

# Seen and Unseen, Vonnegut, Fallacy #15



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*"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).*

As a species, humans are alone in our known universe in using symbols for rational thought. The critical question, however, is whether we can ever use rational thought to dispel the potential corruption of symbolism. Is symbolism too hot of a tool to handle?

First, we should look at the ways in which we handle language, the means by which we form and communicate thought. How do our senses aid and/or confound thought?

Secondly, we will observe that historically, as seen in the disuse of the symbols of democracy, we have a large problem with consistency. Then, we will close by looking at another logic fallacy to see how easily we can jump the tracks between logical premise and logical conclusion.

## Seen and Not Seen

There is a homely homily often heard in the countryside of Kentucky that goes, "Believe none of what you hear and only half of what you see." This useful advice has been attributed to Benjamin Franklin and Edgar Allen Poe, among others. Frederic Bastiat warned us not to leap to conclusions regarding what is seen, but to wait to learn of the unseen as well. And Henry Hazlitt informed us that economic realities are only fleshed out over both the short and the long runs, and only when we have seen all effects on all involved interests.

But hardly any pay due attention to the advice. Why do we believe so much that is not true? We believe that every picture is worth a thousand words, but a few words of logic are not worth the time of day. We pride ourselves on making judgments faster than others. We seldom stick around long enough to see that haste makes waste.

Now I want to connect this with my recent re-reading of Samuel Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*. Back in the day, in my first bout with college, I was an English major,

but via the quirk of having first mistakenly been an Electrical Engineering student (poetic license has been applied in using this word), I took a great course in Technical Writing. Our main reading was Hayakawa's book. It formed an important part of my philosophical foundation, i.e. believing damn little of what you read and even less of what you see. For in this book, much is made of how treacherous language can be because it is a primary vehicle for manipulation. But the most telling point is how what we see dominates what we believe.

But isn't this counterintuitive? Don't we use our eyes to confirm most of our incoming information, to form most of our conclusions? Think, however, of from where most of our visual input comes. Pictures. Pictures provided by others. And even if others did not intend to manipulate what we see, there are natural biases toward form, color, and movement. We tend naturally to prefer a picture with a well-fashioned caption, rather than working through the drudgery of details.

What is most appealing about the evening news on teevee? — Motion, the more frenetic the better; and supersaturated colors (flames and/or blood are good, and lots of flags); and universally recognizable forms like soldiers in battle dress.

You can make great pictures out of explosions, but illustrations of people deliberating totally suck. This is why we will remember Bush 41's trip to Japan for him throwing up at a state banquet, Bush 43's trip to China by him not being able to find a door out of the meeting room, and Obama's regard for the military through his saluting with a coffee cup in his hand. We can only see verbs, and action verbs at that — walking not talking, fighting not negotiating.

### **Vonnegut Quote #1**

*I have wanted to give Iraq a lesson in democracy — because we're experienced with it, you know. And, in democracy, after a hundred years, you have to let your slaves go. And, after a hundred and fifty years, you have to let your women vote. And, at the beginning of democracy, is that quite a bit of genocide and ethnic cleansing is quite okay. And that's what's going on now. — Kurt Vonnegut*

Kurt Vonnegut is one of my heroes. To me, he carries on the tradition of optimistic misanthropy pioneered by Shakespeare, Voltaire, Cervantes, and Twain. If you read the next section, on logical fallacy, you may correctly discern that on its face the above quote uses composition/division in a false way to condemn democracy, but here Vonnegut uses deliberate distortion to highlight the irony that he wishes to amplify.

The cruel fact is that too many people disguise their true intent by wrapping themselves in the garb of a crusade. Statists may claim an abstraction such as democracy as their cause while domination and control are their goal. Vonnegut implies here that the champions of democracy are talking out of both sides of their mouths.

### **Logic Fallacy #15 — Composition/Division**

This type of logic fallacy has two directions. The first is where one takes a specific event, or part of a system, and generalizes that that which may be true of the part must be true of the whole. One does not need to look beyond today's headlines to find examples of this: a) there has been a purported beheading in the principality of Molehillavia, therefore heads will be rolling knee-deep next in the streets of New York City, or b) Ebola has arisen in epidemic proportions in third-world environments where medical science is extremely rudimentary, so the appearance of a few cases in one of the most advanced countries in the world means a pandemic is imminent.

The converse of that fractured logic is where one takes a feature of a whole and makes an assumption that the same must exist in a part — Christmas is a happy time, therefore everyone must be happy at Christmastime. It is raining in Lexington therefore it must be raining all over Kentucky. Propaganda relies heavily on this fallacy, wherein a military may have won a battle but continues to lose the war — in fact, warmongering statists revel in that temporary turns of fortune on the battlefield never to alter the lingering truth that war is the necessary ingredient to authoritarian statism. More headlines: a) criminals use guns in specific crimes, therefore the elimination of guns will curb both crimes and criminals, or b) pedophiles seem to strike in areas where child activities are present, therefore we should curtail child activities. (I acknowledge that this is an area for more debate — certain notorious activities should probably be ended, but not because of pedophilia in any strict sense.)

But one of the reasons why composition/division can be such an effective fallacy is that composition/division is an extremely effective analytical tool for testing what is true. All investigative learning is a repetitive process of combining similar things and separating dissimilar things. The fallacy arises when, either deliberately or inadvertently, the learning is not seen through to verification or is subverted by ulterior motive.

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In living a voluntary life, I try to place mastery of symbolic thought process at the very pinnacle of my practice. Use those eyes, use those ears, use that taste, touch and smell. We have the same senses as all of the higher life forms, but we have the additional challenge of making those senses comport with symbolism for the purpose of determining truth. If we fail we will not survive. If we fail, evolution may or may not supersede us with a species that can survive and pass rational symbolism onward. Voluntaryists may be the

last best hope.

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