

# Three New Fallacies: Appeals to Polite Conversation, Trivial Refutation, and Trivial Defense

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## Abstract

Fallacious reasoning can stem from interacting with purported advocates and/or critics who are not competent to fulfil their respective roles relative to the topic under discussion. The notions of the “incompetent advocate” and the “incompetent critic” are introduced and described, and they are then invoked in the descriptions of three new fallacies. I conclude with some recommendations as to how one can avoid these fallacious traps.

Keywords: incompetent critic, incompetent advocate, polite conversation, trivial refutation, trivial defense, Watkins’ law

## Introduction

The extended lists from the Speech Communications scholars aside, there are basically three ways that one might participate in a dialogue that are relevant to our purposes here: Broadly speaking, a participant (an interlocutor) in a dialogue can function as a *learner*, as an *advocate*, or as a *critic*. These functions each have their own defining objectives:

- A *learner* is simply seeking to learn. (The learner learns through listening, asking questions, and testing their own answers to questions raised.)
- An *advocate* intends to assert, justify, or reply to any objections raised to a definite philosophical position. (This is done through evidence and/or logical argumentation.)
- A *critic* intends to raise substantial philosophical objections to either a position or a case that has been made by an advocate.

Again, any further potential roles in dialogue aside, during the course of any given dialogue, each participant will normally switch repeatedly between these three functions as the dialogue unfolds. Indeed, this spontaneous fluidity is a part of why philosophical dialogue is both engaging and fruitful.

## Incompetent Advocates and Incompetent Critics

Importantly, while *learners* can participate effectively in dialogue with relatively little prerequisite knowledge or skills, *advocates* and *critics* cannot fulfil their respective functions effectively unless they have certain specialized knowledge and skills. Since people have differing levels of knowledge, and differing skillsets, neither all advocates nor all critics are competent to perform the task at hand.

Both **competent advocates** and **competent critics** share the following qualities:

- Sufficient knowledge of the relevant positions, evidence, and logical arguments.

- Sufficient thinking skills and communication skills to both understand what is being said, and to articulate a substantial philosophical case concerning the given positions, evidence, and logical arguments under discussion.

Both **incompetent advocates** and **incompetent critics** lack either the knowledge or the thinking skills and communication skills necessary to perform their respective functions.

## Three New Fallacies

What follows are descriptions of three kinds of fallacious reasoning that can stem from participating in dialogue with advocates and critics who are incompetent relative to the topic under discussion. All three of these "new" fallacies must have been with us forever, but to the author's knowledge they have not previously been named and described explicitly.

### Appeal to Polite Conversation

An **appeal to polite conversation** is a *fallacy* wherein one *concludes* that since one can seemingly outargue others when in polite conversation (i.e., casual conversation in social settings), one's own views hold up to substantial rational scrutiny.

Example:

*Every time I get into a discussion about politics with anyone, they always end up agreeing with me. So, I obviously understand the issues really well.*

This line of reasoning ignores two salient points:

1. The typical people that one encounters in ordinary life will be *incompetent critics*. Thus, they will be generally unqualified to offer substantial critique of your views due to either insufficient familiarity with the issue(s) under discussion, or due to insufficient skills in *critical thinking* and/or *logical argumentation*.
2. Even among the competent critics who are familiar with well-reasoned *objections* to your views, many will not share their well-founded objections in polite conversation due to their *de facto* or conscious personal commitment to preserving the perceived community and rapport among present company through the suppression of substantial disagreement.

Thus, one's seemingly "successful" argumentation in polite conversation does not provide good evidence for the quality of one's thinking.

### Appeal to Trivial Refutation

An **appeal to trivial refutation** is a fallacy wherein one concludes that a proposition *p* is either false or otherwise untenable because one has successfully refuted a poor case made for it by an *incompetent advocate*. Since the advocate here is incompetent, one's refutation is trivial because the proposition has not been given an adequate defense.

An example:

*At today's meeting of the philosophy club, that new member offered a bad argument about Plato's philosophy. I completely destroyed their line of reasoning with just one rhetorical question! Obviously, they're totally wrong about Plato.*

Indeed, this fallacy could be construed as a permutation of the "fallacy" fallacy, wherein one concludes that a proposition is false because it has been defended fallaciously.

### Appeal to Trivial Defense

An **appeal to trivial defense** is a fallacy wherein one concludes that a proposition  $p$  is either true or otherwise rationally tenable because one has successfully refuted the poor objections to it from an *incompetent critic*. Since the critic here is incompetent, the defense is trivial in that the given proposition has not been subjected to substantial criticism.

An example:

*In my government class today I gave an argument in favor of a change to public policy. One of my classmates tried to refute my argument, but I responded to their objection very effectively and it became clear that they did not even know what they were talking about. This is how I know that my thinking is solid on this issue.*

Here again, the purported "defense" is trivial in that it has been posed in response to no substantive challenges.

### These New Fallacies in Contemporary American Culture

What follows are hypothetical accounts of how these three new fallacies arise in popular culture in the U.S. today.

An "appeal to polite conversation" as it might appear in American popular culture today:

*At Thanksgiving, the subject of the economy came up and everybody agreed with me, and the same thing happened at my friend's baby shower. It should be obvious that I really know what I am talking about.*

An "appeal to trivial refutation" as it might appear in American popular culture today:

*At work today, my co-worker gave a bad argument in support of [politician x]. I shared with them some evidence that one of their key claims was false. They were speechless, and then they got mad and left! It's perfectly clear that [politician x] should not be supported.*

An "appeal to trivial defense" as it might appear in American popular culture today:

*I was in line at the store and the subject of the election came up. I made my case for [politician x], and despite the fact that they disliked my conclusion, no one who was there could refute my argument. It follows that we should vote for [politician x].*

### Concluding Recommendations

Unfortunately, all three of these fallacies arise daily in the American body politic. Importantly, dialogue of the sort outlined here can still be meaningful, though we must be careful in the conclusions that we draw from the experience. Potentially, such dialogue can be worthwhile because it can serve to raise the awareness of the incompetent or otherwise uninformed participants, and it can familiarize all of the participants with the kinds of arguments (both good and bad) that are circulating currently.

This leads us to a few interesting points. Ordinary social settings are generally functionally inappropriate for truly free inquiry and rational critical dialogue, and unfortunately, in this regard, political rallies and free speech zones tend to be even worse than ordinary social settings. In each of these kinds of settings we can certainly encounter critics and advocates

all day long, and they will be both enthusiastic and outspoken, but we will rarely meet competent thinkers.

As bold – or perhaps as self-aggrandizing - as this may in fact be, here I propose what I refer to in my courses as “Watkins’ law”:

**One is exceedingly unlikely to have a chance encounter with a competent critic of one’s own views, and one is equally unlikely to randomly encounter a competent advocate for any alternative points of view.**

In conclusion, for the reasons described, those who are truly interested in refining their own understanding should actively seek out and embrace all of the following:

- Settings that are appropriate for substantive dialogue.
- Dialogue with **competent critics** of one’s own current views, so as to subject one’s own views to substantial rational scrutiny.
- Dialogue with **competent advocates** for alternative views, so as to expose oneself to the good cases to be made for other points of view.

How one might realize these recommendations in practice is beyond the scope of this article.