

Recognizing Faulty Reasoning

As you read in this chapter, wealthy landowners in the 1700s were replacing medieval strip farms with large, enclosed fields that could be cultivated more efficiently and more profitably. This resulted in grave misfortune for thousands of England’s peasants, who were forced to leave the land on which they had worked for years. The text below is a fictional conversation between such a peasant and the wealthy landowner for whom he and his family have worked for generations. The peasant has been put off the land and is now pleading his case before “his lord.” ♦ *As you read the conversation, think about common errors made during discussions. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

“My Lord, I’m here to plead with you for my life. I beseech you to allow me and my family, who have farmed this land for you and your father before you for a hundred years, to continue working this land that has been our home these many years.”

“Peasant Joe, you know that is impossible. All the land is being enclosed to make larger and more efficient fields. Times are changing and you have to move on.”

“Move on to where? If I can’t work the fields, how will I feed my family? Farming is the only work I know.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t need as many workers now because the fields are larger. It’s a much more profitable system, Peasant Joe. It’s impossible for you to stay.”

“I’ll be ruined. I knew when that old servant lady of yours gave me the evil eye I’d be falling into misfortune soon. And at your hands, too. Why should I be surprised now?”

“I knew when that old servant lady of yours gave me the evil eye I’d be falling into misfortune soon.”

“Now, now. This is the modern world, Peasant Joe. We can’t be hanging onto old ways of doing things. Out with the old and in with the new. England will profit greatly from the new system.”

“Not all of England. Not England’s workers. We’ll just suffer, worse than we’ve suffered in the past. But what do you care? You and your dirty dealing ways, cheating and lying to anyone so you can live the life of a ‘nobleman.’”

“That’s enough! Get out of my sight before I have you thrown in jail, you ignorant peasant!”

Questions to Think About

1. What types of faulty reasoning do you find in the conversation above? Give examples from the dialogue to support your answer.
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think that the landowner uses the type of reasoning that he does?

Linking Past and Present

3. Faulty reasoning is harder to detect when you are an eyewitness or participant in a debate than it is when you are reading the text of an editorial, conversation, or other writing. This is because speakers can often obscure their faulty reasoning by displaying strong emotions that distract others during a debate. For example, a speaker may stand up, raise the voice, or

otherwise attempt to intimidate an opponent. Meanwhile, however, the actual words are mere repetitions of what has already been said or show other flaws of reasoning. First, choose a partner and act out the debate. Both participants should state their arguments quietly and calmly. One debater should use faulty reasoning. Then, act out the situation again, this time having the faulty reasoner use emotional techniques such as those mentioned above to win the argument. Other emotional approaches can be used as well, such as trying to elicit pity. After you have staged both debates, discuss with the class the effectiveness of such techniques and how they can be counteracted.