Fallacies of Presumption

If you’re not OUTRAGED
you’re not paying attention
Fallacies of Presumption

• Fallacies of presumption are arguments that rely on an unwarranted presumption.

• The concept of “warrant” is an important one:
  – Having warrant means having “good reason”.
  – If the sheriff has a warrant for your arrest, then the sheriff has a “good reason” to bring you in.
Copi’s Fs of Presumption

• P1: Complex Question.
• P2: False cause.
• P3: Begging the question.
• P4: Accident.
• P5: Converse Accident.
• P6: Suppressed Evidence.
• P7: False Dichotomy.
Complex Question

• AKA: Loaded Question.
• AKA: *Plurium Interrogationum*
  – Many questions.

• A complex question is one with implied presumptions.
• Asking: “How do you like Critical Thinking?”
  – Implies you are taking critical thinking?
• Important technique in forensic examination.
Fallacy of Complex question (P1)

- Fallacy of complex question is committed when a question has a false or disputed presupposition.

- Where were you when you pulled the trigger? Assumes you “pulled the trigger”.
Persuasiveness.

• We all depend on background information to conduct our everyday lives.
• Much of this information is tacitly accepted by everyone around us.
• It is hard to notice when some new, questionable presumption is slipped into the conversation.
Special Case: Loaded Question

• The loaded question is one in which no answer avoids the complex question fallacy.

• Eg: have you stopped plagiarizing essays?...
  “No” implies you still are...
  “Yes” implies you have in the past.
A series of examples...

"Why should merely cracking down on terrorism help to stop it, when that method hasn't worked in any other country? Why are we so hated in the Muslim world? What did our government do there to bring this horror home to all those innocent Americans? And why don't we learn anything, from our free press, about the gross ineptitude of our state agencies? about what's really happening in Afghanistan? about the pertinence of Central Asia's huge reserves of oil and natural gas? about the links between the Bush and the bin Laden families?"
Simpler examples

• Have you quit using drugs?

• Have you stopped beating your spouse?

• Why are you lying to me?
False cause (P2)

• AKA: *post hoc, ergo procter hoc.*
  – After this, therefore because of this.
• AKA: *cum hoc, ergo procter hoc.*
  – With this, therefore because of this.
• AKA: *non causa pro causa.*
  – Non-cause for cause.

• Form: False identification of cause based on co-incidence.
Persuasiveness

• We attribute causes fairly freely in everyday life.
• There is usually very little cost to being wrong about such things.
  – Wearing the same socks to every hockey game doesn’t risk anything serious.
  – Most superstitions are causal fallacies.
• Harm is likely in ignoring the actual cause.
  – Thinking a witch caused your disease makes you less likely to investigate the actual cause.
Examples

• Rooster crowing causes the sun to rise.
  – Causes reversed, sun causes the rooster to crow.

• Spontaneous generation: Life will emerge from inert matter under favourable circumstances.
  – Having a few rags, some grain doesn’t beget mice.
  – Disproved by Pasteur.
More Examples

• The constellation in pre-eminence during the month of your birth will determine your personality. (Astrology).

• The year of your birth will determine your personality. (Chinese Zodiac.)

• Wolves howling impugns disaster.
  • Farm hands know they can steal a chicken whenever the wolves howl.
WATCH WHAT I CAN MAKE PAVLOV DO. AS SOON AS I DROOL, HE'LL SMILE AND WRITE IN HIS LITTLE BOOK.
Special Case: The slippery slope

- AKA: the domino fallacy.

- In the slippery slope argument, the effect of one cause is the cause of the next, *ad infinitum*.

Form: X is the cause of Y, but Y is the cause of Z etc. Z is undesirable (or false). Therefore X is undesirable (or false).

Since a chain of causes could result in something you don’t want, you cannot accept the initial condition.
Eg: Slippery Slope.

- If you accept gay marriage, you won’t be able to have laws against...
  - "Why will gay marriage set the table for polygamy? Because there's no place to stop..."
  - “…it is certain that some self-possessed judge somewhere will soon rule that three men, or three women, can marry. Or five men and two women.”
Reply to Slippery Slope.

• The slippery slope “presumes” there is no stopping point between the initial cause and the final position.
• Reject this presumption.
• Demonstrate (if possible) that there are one or more places the “slope” can stop.
• Eg: In the gay marriage debate: the issue is gender of people, not #.
Slippery Slope

I REJECT YOUR PROPOSAL.

IS THERE ANY PARTICULAR REASON THIS TIME?

AT MY LEVEL OF MANAGEMENT I DON'T HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO APPROVE ANYTHING IMPORTANT.

BUT I DO HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO REJECT THINGS.

IF I DON'T REJECT PROPOSALS, THERE'S NOTHING FOR ME TO DO.

IF I DO NOTHING I'LL GET FIRED. I MIGHT NEVER GET ANOTHER JOB. I COULD STARVE TO DEATH.

SO I HAVE TO REJECT EVERYTHING YOU PROPOSE OR ELSE I MIGHT DIE.

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?

CAN YOU REPHRASE THAT QUESTION IN THE FORM OF A PROPOSAL?
Slippery Slope

1. I reject your proposal.
2. Is there any particular reason this time?
3. At my level of management I don't have the authority to approve anything important.
4. But I do have the authority to reject things.
5. If I don't reject proposals, there's nothing for me to do.
6. If I do nothing I'll get fired. I might never get another job. I could starve to death.
7. So I have to reject everything you propose or else I might die.
8. What am I supposed to do now?
9. Can you rephrase that question in the form of a proposal?

Slippery Slope!
Begging the question (P3)

- AKA: Petitio principii.
  - Literally: “assuming the 1st part.”
- AKA: Circular reasoning.

- Form: X, therefore X.

- Usually, X is buried along with other details in the premises.
Valid?

• An argument is valid when the conclusion cannot be false when the premises are true. Since the conclusion is (one of) the premise(s). This requirement is satisfied. (trivially).

Begging the question is a fallacy that is also a valid argument.

No counterexample possible.
Persuasive?

• Since argument “sounds” valid this is a highly persuasive fallacy.
• The presumption is hidden in the premise.
• Reply is to identify and reject the presumption.
Example

• The Bible is the word of God. The word of God cannot be doubted, and the Bible states that the Bible is true. Therefore the Bible must be true.

• Active euthanasia is morally acceptable. It is a decent, ethical thing to help another human being escape suffering through death.
Tougher examples

• Murder is morally wrong. So active euthanasia is morally wrong.
  – This argument presumes the hidden premise:
    • Active euthanasia is murder: which is exactly the question under debate.

• Capital punishment is justified for the crimes of murder and kidnapping because it is quite legitimate and appropriate that someone be put to death for having committed such hateful and inhuman acts.
Special Case: Question Begging Epithets.

• Sometimes, the question begging is done by identification often involving emotionally charged language.

• Similar (possible overlap) with Circumstantialist Ad hominem.

• Eg: “This criminal is charged with violently murdering the innocent victim”.
More examples of Begging Epithets.

• “Our department is becoming infested with creationists.”

• I wouldn’t believe anything Jon Stewart says, he’s a Liberal, New York Jew. (Bill O Reilly)

• The Ground Zero Mosque should not be built on a place that is sacred to most Americans.
Seriously?

The Bible is the word of God

Because the Bible tells us so

but how can you be sure it’s the word of God?

but how do you know it’s infallible?

but why believe the Bible?
Fallacy of Accident (p4).

- AKA: Sweeping Generalization.
- AKA: *Dicto simpliciter.*
  - (saying without qualification)

- Form: Usually X is an A. Therefore, in this case, X is an A.

- Copi does two versions:
  - Where X is a thing, and A is a category;
  - Where X is an action, and A is a principle.
Persuasiveness.

• Since “usually” X is an A, it seems reasonable to presume this will be true in every case.
• However, exceptions are inevitable.

• How much trust would you place in an airplane that is “usually” safe.
Counterexample

• She is from Beverly Hills, so she must be rich and famous...
Examples.

• Plato’s example:
  – You have been entrusted with your friends sword with the promise to return it when requested. Your friend, after a drunken quarrel with a mutual friend, demands you fulfill your promise and return the weapon. Do you?

• Birds can fly, and Petey the penguin is a bird, so Petey can fly.
Racism and Accident

• It is common to justify racist attitudes on the basis of common stereotypes. Even if these stereotypes have any justification in fact, it is still the fallacy of accident to apply them to particular people.

• Eg: White people can’t dance, therefore...
Genetic Fallacy

• Subcategory of F of Accident.

  – Form: The origin of someone/something is the basis for a presupposition.

• Hans is from Germany, so you can be sure his notes are meticulously organized.

• I’m from friendly Manitoba, so you can be sure I have booster cables, and know how to use them.
Converse Accident (p5).

- AKA: Hasty Generalization.

- Form: A few X’s are A’s
  Therefore All X’s are A’s.

Example: My Uncle Ted drank like a fish and he lived to be 94, so being an alcoholic doesn’t affect your health!
Persuasiveness

• When you are cooking pasta, and you find a single strand cooked completely, you can be sure the whole pot-full is ready to eat.

• The basis for generalizing about entire populations based on representative samples is the subject of inductive logic.

• WE are not particularly good at judging adequacy here.
More examples

• If we allow sick people to use marijuana, then we should allow everyone to use marijuana.

• You let a student with a diagnosed disability avoid writing one exam, so you should let me get out of my exams.

• I loved the song “don’t stop believing” so I’m sure all music from the ‘80’s is wonderful.
Anecdote

• Hasty generalizations are often based on individual testimony, rather than from aggregated results.
  – "I interviewed ten people on Main Street in Greenwood on Friday night, and they all stated they would rather be there than watching TV. I conclude that the folks in Greenwood don't like to watch TV on Friday night."
Accident vs. Converse Accident

• Watch for the position of the general statement.
  – If it is in the premise(s) it is Accident.
  – If it is in the conclusion it is Converse Accident.

Accident:
Most P’s are S’s
Therefore
This P is an S

Converse Accident
This P is an S
Therefore
Most P’s are S’s
Suppressed Evidence (P6)

• AKA: Cherry Picking

• Form: X is sufficient information for Y. Therefore Y is true.

• Fallacy is committed when an argument falsely presumes to have presented sufficient evidence. Usually it is contrary evidence that is ignored.
Counterexample

• Tobacco companies routinely suppressed evidence that their nicotine was an addictive substance. At the same time, they were developing varieties of tobacco that included increased levels of nicotine so as to increase the addictive nature of their product.

• Recently these companies have admitted they suppressed this evidence, and now accept that nicotine is addictive...
More examples

• Indie rocker Hawksley Workman tells the story of his father who was selling a canoe he found at the dump. When asked “does it float” he replied: “she’s a beauty”.

• Car salesmen usually don’t tell you what’s wrong with the car.
U.S. Mortgage Collapse

• The recent economic recession was caused (in part) by the use of “sub-prime” mortgages that made getting a 1st mortgage too easy.

• These mortgages were designed to have low initial interest rates, but which dramatically increased in a few years. These increases were in the “fine print” and many mortgage holders were never informed of these details.
False Dichotomy (P7)

• AKA: Black and White Fallacy.
• AKA: Either/Or Fallacy.
• AKA: False Dilemma.

• Form: Either P or Q
  Not P
  Therefore Q (where either P or Q is false)

Eg: Pres. Bush: You’re either with me or against the troops!
Disjunction

• Statements where the major logical operator is “or” are called disjunction.
• The Latin name for such statements is “dichotomy”.
• In ordinary language, it is not clear when “or” means:
  – One or the other but not both.
  – One or the other and possibly both.

• Consider:
  – You can have pie or cake for dessert.
  – Would you like cream or sugar for your coffee?
Counterexample?

• Another Valid argument form that is also a fallacy.
• No technical counterexample possible.
• However consider:
  – You can live in Toronto or Ottawa, you don’t live in ottawa, so you must live in Toronto.
  – No, I live in winnipeg.
Persuasiveness

- Like Begging the question, the persuasiveness of the false dichotomy stems from its valid form fooling us into accepting the argument.
- The argument is a fallacy because of its false premise, not because of its form.
Examples:

• We must either cut social programs or have a huge deficit next year, and we can’t accept a deficit, so we must cut social programs.

• You can have jobs or trees. Since everyone needs a job, the environment will have to look after itself.

• You can have faith or accept the scientific orthodoxy that evolution is true.
Visually false dichotomy
FALSE DICHOTOMIES
You either love em'... or you're some kinda pinko commie terrorist Dixie Chick fan.
End: Fallacies of Presumption

The people who now doubt whether or not Saddam really has WMD programs, chemical and bacteriological in particular, are really two types. Either they work for Saddam or they're doing human imitation of an ostrich."--former CIA director James Woolsey, on Powell's UN speech

It's a blot. I'm the one who presented it on behalf of the United States to the world, and [it] will always be a part of my record. It was painful. It's painful now."--Colin Powell, looking back on his UN speech, Sep.8, 2005