

- *Oversimplification of cause.* The belief that any given situation must have only one cause. If this is not true of the answer to “Why did you choose to have pizza?,” it is unlikely to be true of “What caused the recession?,” and yet we continue to act as though it is.
- *Moral high ground.* The idea that some actions, people, or ideas are innately virtuous and that any association with them proves the truth of a particular case. One easy way of thinking about this model is to consider whether the fact that someone is a criminal automatically renders his opinions on all subjects worthless. It clearly doesn’t, the opinion can be assessed in its own right regardless of the source.

There are many, many more fallacies; take some time to examine other lists. The purpose of the one above is simply to demonstrate an approach to how we should consider assertions. Simply ask yourself whether a particular point has actually been proved or whether you’re being asked to take it for granted.

Insist on Evidence for Even the Most Apparently Self-Evident of Claims

We believe many things to be both factual and true that are neither, especially in areas that affect most members of society but actually require advanced training to understand properly—science, health care, or economics, for example. We have a tendency to assume that anyone who has been sick knows about health care, that watching the Discovery Channel entitles us to comment knowledgeably on science, or that getting an allowance makes us experts on economics. There is some truth in this; experiential knowledge—knowledge gained by being a participant—can provide useful insights, but all three of these disciplines require methodological rigor that may well produce counterintuitive outcomes. Statements such as “it must be true” or “surely everyone knows” should be treated as warning signs that something widely believed and quite probably untrue is about to enter the discussion. Even at the level of fundamental beliefs about how the world works, it’s good to get into the habit of acquiring evidence before you accept a statement as true. After all, if you look around you, the Earth appears to be flat and the stars are, quite obviously, holes in the sky where the light gets in. Until relatively recently in human history, some very clever people believed both of these because they are obviously true.

Subject Our Own Beliefs and Claims to the Same Scrutiny as Those with Which We Disagree

One of the most common intellectual errors made is to assume that something is true because we happen to think it. Most of us carry around beliefs and values that we picked up fairly uncritically at the age of six or when somebody we like mentioned it in passing.