Fallacies: Ignoratio Elenchi and Straw Man

I. Lesson

> "If, then, a man treats the admission that a thing is white in a certain respect as though it were said to be white without qualification, he does not effect a refutation, but merely appears to do so owing to ignorance of what refutation is."
>
> -Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* (W.A. Pickard-Cambridge, 1984)

There are many ways to make a silly argument. One way involves the fallacy of ***ignoratio elenchi***,.

- ***Ignoratio Elenchi*:** a fallacy in which an argument proves a different conclusion than the one(s) which were supposed to be proven

In the strict Aristotelian sense, this kind of fallacy occurs during a debate in which one of the participants does not present the refutation that would contradict an opponent's position. Instead, the participant simply establishes an unrelated point.

In the wider, more modern sense, the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy occurs any time someone comes to a conclusion that is irrelevant to their original proposition.

It is important to note that a commonality across both senses of the term is that the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy exists even if the argument is logically sound and the conclusion is true. This is different from other fallacies, which depend on the unsoundness of the argument.

It is also helpful to note that another kind of fallacy commonly referred to as "straw man" can be considered a special case of the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy. The **straw man** fallacy occurs when someone takes another person's argument, distorts or exaggerates it, and then attacks the distorted version of the argument as if that were actually the claim the first person made. The reason that the straw man fallacy can be considered a case of *ignoratio elenchi* is that the distorted conclusion is irrelevant to the original position.

[**Activity]:** Discuss with a partner why it might be tempting to engage in a straw man fallacy during a debate. What are some good ways to respond to an interlocutor if they commit a straw man fallacy with regards to your argument or position?

II. Examples

i. Your sister is accusing you of stealing her clothes. In order to prove her point, she tells your mom how you are not very intelligent and why it would be so cruel for you to steal them. Your mom

seems convinced that you're the culprit. But wait! Even if you are *not* very intelligent, and even if it *would be* cruel for you to steal them, does that prove that you are in fact the culprit?

It doesn't. Your sister's arguments are either totally irrelevant (the attack on intelligence) or they simply show that *if* you had stolen the clothes, *then* that would have been cruel. However, your sister hasn't proven that you *actually* stole her clothes. You can inform her that she has engaged in a kind of fallacious reasoning known as ***ignoratio elenchi,*** or irrelevant conclusion.

ii. You explain to your mom that the real reason your sister is accusing you of theft is that she wants your mom to pity her and buy her new clothes. Your sister overhears and retorts, "you're just trying to ruin my life!" If you want to rile her up just a bit more, you can explain that this new argument she's come up with is also ridiculous. By accusing you of something as dramatic as trying to ruin her life, she has made your argument more extreme than it actually is. She is now attacking you on the basis of something you never said. She has fallen subject to the **straw man** fallacy.

III. Exercises

Exercise 1

Summarize the key difference between Aristotle's use of *ignoratio elenchi* and the modern use of the term.

Exercise 2

Explain how *ignoratio elenchi* differs from other kinds of logical fallacies.

Exercise 3

Explain why the straw man fallacy can be considered a subset of *ignoratio elenchi*.

Exercise 4

Identify the following exchanges as examples of *ignoratio elenchi,* straw man, both, or neither. Explain your reasoning.

i. A: I think that climate change is largely caused by human beings.
B: So you think that humans can control the daily weather report? That's ridiculous!

ii. A: My parents told me that it's safest to lock the door at night, so I think we should lock the door before we go to bed.
B: But your parents also told you that Santa Claus was real! Do you think we should really believe everything your parents say?

iii. Baby pumas can't possibly be dangerous, because they're just so fuzzy and cute!

iv. A: I don't want to look at you, because I'm just so angry at you right now.
B: Well, if you don't want to even look at me, then I'll leave you alone for a bit.

v. A: The employees of this startup would benefit from a raise.
B: The managers of this startup are working really hard to make a good product. So employees shouldn't be asking for a raise right now.

vi. Those flower bouquets are very expensive, and I don't have a lot of money right now, so I think I probably won't buy flowers this time around.

Exercise 5

Challenge: construct your own example of an *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy and a straw man fallacy.

IV. Conclusion

When we're debating, sometimes things get so heated that it's hard to take a step back and evaluate the situation rationally. But when we have the appropriate terminology to see the potential problems in an argument, it's much easier to take the necessary distance and determine what's actually going on. Understanding the fallacies of *ignoratio elenchi* and straw man is therefore an important step towards improving our patterns of reasoning and argumentation.

V. Lesson Goals

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Differentiate between the strict/Aristotelian and loose/modern conceptions of the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy
- Explain how *ignoratio elenchi* differs from other types of fallacies
- Explain how the straw man fallacy constitutes a subtype of *ignoratio elenchi*
- Determine whether specific debates or patterns of reasoning are examples of *ignoratio elenchi,* straw man, both, or neither
- Craft their own examples of *ignoratio elenchi* and straw man fallacies

Answer Key:

Exercise 1

The key difference between Aristotle's use of *ignoratio elenchi* and the modern use of the term is that, for Aristotle, the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy is involved in a debate between two people. In contrast, in the more modern understanding, this fallacy can also be part of a single person's reasoning.

Exercise 2

Ignoratio elenchi differs from other types of fallacies because this fallacy exists even if the conclusion is logically sound (so long as the conclusion is irrelevant in the context of the given argument). In contrast, other fallacies require the conclusion to be unsound.

Exercise 3

The straw man fallacy can be considered a subtype of the *ignoratio elenchi* fallacy because the over-exaggerated conclusion that characterizes the straw man fallacy ends up being irrelevant to the original argument.

Exercise 4

i. This is an example of a straw man fallacy (as well as *ignoratio elenchi,* since straw man is a subset of *ignoratio elenchi*). Person B has exaggerated person A's argument by choosing a very extreme example and by equating the concept of "largely caused" with that of "directly responsible." In fact, the latter concept is

ii. This is also an example of a straw man fallacy (and by extension, of *ignoratio elenchi*). Person A has said that we should follow a commonsensical piece of safety advice that has been offered by the person's parents. However, person B responds by selecting a white lie that was told by person A's parents in a very different context. Person B does this in order to argue that person A should not believe what their parents say. The point that person B is making is not relevant to the point that person A is trying to make.

iii. This is an example of *ignoratio elenchi* (but not straw man). The conclusion that baby pumas aren't dangerous can't be proven on the basis of the fact that baby pumas are fuzzy and cute, because danger and fuziness/cuteness have nothing to do with one another.

iv. This is not an example of either kind of fallacy. Person B's response is reasonable and relevant in light of Person A's statement. Person B leaving Person A alone for a minute might allow the situation to calm down, which presumably would be preferable.

v. This is an example of *ignoratio elenchi* (but not straw man). The fact that the

managers of the company are working hard to make a good product is irrelevant in the context of employees' need for a raise.

vi. This is not an example of either kind of fallacy. The individual's conclusion is reasonable and relevant in the given situation. If the individual cannot afford the purchase this time around (based on the price of the product and the individual's lack of money), it is reasonable to not purchase the product this time around.

Exercise 5

Answers will vary.