

The Logical Failures of Food Fads

Why studying the humanities can help you live a healthy life.

By Alan Levinovitz

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In a recent **viral essay** for *Gawker*, Yvette d’Entremont (aka the Science Babe) called out food activist Vani Hari (aka the Food Babe) on her “bullshit.” While d’Entremont makes effective use of science, the heart of her criticism is philosophical. Some highlights:

- Failure to define terms: Hari never specifies what she means by “toxin” and “chemical.”
- Bad logic: If a substance is dangerous in one context, Hari assumes it must be dangerous in all contexts.
- No interest in dialogue: Detractors are banned from the Food Babe’s Facebook page.

It takes a decent background in statistics and biochemistry to understand how Hari **tortures studies to fit her agenda**. Thankfully, spotting the fatal flaws in her arguments requires no scientific knowledge whatsoever. Anyone with a rudimentary grasp of rhetoric and logic who reads *The Food Babe Way* will be overwhelmed by tautologies, fallacies, non-sequiturs, and false dichotomies.

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It’s not just Hari. Consider Rozin’s “love of nature,” which is used to justify virtually every diet on the market, from gluten-free (modern **Frankenwheat** is unnatural!) to raw food (cooking is unnatural!). It turns out that the “**appeal to nature**” is a well-established fallacy, plagued by **question begging**—*natural things are good because unnatural things are bad*—in addition to the inherent vagueness of the term *natural*. Nevertheless, people demand all-natural foods and dutifully avoid unnatural chemicals, oblivious to the irrational foundation of their preferences.

Or take this utterly irresponsible anecdote from neurologist David Perlmutter's forthcoming **Brain Maker**: "Consider Jason, the 12-year-old boy with severe autism who could barely talk in full sentences. In chapter 5 you'll read about how he physically transformed into an engaging boy after a vigorous probiotic protocol."

Like so many diet gurus and faith healers, Perlmutter (best known for the best-seller **Grain Brain**) routinely exploits another well-established fallacy, known as **post hoc ergo propter hoc**: If Event B follows Event A, then Event A must have caused Event B.

YOU DON'T NEED ADVANCED SCIENCE TO RESIST FOOD FADS—JUST A LITTLE BIT OF LOGIC
The same fallacy often contributes to parents' belief that vaccination led to their child's developmental delays.

Strangely, the philosophical training that helps to identify **pseudoscientific bullshit** is largely absent from the American educational system. We pay lip service to critical thinking skills, but high schools rarely offer courses in formal logic. The vast majority of college graduates don't understand the difference between induction and deduction. And it's entirely possible for you to graduate with a degree in chemistry yet remain unfamiliar with thinkers like Descartes and Bacon whose philosophical innovations paved the way for your knowledge.

Study of persuasive techniques is also missing from the curriculum. Unless my students happen to take a class on Aristotle, it's a good bet they'll never learn to distinguish between *pathos* (appeal to emotion), *ethos* (appeal to character), and *logos* (appeal to logic). This leaves them especially vulnerable to nutritional evangelists, who, like their religious forebears, are heavy on *pathos* and *ethos*, but woefully lacking in *logos*.

At this point it would be nice to rest my case. Since food fads are based on irrational ideology shot through with terrible reasoning, I've proved that the antidote to food fads is teaching people logic and rhetoric. But as any good philosopher would no doubt object, the argument is seriously deficient. I assume that teaching these skills is possible, but some cognitive scientists have claimed **it really isn't**. I assume that knowing about fallacies makes people less likely to accept fallacious reasoning, yet I provide no empirical evidence to support my claim. And I assume that basing dietary decisions on mythic narratives is inherently undesirable, without ever explaining why people who don't are better-off.

Wait a second. What am I doing? I mean, everyone knows that diet gurus are way more persuasive than philosophers. Better to imitate the Food Babe if I want to convince people, right? Besides, I've got my **own book to sell**. Here goes:

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I am a small scale farmer who tries to farm sustainably, by which I mean building up good soil structure, rotating crops, using cover crops for organic matter, etc. [More...](#)

-Erratic

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We are facing an epidemic of idiocy. Dr. Oz dispenses the nation's most popular medical advice. The Clintons' personal doctor compares the Food Babe to **Martin Luther King**. Clean eating has given birth to new, **horrific eating disorders**. It's enough to terrify anyone who cares about the mental health of our country and our children. Fortunately, there's a simple cure! Unlike today, ancient civilizations such as the Greeks trained their children in logic and rhetoric. As a result, everyone thought rationally and no one held unjustified beliefs. Food Babes and grain brains were unheard-of. People ate all the gluten they wanted without a care in the world. Incredibly, the reduced stress meant they lived longer and never suffered from neurological disorders like Alzheimer's and ADHD.

Let's follow their lead. I promise: With just 10 days of researching logical fallacies and rhetorical techniques, you'll be on the road to wellness! It may give you a headache at first, but don't worry. That's just the toxic beliefs leaving your brain. Before long you'll feel like a brand-new person, capable of laughing at the latest nutritional dogma and eating your dinner in peace.

Trust me—I'm a **doctor**.

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