

Either You Like Bacon or You're Wrong

The fallacy of bifurcation cripples the imagination and limits possibilities.

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Commentary

It's a presidential election year, which means the season of either/or will soon reach fever pitch.

The candidates running for high office and their supporters will cite diverse reasons—ending war, lowering taxes, improving the schools—as to why they deserve to be president, governor, or a member of Congress. Common to all will be an endlessly repeated refrain: “Vote for Candidate X or Y will die.” For Y, insert democracy, equality, or a dozen other code words.

Of course, this either/or mentality isn't restricted to politicians. A young man I know recently graduated from high school and has now worked for a year while he decides whether to attend college. He's a bright fellow and a hard worker who will likely succeed at whatever he attempts, and his employer has already offered him the possibility of promotion and a higher salary. So, does he go to college, likely piling up debt along the way, or does he take a job offering immediate benefits?

Both of the either/or propositions mentioned above create false dichotomies. Sometimes called the “black-and-white fallacy,” sometimes the “fallacy of bifurcation or false alternatives,” the either/or fallacy all too often brushes aside possibilities. The either/or rhetoric of some politicians, for instance, ignores all sorts of alternative prospects, unforeseen events like a war, or resistance by the public to certain policies. As for my young friend, he could easily blend his ambitions, attending community college for a couple of years while continuing to work or entering college with the intent of finding a job while there.

In “[What Is the Either-Or Fallacy?](#)” Kassiani Nikolopoulou explains why we resort, often unconsciously, to this fallacy. Considering only two choices, for example, simplifies a problem. Either/or is also a tool for persuasion, falsely presenting alternatives that ignore complexities, a device we'll see frequently employed this election year. Ms. Nikolopoulou's cognitive bias—“an inherent tendency to perceive the world in terms of opposites or limited options”—is, I suspect, the most common snare set by this fallacy. “I can either go to the party or read a book at home” ignores a plethora of options.

In “[The Either/Or Fallacy](#),” Jason Southworth and Chris Swoyer provide other examples of this everyday false dilemma. Here, for example, is a mother to her son: “Are you going to college, or are you going to be a bum like the Jones boy?” Mom’s dichotomy ignores several other options, from gainful employment to enlisting in the Marines. “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em” is advice that easily yields defeat and failure. “America: Love it or Leave it” neglects to define America and love of country.

When we realize we have become entangled in the false web of a binary fallacy, two other word equations, “both/and” and “neither/nor” may provide ways of escape. Rather than choosing either/or between two medical treatments, a man afflicted with cardiovascular issues might seek help from both his physician and a homeopathic online doctor. The woman who is told by her friend, “I don’t care how much you love him, you either need to leave your husband or be miserable for the rest of your life” may apply “neither/nor” to that advice, and then search for alternatives to save her marriage.

How we construct, use, and interpret either/or propositions is important, even vital to our well-being. Sometimes the premise may actually be valid, and a problem may have only one of two solutions. Much of the time, however, we tumble into the rabbit hole of a false dichotomy, our creativity shackled, our possibilities limited to two outcomes.

If you need some practice deciphering either/or statements, you might test the validity of the above dichotomy taken from a [t-shirt](#): “Either you like bacon or you’re wrong.”

For more practice, I’ll leave you with this follow-up exercise: “Either the bacon statement is valid, or the writer brought it into play as a means of conclusion for his article.”

Have at it.

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