



Thinking Logically 2

Last week we explored the rhetorical fallacy of equivocation, which is using one word to mean two different things. This week we will explore another fallacy, that of the false dichotomy.

A false dichotomy is formed when two terms are proposed as mutually exclusive choices or possibilities. I saw a meme last week which proposed the following dichotomy.

“All illegal immigrants are stealing our jobs. Illegal immigrants are all on welfare. You can’t have it both ways.”

It is cute, and it brings up two things we may have read in the press or heard on television or online. Most people might just accept one or the other (or both) of these propositions uncritically—that is, without looking too deeply at the whole picture. The error in this false dichotomy is also a bit complex because it actually involves two fallacies, that of a hasty generalization combined with the false dichotomy.

The hasty generalization is found in the use of the “universal” term “all”. If one can disprove the “universal” term, the whole dichotomy falls apart. The universals in this false dichotomy fail when we look at the facts behind the proposed ideas. A hypothetical refutation might go like this:

I have known some families who did not “have papers” who were working jobs at the Factory, and who were arrested and deported in a raid. So, it is true that there were some “illegal aliens” who had jobs in the US. I also know a student whose visa had expired and who was waiting for his family or friends to give him enough money for a ticket home. I have also known some farmers in California who during high unemployment in that state didn’t check for papers for their field workers after they had tried to hire US citizens to work the fields and there were not enough who applied. Because the crops were getting to the point where they were up against a deadline for harvest, the farmers hired some migrant workers who didn’t have papers. So much for the first universal that all illegal immigrants steal jobs.

Now for the second term. Taking the student referred to above; he did not apply for welfare. But he did ask some of the church members for help as well as family members in his home country to send him money or a ticket home. Help arrived and he went home. So much for the second universal that all illegal immigrants are on welfare.