unwarranted generalization and stereotyping*? Actually, there are two.

First, if some politician or pundit tries to get your vote or a donation by using this fallacy—trying to scare you with the idea that members of some group all have the same negative trait and they're coming to get you—just say no. If they can't treat you like the intelligent person you are, capable of making rational, evidence-based decisions, they don't deserve your vote or money. Don't waste your time listening to them and *don't* give them any money.

Second, if some speaker or writer is saying things that reflect your own prejudices (which, remember, we all have), you're going to be tempted to think that they're engaged in serious political analysis. If that happens, you need to find a way

to stay intellectually honest. Here's how to reframe things—because contemporary politics is really no different from what goes on between eight-year-old boys in a schoolyard.

Imagine that we have Tim and Phil, who every day look for new ways to insult each other. Today, Tim loudly announces during recess, “Hey everybody. I just learned that ‘Phil’ is short for ‘Phyllis.’ So,” he taunts, “Phil is really a *g-i-r-l*.”

To which Phil replies, “At least I don't have a last name that means dog poop—Mr. Timothy *Doo Doo*.”

Tim, of course, isn't going to let that slide, so he says, “Hey, you know my last name is ‘Doodle.’ But I guess you're too stupid to be able to read. You think you're smart, but you're just a dumb poo poo head.”

Then Phil. “Yeah? Well, I'd rather be a dumb poo poo head than a big eared bum face.”

I'm sure you get the idea. Contemporary political rhetoric is *not* “spirited argument or serious political discourse,” it's “dumb poo poo head” versus “big eared bum face.” As I said, just say no.

And I'm serious about this. People who want your vote or your money should respect you enough to have to work for it. In particular, they shouldn't expect you to be convinced by stereotypes or arguments that would get an “F” in any logic or critical thinking class on the planet. This isn't a schoolyard where the object of the game is to taunt, insult, frighten, intimidate, manipulate, or deceive. Just say no.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White. This has been philosophy for the real world.