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Appeal to Fear

argumentum in terrorem

(also known as: argumentum ad metum, argument from adverse consequences, scare tactics)

Description: When fear, not based on evidence or reason, is being used as the primary motivator to get others to accept an idea, proposition, or conclusion.

Logical Form:

If you don't accept X as true, something terrible will happen to you. Therefore, X must be true.

Example #1:

If we don't bail out the big automakers, the US economy will collapse. Therefore, we need to bail out the automakers.

Explanation: There might be plenty of legitimate reasons to bail out the automakers -- reasons based on evidence and probability—but a “collapsed economy” is not one of them.

Example #2:

*Timmy: Mom, what if I don't believe in God?
 Mom: Then you burn in Hell forever. Why do you ask?
 Timmy: No reason.*

Explanation: Timmy’s faith is waning, but Mom, like most moms, is very good at scaring the Hell, in this case, into, Timmy. This is a fallacy because Mom provided no evidence that disbelief in God will lead to an eternity of

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suffering in Hell, but because the possibility is terrifying to Timmy, he "accepts" the proposition (to believe in God), despite the lack of actual evidence.

Exception: When fear is not the primary motivator, but a supporting one and the probabilities of the fearful event happening are honestly disclosed, it would not be fallacious.

Timmy: Mom, what if I don't believe in God?

Mom: Then I would hope that you don't believe in God for the right reasons, and not because your father and I didn't do a good enough job telling you why you should believe in him, including the possibility of what some believe is eternal suffering in Hell.

Timmy: That's a great answer mom. I love you. You are so much better than my mom in the other example.

Tip: Think in terms of probabilities, not possibilities. Many things are possible, including a lion busting into your home at night and mauling you to death -- but it is very, very improbable. People who use fear to manipulate you, count on you to be irrational and emotional rather than reasonable and calculating. Prove them wrong.

References:

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