Plato and the Scotsmen

by Bradford Tuckfield (September 2015)

I have loved logical fallacies ever since I took a deductive logic class in college. To be more accurate, I don't love the fallacies themselves, but I love learning and knowing about them. I find that familiarity with the most common fallacies, together with some other logical principles, gives one power to quickly understand, deconstruct, and cut through even the most formidable opponent's arguments. It can mean the difference between "that doesn't sound quite right, but I can't put my finger on why" and "you're using argument X, and it's fallacious, and here's why." Of course, the latter response can make one an unpopular conversationalist, but that is a separate issue.

As I have watched TV news recently, I have wished that the hosts and pundits were more steeped in knowledge of logical fallacies. Lately, I have seen literally hours of discussions that are simply repeated invocations and refutations of the "No true Scotsman" fallacy. If commentators were familiar with the fallacy and how to argue for or against it, they could save themselves hours of linguistic grappling and struggles to express ideas that have been thought through many times before. They could then move on to discussing finer points, or more important events, or more coherent ideas, and their debates could be more fruitful and less exasperating.

Before I explain more clearly what I mean, a brief explanation of this particular fallacy is in order. The "No true Scotsman" fallacy is exemplified by the following story: a proud Scottish man claims that no Scotsman would ever commit murder. The next day, he reads in the newspaper that a Scotsman committed murder. His response is to claim that the murderer was not a *true* Scotsman, and that no true Scotsman would ever commit a murder. In this way, a category can be infinitely protected from evidence about it, and an assertion can be infinitely defended as true even when it's plainly proven false. The fallacy comes from the criteria for "true Scotsmen" being arbitrary and ad-hoc (changed as needed strictly to protect a disproven argument).

I see this fallacy in one form or another in so many of the discussions on TV news channels. Discussions about Islamic terrorism are especially likely to

contain it, as commentators grapple with whether Islam is a "religion of peace." No Muslim, they argue, would murder innocents in acts of terrorism. But so many self-proclaimed Muslims have murdered innocents in acts of terrorism, and the murders continue every day in territories controlled by ISIS and elsewhere, comes the response. But no *true* Muslim would do such a thing, they say, completing the fallacy.

On TV, this is only the start of the discussion, and they spend a long time repeating arguments that have been made many times before. If pundits could identify the fallacy and avoiding committing it, we would save plenty of time. If they could denounce when it is brought up and move on, we could save even more time. If they could intelligently defend themselves after being denounced for using it, then we could at the very least raise the level of our discussions from simply repeating fallacies to talking intelligently about them. As viewers and citizens, knowledge of this fallacy arms us to turn the TV off instead of listening to another inane repetition of this fallacy, and to attack untruth and defend cogency when we have our own, off-air discussions.

This fallacy comes up almost every time ISIS or Islamic terrorism is mentioned in the news. But it is not limited to these occasions. I see the fallacy, or something close to the fallacy, all the time on the news and in political discussions. No true policeman would neglect his duty and mistreat a suspect (except for the ones who do). Since Democrats have a pro-"women's rights" platform, no true Democrat would mistreat women (except the most popular and lionized Democrats of the twentieth century: FDR, JFK, and Clinton, all inveterate and chronic cheaters). No true Communist regime would build itself on mass murders and totalitarian suppression (except all of the prominent ones: the USSR, North Korea, Cuba, China). The list goes on. The example of Communism is actually my favorite one — I cannot think of something that is so disastrous and monstrous everywhere it's implemented that is so firmly defended on theoretical grounds (that it's well-intentioned, that it "should" work, that it's just).

The fallacy brings to mind what Confucius taught: that the rectification of names — callings things what they truly are — is the first step to creating a good society. Today's pundits don't want to call Muslims Muslims; they want to corrupt the meanings of words to preserve their arguments and ideologies. We should certainly call things what they are. However, even the rectification of names would not be quite enough to eradicate this fallacy. The heart of the

fallacy is really a Platonic idea: that there is a true and immutable Scotsman of whom some people on Earth are instantiations, and our reasoning about Scotsmen should be based on the Platonic Scotsman rather than the Scotsmen we see in front of us. Even if we agree that a Muslim person has committed some crime, we can disagree about whether this should change our view of Muslims generally or of Islam itself. A Platonic idealist would say that the characteristics of Islam and Muslims are independent of anything that individual Muslims do. A hard-nosed realist would say that the only thing we have to base decisions on is evidence, the truths in front of our noses, and that we should base theories on evidence rather than interpreting evidence in light of theories.

When reasoning about this fallacy, we should bear a few things in mind to avoiding coming to incorrect conclusions. First, the fallacy is not committed (or at least is much less serious) if there is a categorical contradiction between classification as a "Scotsman" and the behavior in question. For example: one person says that no vegetarian would eat meat. His interlocutor says that some well-known self-proclaimed vegetarian just ate meat. The response: no *true* vegetarian would eat meat. In this case, the argument is justified since membership in the class "vegetarian" is pre-defined precisely as "those who don't eat meat," and the very act precludes membership in the category. One natural question, then, is whether a terrorist is *ipso facto* not a Muslim, in the same way that a meat-eater is *ipso facto* not a vegetarian, by the definition of the category (*i.e.*, the definition of "Muslim" includes "someone who doesn't commit terrorism). I will leave this to experts on Islam and Platonists to decide, however the passages in the Quran and the hadith literature on jihad don't seem to leave much room for doubt that religious warfare, if not religious terrorism, is justified.

Another important issue to keep in mind is that of population proportions. Since all Communist regimes seem to be disastrous, it is reasonable to conclude that Communism is a disaster. Since only a handful out of many thousands of policemen behave badly on the job, it is much less warranted to conclude that all policemen are wicked. The inferences that we can make about Scotsmen (or Muslims) are limited by the proportion of the total population that behaves in a particular way.

Platonism has always been appealing to thoughtful people: the idea that there

are pure and simple truths beyond the reach of the messy and sometimes ugly world is attractive to anyone who cares about ideas. However, whatever the merits of Platonism, it should not form the basis of our policy debates. Public policy (in my opinion) must be based on the empirical and the verifiable since it has so much immediate power to change our lives for the better or worse — there is little room for unverifiable academic theories in such a practical field.

In the same news shows where I see these fallacies committed, I see conservatives accused of being unintelligent, anti-science, or both. I think that committing the "No True Scotsman" fallacy is as unintelligent and anti-science as anything I see conservatives do or say. Insisting on some pet theory of Islam in contradiction of the evidence before our eyes is inherently anti-empirical, and therefore anti-science since science is an empirical endeavor.

There are many other fallacies that are committed regularly on TV news and opinion shows. Documenting them could easily fill a book. Knowing about these fallacies gives us power to avoid them and fight against them, and to better understand any argument we may find ourselves in. But even the uneducated can avoid these fallacies. Behind every logical fallacy is a simple departure from common sense. Even without a logic textbook, one can tell that someone who wears traditional Muslim clothing, goes to a mosque, prays in the Muslim manner, calls himself a Muslim, and quotes Muslim teachings to justify each of his good and bad actions, is a Muslim. Like Orwell pointed out, it is remarkable how much we struggle to see these things in front of our noses. An understanding of fallacies is a tool for any pundit or citizen to rely on in a pinch, but it cannot replace common sense, which will always be the most essential and the most lacking ingredient in every human debate.

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