

Informal Fallacies from Unwarranted Premises

Prior to this, we looked at informal fallacies where a non-deductive argument masquerades as a deductive argument. Here, we will look at a different type of informal fallacy, where an *unjustified assumption* is utilized. As before, these fallacious arguments never rationally *compel* you to accept the conclusion, insofar as their assumptions are unwarranted. But again, if an argument has an unwarranted assumption, it does not follow that the conclusion is false. It just means that the argument should not be fully persuasive, and that the conclusion can thus far be rationally denied.

Circular Argument, or “Begging the Question”: *Petitio Principii*

To beg the question is to assume the truth of what one seeks to prove, in the effort to prove it.

God exists, since the Bible says so. After all, every word of the Bible is true, since the Bible was revealed to us by God.

This argument assumes there is a God who has revealed the Bible to us. But that is what the argument is trying to prove, i.e. that God exists. So the argument won't convince anyone who doesn't already believe in God. The argument goes in a circle: It starts from the very claim it wants as a conclusion.

[Note: The mass media has developed a bastardized use of the phrase “to beg the question” where it means roughly “to raise the question.” This is *not* how the phrase is used in academic philosophy.]

N.B. All circular arguments are deductive: If the premises are true, then—trivially—so is the conclusion. (After all, the conclusion would be assumed in the premises.) Yet circular arguments are always fallacious because they are *ineffective* in proving their conclusions. A “proof” that appeals to its conclusion as a premise does not really function to *prove* that conclusion.

Slippery Slope

A slippery slope argues against a proposal by suggesting that it would lead to worse and worse results, without sufficient evidence that it would have such results.

If you grant homosexuals the right to marry, then pretty soon you'll have to allow polygamy and polyandry, and eventually bestiality. So gay marriage must be opposed.

This argument is fallacious since, in the absence further evidence, there's no reason to think that gay marriage will actually lead to more extreme practices. Granted, it is conceivable that there is such evidence. But a “slippery slope” just asserts such a thing without providing the evidence, and instead just insists that the idea leads to absurdities.

But as this suggests, not all slippery slopes are fallacious. For if there is sufficient evidence for a catastrophic chain reaction, then the argument is just an evidence-based case that the proposal has bad outcomes. (But: Beware of the Nirvana Fallacy.) Here are two fairly legit “slippery slopes:”

Look, you’re a recovering alcoholic. So if you have just one drink to celebrate the new year, you’ll probably end up having two. And if you have two drinks, you’re likely to have three. And so on, until you’re totally blitzed and you do something you really regret. So just don’t start.

Lawyer: If we do not punish this man for killing his wife’s lover, then this sets a legal precedent for excusing vigilantism. This would excuse many others for their crimes, and ultimately would weaken the of the legal system, and lead to more social disorder.

Dubious Dilemma

If the premises offer only a *non-exhaustive* list of possibilities, the argument presents a dubious dilemma. Often, the non-exhaustive list consists only in a single “either-or” premise.

Example:

- (1) Bill Gates is registered either as a Democrat or a Republican.
- (2) Bill Gates is not a registered Republican.
- (3) Therefore, Bill Gates is registered as a Democrat.

The fallacy is in ignoring some of the other possibilities for Gates. Specifically, the first premise fails to mention the possibility Gates is registered with some third party, or perhaps isn’t registered to vote at all. In contrast, the following argument contains no dubious dilemma.

- (1) Bill Gates is either a registered Republican or not.
- (2) So, if Bill Gates is a registered Republican, then he is a registered Republican.

Here, (1) expresses a dilemma that is logically exhaustive of the possibilities.

Guess what? Sometimes an argument with a “dubious dilemma” isn’t really fallacious. That occurs when the “either-or” premise is not vulnerable to any real doubt, even though the options are not logically exhaustive. For example, suppose a judge sentences a criminal to 30 days in prison with a \$5000 bail. Then you might reason:

- (1) The convict will either pay \$5000 or go to jail for 30 days.
- (2) He is unable to pay \$5000.
- (3) So, he will go to prison.

Other things equal, there won't be any serious doubt about whether (1) is true. So it won't be fallacious, even though it has the form of a dubious dilemma, i.e., even though the options are not *logically* exhaustive.

Bonus: Perfectionists often commit the fallacy of dubious dilemma. "Either it's perfect or it's crap!" This of course ignores the possibility that something might fall short of *perfect*, but still be amazingly good.

Besides perfectionism, there are other examples of "black or white" thinking which commit the fallacy. "Either human beings are basically good or fundamentally selfish." This ignores the possibility that humans are motivated by *both* altruistic *and* egoistic instincts, or that the same action may be motivated by altruism or by egoism *to different degrees on different occasions*.

Aside: Logicians typically call "dubious dilemma" the fallacy of "false dilemma" or "false dichotomy." However that may be misleading. The problem is not necessarily that the "either-or" claim is *false*. Sometimes, the flaw is merely that the premise is *dubious*. So for instance, in the first example, it could be *true* that Gates is registered as a Democrat or a Republican, even though it may be unknown to us. It thus seems clearer to say just that the dilemma is "dubious."