

The Skeptic's Tools

(Thanks Carl Sagan!)

Listen to the facts. Be clear that you know that what you have is the alleged facts not what you think is the facts.

Then look for independent confirmation of the facts if it is available. For example, if Tony says his lucky charm always works and makes him win all the time, get somebody to confirm this who does not stand to gain from confirming. Getting Tony's wife to confirm it is not an independent witness unless she is now as good as a stranger to him.

Here are common errors of thinking:

Arguments from authority. X is true for so and so said its true. Listening to "experts" and those who are in authority is treacherous. The authorities and experts disagree among themselves. They can be wrong. Some authorities and experts are deliberate liars because they know it will do their career little or no harm. For example, the Mormon archaeologist may say he has found evidence that the Book of Mormon is true. He knows this makes him the laughing stock of his field but he doesn't care for the Mormon Church is his audience. Christians like to quote authorities and professors that back up their faith. That is trickery for you could easily get as many if not more to say the faith is nonsensical. Science avoids authority - it depends on tests.

If something strange is reported such as a miracle then take account of all the facts and come up with a hypothesis that explains all of them. Indeed if you can think of many theories then all the better! You don't have to be able to explain how an alleged miracle happened. Its enough to know that it could have had natural causes and not have been a miracle at all.

What about the possibility that witnesses of miracles are lying?

Don't be afraid to change your hypothesis.

The hypothesis must possibly account for everything. It is mad to say a stigmatist cut herself to make the wounds if you were watching her all the time and she had no chance to do that.

If hypothesis 1 accounts for something and if another hypothesis accounts for it just as well - no more and no less - then just choose the simplest one.

Suppose there is a miracle reported. If hypothesis 1 assumes that nature can account for it and hypothesis 2 assumes that the paranormal can account for it choose hypothesis 1. You can't assume that the tenner stolen from your wallet magically turned into a puff of smoke. You assume that some more mundane and boring explanation is the right one - there is a thief on the loose.

Always ensure that in principle at least, a hypothesis can be falsified. Suppose somebody dying of cancer suddenly and instantly gets better. There is no way of telling that magic invisible medicine was behind it or that it was God or that the person suddenly unleashed temporary healing powers. You can't disprove any of the paranormal suggestions about what might have happened. You can't say you know when the cure took place. Perhaps the person was healed weeks ago and some occult force made the person seem to be still stricken with cancer and on the verge of death though they were not.

Ad hominem. When one disagrees with the argument, one attacks the one making the argument and not the argument. For example, "I don't believe that adultery is wrong for the pope condemns it and he is dodgy". Another example, Voltaire said Catholicism was nonsense but he was a scoundrel so you can't trust him. You can be the worst liar in the world and still be telling the truth about something. If some person who cannot be trusted either because of her bad life or because you don't really know her, what you do is you do not dismiss something she says. What you do is recognise that it may be the truth. She needs more checking out than a person known to be honest would.

I perceive that those who believe in miracles use ad hominem reasoning in order to make their stupidity and arrogance look acceptable. They attack the person making the argument not the argument in these ways,

Accusing those who don't believe of not having looked at the evidence.

Accusing those who don't believe of not understanding the evidence.

Accusing them of putting the dogma that miracles do not happen above the evidence - they are therefore accused of being

dishonest.

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But are sceptics no better?

Arguments from unwanted or bad consequences. Jesus Christ must be the Son of God for without belief in him we will have no morals. Even if we need to believe in Jesus as the Son of God to be moral it does not follow that he really was the son of God.

Arguments from ignorance. For example, nobody has disproved the existence of God therefore God exists. That does not follow.

The mystery or "We do not understand" excuse. Christians cannot explain why God makes horrific diseases and they tell us to trust in him saying it's a mystery. If you can prove God's existence then it's no longer an excuse. But if you cannot prove God then it's just an excuse. It is trying to defend what deserves only vehement condemnation.

Assuming the answer. For example, we must honour God by believing in his miracles. But we can honour God without believing in miracles. A wife can honour her husband without knowing or believing that he once donated a kidney to a friend.

For example, we must be against contraception for it will make it easier to be adulterous. Perhaps it won't make any difference.

Observational selectiveness. E.g., when you see the faults in everybody else's religion but only the good points in your own.

Statistics of small numbers. For example, 1/20 of the world is Catholic but that cannot be right for I have met no Catholics.

Misunderstanding of the nature of statistics. Statistics for example may show that a large number of people claim to have had an experience of the love of God.

Inconsistency. Say that atheist who are attracted to children will abuse them and ignore the fact that your priests who are attracted that way may do it too.

Non-sequitur. That is "It does not follow" in Latin. The Bible says that God will triumph over the world for all power is his. God might have all power but if he has given us free will he might not get our consent to take over the world and he may respect that.

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc - y happened. Then x happened after it. Therefore y caused x. John has the flu apparently. He takes elderberry wine and in a half an hour he is better. Therefore the wine cured John. This conclusion is not necessarily correct. "Abortion is sinful and harmful for the woman who has one. Most women have depression and feel suicidal afterwards."

Meaningless question. What happens when a force that cannot be resisted meets an immobile entity or object? This question is meaningless for it contradicts itself. What happens when nothing becomes something is even worse. If that is not a meaningless question then nothing is.

Excluded middle means you take the two extremes and forget about the possibilities in the middle. For example, Jesus said that whoever does not lift up his cross cannot be his disciple and whoever does is his disciple. What about people who partly take the cross? You can be a part-disciple! It is common to hear today that if you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. That is another example. No problem is completely bad.

Short term versus long term. This is a kind of excluded middle fallacy. It is important that we give the Church loads of money so that it can save souls from Hell with its message and its sacraments. Putting more money into the hospitals is not an option for better to be sick and dying than to be a sinner in danger of Hell.

The fallacy in this is that you don't have to deprive the hospital for the Church. What about compromise? Maybe you can give all the money to the Church and it will be a waste if people do not respond to its message and accept salvation.

Slippery slope argument. For example, if the nation becomes atheist, it will legalise abortion and infanticide for atheists have no morals. For example, if you legalise condoms people will see their partners as objects for their gratification rather

than persons. For example, if you accept gay people you will be implying that promiscuity is acceptable and you will be encouraging it. That assumes that all promiscuity is bad. It assumes all or most gay people are promiscuous. They are not - there are people in the closet who never had sex.

The pope says that promoting condoms increases HIV contraction. This overlooks the fact that it is not that simple. Its not just about condoms. Its about culture - maybe those who are saying they are using the condoms for the most part are not using them at all or not very often. Its about how condoms are used. For example, what if a lot of men are using the same condom over and over again. What if the men are sneakily removing the condoms without the partner's knowledge. The pope has been told all this time and time again but doesn't have the integrity to stop using the slippery slop arguments. He values the sound of his voice more than human life. You don't engage in that amount of grave dishonesty in such a serious matter if you care about the people.

Confusion of correlation and causation. For example, your star sign is Libra and that is why you are so well-balanced. For example, "I went to the shrine and felt great peace. The presence of God at the shrine did this." The confusion of correlation and causation is the prime reason why people are deluded by religion. "Catholic theologians are very intelligent. They are also devoted Catholics. Therefore Catholicism is an intelligent religion." This overlooks the fact that intelligent people can and do find intelligent ways to delude themselves or rationalise away the proofs that their religion is rubbish.

Rationalisation is not reasoning. Its the twisting and perversion of reasoning. An example is, when the Christian says there is no error in the Bible. Then somebody shows him an error. He might say, "The error was not in the original text then. That translation is mistaken." Catholics say, "My little boy is so bad and now I know that original sin exists". But a child being awkward and difficult does not mean he or she had a sin at birth. Also, a child cannot sin seriously no matter how bad his or her behaviour is.

Straw-man argument. This is making a position or argument look stupid to make it easier to refute it or attack it. Atheists, say chance made all things. But you can be an atheist and believe in intelligent design. Also, nature is about what works. Imagine a shapeless asteroid. Jesus himself used the straw man approach in the Bible. The Jews supposedly said that his power to cast out demons and cure those tormented by them came from Satan. Jesus said that was absurd for Satan wouldn't cast out his own servants for then he would have no kingdom. But Satan doesn't need to decree possessions to have a kingdom! Indeed seeing possessed people would put people off serving him! Jesus' answer was so silly and defensive and absurd that it would only have been confirmation to himself and the Jews that something satanic was indeed going on with Jesus' alleged powers!

Christians say that whoever says nobody is bad enough to go to Hell forever is unaware of the malice of sin. That is an attempt to make the critic of the doctrine seem to be a fool. It is they who are malicious. A truly good person will not believe anybody can suffer everlasting torment for sin in Hell unless the person sees Hell. They will be so compassionate and fair that they will not believe it unless they are forced to be the evidence.

Suppressed evidence. This is when you are not told the whole story. For example, Christians tell you Jesus rose from the dead. They do not tell you that a missing body is not enough to show that the person rose. What about Jesus appearing after his death? They do not tell you that apparitions do lie or err a lot. Maybe it was an entity pretending to be Jesus. Protestants certainly tend to ignore the apparitions of Mary in the Roman Church and the Roman Church itself ignores most of the reported apparitions.

Half-truths. For example, the pope says having sex while using contraception so that there will be no baby is sinful and unloving. Yet he allows sex based on the safe period while intending that no baby will result. The half truth is that he is not admitting that the real reason for being against contraception is his own sexual hang-ups. He wants to make sex misery for his flock.

Most people who enrol their children into Catholic Church membership have not thought correctly about what they are doing and the Church has kept the nastier facts from them.

Weasel words. That is when a spade is not called a spade. For example, war might be called something else to make it seem more acceptable as an option. Politicians are masters of weasel words. A top example from that other master of manipulation, the Catholic Church is, homosexuality is a disorder but we are not saying homosexuals are disordered. That is like saying blindness is a disorder but the blind eye is not disordered.

Roman Catholics define sin not as an act but as a sign of having a bad character. Then they tell you to love the bad character and hate the sin meaning the bad character. Totally impossible for to hate one is to hate the other for they are one and the same! The Catholic Church is really urging people to be intolerant not of sin but of what their religion tells them is sin and also to hate the sinner but to conceal that hate well. Its only a waste of time the Catholic Church bringing in child protection rules for the rot is in the theology with its double-speak and hypocrisy.

Mistaking excuses for reasons and reasons for excuses. The believer in the Christian God thinks that though there is no full explanation for why God allows so much suffering to happen, this is a reason to believe. The woman rebuffs a man who likes her. Then he turns against her and says she's a cow. People will argue that he is against her because she rejected him. But that implies she caused his reaction. She did not. He did. He is against her not because she rejected him but because he is vindictive.

Emotional reasoning. I feel uncomfortable around John therefore he is a bad person. I feel peace when I pray therefore God exists. I believe in the Catholic Church because I was brought up Catholic. People who use emotional reasoning are guilty of mistaking their feelings for beliefs. Beliefs are in the head. You can believe that God exists even if you feel that he does not. Feeling God exists does not mean you believe in him. Indeed if all you can do is have a feeling, that is a sign you do not really believe at all.

Much of this has been paraphrased from *The Demon-Haunted World, Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Carl Sagan, Headline Books, London, 1997

The Roman Catholic Church got control of the primary education system. It did not give people the rules of right thinking. It did not provide classes in psychology. It did not provide classes in basic philosophy and ethics. Instead, the goal was to have religion classes that merely assert Catholic doctrines as the truth. For example, the religion class will assert that it's a sin not to go to Mass except for a grave reason. It's asserted. The child is given no sensible or cogent reasons for going. Roman Catholicism is a system of spiritual abuse of the child.

Using the tools for spotting baloney means you are respecting your own intelligence and improving your potential. You are protecting yourself. You are not letting yourself become a stumbling block to others that misleads them. You will have less to fear. Using the tools is not a dry intellectual activity. It's warm and liberating. If you want the world to be a better place let the tools shine in your life and heart and in your speech.