Like many who charge their foes with a double standard, Rush Limbaugh fell into a logical trap.

I love it when it’s said that folks on different ends of the political spectrum should “talk out” their differences. This sounds good in theory but is fatally flawed in practice. Number one, as I have learned from Daniel Kahneman’s excellent book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, humans are really, really bad at grasping causation, trends, and statistical reality; at any sort of prediction; and at the other operations that form the basis of most political discourse. Number two, a sort of bogosity multiplier effect comes into play when you are advocating for a position or candidate you are already committed to, all the more so when you are arguing against someone who’s on the other side. It almost goes without saying that nothing that comes out of your mouth will convince others or even cause them to ideologically budge. Beyond that, almost nothing you say, unless you’re an unusual person indeed, has any fundamental value. (I hasten to acknowledge that I am not an unusual person indeed.)

The most common types of bogus arguments people make, and then some, are enumerated on a Wikipedia page called “List of fallacies,” which I like to reread every few months or so, or even more often if I catch myself feeling hopeful about the possibilities of nonbogus discourse. A selective list of the entries will give you a bit of the flavor:

- Argument from ignorance
- Begging the question
- Black swan blindness
- Cherry picking
- Fallacy of the single cause
- False dilemma
- If by whiskey
- Red herring
- Slippery slope
- Straw man

During election season, a fun activity might be Fallacy Bingo, in which you and your friends watch a presidential debate, pencils at the
ready, and see who can fill up a fallacy card fastest.

My own favorite fallacy, which I claim to have identified and named, is not on the list. I call it the Double Standard Fallacy, and Rush Limbaugh engaged in it a few weeks ago, when he was still defending having called Sandra Fluke a prostitute and a slut. He said:

_Talk about a double standard. Rappers can say anything they want about women. It’s called art. And they win awards._

Here’s another example, this time with liberals charging a double standard. They have been noting how Fox News and other conservative outlets are ripping President Obama for current high gasoline prices; then they replay Fox News commentary from the Bush years arguing that the president can’t _control_ gas prices. Double standard again.

The accusation can be represented as $I^1(X) + I^2(-X)$, where $I^1$ and $I^2$ are two incarnations of the same issue, $X$ is one position adopted by your foe (usually approval or disapproval), and $-X$ is the opposite position, also adopted by your foe.

The fallacy is not that the people making the charge are incorrect. Limbaugh is right that those who criticized him, or most of them, have been silent on the matter of rappers’ referring to “hos” and suchlike. The liberals are correct that the many of the same commentators who once said a president can’t control gas prices are now saying the opposite.

The problem is that, in order for this charge to truly stick to an opponent, accusers must take one of two additional rhetorical or logical steps, and they almost never do. The first option is for the accuser to demonstrate that he or she isn’t following the _converse_ double standard, that is, espousing $I^1(-X) + I^2(X)$. Limbaugh would have to show that he is fine with rappers’ language (not true), and liberals would have to show that they never bashed Republican presidents when gas prices were high (not true, either).

The other option is the “but that’s different” ploy: to make the case that $I^1 \neq I^2$. I don’t think this can be done in the gas-price example. Limbaugh would have to somehow argue that rappers’ misogyny is
bad (because they really mean it? because they show violent images along with it?) while all he did was use thoughtless or “inappropriate” language and maybe a bit too much hyperbole. Needless to say, he didn’t make such an argument.

To be sure, some double-standard chargers do go the extra mile. The Catholic Church—to pick an institution that could use some good press these days—criticizes pro-choiceers who are against the death penalty for being inconsistent in their attitude toward human life. Whether you agree or not, the charge is at least deserves a response, because the church itself is consistent, in being opposed to both abortion and capital punishment. On the same issues, those on both sides frequently do make the $I^1 \neq I^2$ argument, giving reasons that abortion is justified while execution is not (or vice versa). Again, agree or not, their position is at least credible.

But these are exceptions. The truth is that all of us (except the very unusual) are guilty of double standards, criticizing our foes for the same things we would countenance or applaud in our allies. Liberals rip Newt Gingrich for philandering but defended Bill Clinton (or at least gave him a pass). What do you know? Conservatives followed just the opposite pattern. Ninety-five percent of the time, when you hear someone accuse someone else of following a double standard, you can just stop listening. And that’s no fallacy.