Reductio ad Absurdum

The phrase "reductio ad absurdum" is Latin for "reduction to absurdity". It is the name that philosophers give to an argument of a certain form. In this argument form, we begin with an assumption, and show that this assumption, along with some other true premises, yields a contradiction. If we can do this, then we know that the original assumption must be false.

Here's an example:

Joe: "Everything that McDonalds makes is delicious."

Jim: "Do you like the Fillet 'O Fish sandwich?"

Joe: "No, I don't think it's delicious at all."

Jim: "Wait a minute. If everything that McDonalds makes is delicious, and McDonalds makes Fillet 'O Fish sandwiches, then Fillet 'O Fish sandwiches are delicious. But you said that Fillet 'O Fish sandwiches are not delicious. Your statements imply that the Fillet 'O Fish sandwich is both delicious and not delicious, which is a **contradiction**. So by reductio ad absurdum, it is false that everything that McDonalds makes is delicious."

Notice that when we talk about contradictions in philosophy, we are talking about something very specific. A contradiction is a sentence of the form "A and not A".