

ASSIGNMENTS AND OTHER ANNOUNCEMENTS — JANUARY 24, 2007

The assignment for **Monday, January 29, 2007**, is to read Chapters 6 and 7 (Irrelevance and Diversion) in pages 51 – 83 of Gula and to be ready to give two examples illustrating the issues raised in these chapters. Note that the issues in the book are listed on pages 205 – 211.

There are no “wrong” examples. The idea is to examine various examples to see whether they reflect the issues from Chapters 6 and 7, and if so how they do so. Advertisements of any kind are appropriate (print, radio/television, World Wide Web), as are other attempts to persuade others to a particular viewpoint. As before, it is important to remember that our interest lies in the logic of examples rather than trying to advocate positions for or against any of the views in the examples.

Examples

Here are a few examples of going off track in a discussion. The first is taken from an interview involving Chris Matthews and Ann Coulter which was broadcast June 30, 2003:

MATTHEWS: *Let me ask you about Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton's book, how is it doing compared to yours?*

COULTER: *Well, she has many advantages over me.*

MATTHEWS: *You said she weighed more than you the other day. Was that the case?*

COULTER: *She had a 3 to 1 pound advantage. Her book is also three times as large as mine.*

In his second comment, Matthews is accusing Coulter of launching an abusive *ad hominem* argument, in which some irrelevant personal attribute is noted disparagingly in place of a response to the original question. Substantive answers could have been that the sales for her own book were doing quite well and that her book and Clinton's were different enough that they were not necessarily competitive. The final response restated the *ad hominem* argument and in fact went further down the same path with a comment about the relative length of Clinton's book.

Another example, also involving Ann Coulter, involved comments in her 2006 book *Goddless: The Church of Liberalism*, in which she criticized four women whose husbands were killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, claiming they were “enjoying their husbands' deaths,” calling them “witches” and “harpies,” and speculating, “how do we know their husbands weren't planning to divorce these harpies? Now that their shelf life is dwindling, they'd better hurry up and appear in *Playboy*.” — This is another example of attacking personal attributes rather than the positions taken by the four women, and it is particularly ironic since Coulter could have cited the four women's more controversial political statements as examples of emotional appeals to irrelevant authority.

It is safe to say that Ann Coulter and Hillary Clinton are not close friends, and shortly after the appearance of Coulter's book, Clinton called Coulter's comments a “vicious, mean-spirited attack”, suggesting that Coulter's book should have been titled *Heartless*. This response also contains an example of going off track, for the parody of the book title may be amusing, but it is also a diversionary use of satire. However, this is not the end of the story, because Coulter later

responded, “Before criticizing others for being ‘mean’ to women, perhaps Hillary should talk to her husband who was accused of rape ... ” This is a clear example of an emotionally charged red herring. Even if Coulter has incontrovertible proof of the serious accusations she mentioned, there is no evidence presented to indicate that the issue has anything at all to do with the appropriateness of her derogatory statements regarding the four women. — The preceding discussion is not meant to advance a particular political position but rather to give examples of irrelevance and diversion. It should be noted that prominent non-liberal Republicans have condemned the statements we have discussed.

Let’s take an example now that **doesn’t** involve political differences. Many people feel that buying an automobile is one of the most unpleasant things they have to do. Some dealerships have very straightforward sales practices, but the general reputation of car dealers is clouded by the large number that use a wide range of tricks to make customers pay as much as possible. Our interest here lies with ways of distracting the customer’s attention from details of the sale. One approach is to make the customer feel comfortable and confident that the sales personnel are being extremely open in presenting information. This can take several forms. For example, the salesperson may “speak as a friend” to the customer, creating an appeal to trust and giving advice that may or may not be in the customer’s best interests. Quite often the salesperson will bring a sales manager into the discussion. One type, known as The Charmer, will strike up friendly conversations about topics unrelated to the car in an effort to create an appearance of friendship; sometimes this is sincere, but in any case it is important to remember that the purpose of coming to the dealership is not for socialization but rather to make a financial decision that is very substantial for most people. Other approaches are meant to confuse or fluster a customer. For example, there are all sorts of tricks to spread figures all over a piece of paper so that it takes a great deal of concentration to see how the various parts of the deal really fit together and to determine whether there are problems with any of them. Another trick is to switch the discussion from one type of vehicle to another very abruptly. In many cases the objective is for the customer to accept the dealer’s previous offer in order to avoid even further confusion. Finally, the salesperson may bring a less friendly type of sales manager known as The Intimidator, whose presence creates an unpleasant atmosphere which again diverts attention from the specifics of the transaction. — Once again, there are automobile dealerships that do not play these sorts of head games, but clearly potential buyer should be ready for them when walking into any dealership.

Finally, here is a quick and fairly standard example of **poisoning the well**: *Are you still selling illegal drugs?*

Either a **YES** or a **NO** answer indicates that the person answering the question has sold illegal drugs in the past. The proper response is the question is not phrased properly and overlooks one important alternative; namely, that the person being questioned has never sold illegal drugs.