

A New Logical Fallacy Is Popping Up

By now, most of you are familiar with the *ad hominem* logical fallacy. Latin for “against the man,” it’s the practice of personally attacking one’s opponent rather than his or her argument.

In this blog I’d like to introduce a brand new logical fallacy that I frequently see committed today. I have dubbed it the “*ad nostalgiam*” fallacy.

Someone is guilty of an *ad nostalgiam* when he accuses another of “nostalgia” just because the other person argues that something was better in the past. Here’s an example of one we’ve seen at Intellectual Takeout in response to some of our posts:

Person X: When you compare school book lists today with book lists 100 years ago, it appears those in the past were more rigorous.

Person Y: You’re just being nostalgic, and assume that education in the past was better.

I suppose the *ad nostalgiam* fallacy is a cross between an *ad hominem* and a straw man argument. Like an *ad hominem*, the person making it is often attempting to insult the person and not engage his arguments. And like a straw man argument, the person is mischaracterizing another’s point as mere sentimentality for the past in order to quickly refute it.

Now, to be fair, there *is* a fallacy known as the “appeal to tradition” or the *argumentum ad antiquitatem*. This fallacy takes the form of implying that something is better *simply because* it is older or was practiced in the past, i.e., “this

is right because we've always done it this way." An example: *"When I was younger, women stayed at home rather than rushing off to jobs every day, and that's the way it should be now."* Someone who makes an *argumentum ad antiquitatem* may very well be nostalgic.

At the same time, it's important to clarify that just because something is not *logically fallacious* does not mean it is false. An appeal to tradition may not pass the syllogistic rules of validity, but it may still be true and worth contemplating. Believe it or not, logic does not capture the entirety of how humans come to know.

In addition, we must remember that the past remains an important source of knowledge and comparison for us in the present. There has been a movement afoot for the past 500 or so years that assumes that keeping an eye on the past is a major obstacle to "progress."

But it's difficult to know if one is making progress toward something if one doesn't know where he's coming from. Moreover, as history shows (notice the appeal to tradition?) the path to progress often involves a new and creative rediscovery of the past.