

challenge and hence improve themselves. They develop habits of dependency, and many develop the symptoms of neurosis and other psychological disorders. Can we afford a generation of weak, dependent people unsuited for the demands of contemporary society?

In this example the arguer opposes a strict grading policy by claiming that it will ultimately lead to "a generation of weak, dependent people." The first step in the causal chain—that strict grading leads to frustration—is perhaps plausible. But from that point on the series of occurrences is unlikely. There is no good reason to believe that harsh grading will lead to expectations of failure, withdrawal from responsibility, and eventually dependency or neurosis. Thus, the arguer commits the fallacy of slippery slope.

To recognize the slippery slope fallacy, look for an argument claiming that a certain practice or event will initiate a series of events ultimately leading to some undesirable consequence.

3.15 Begging the Question

Begging the question is the fallacy of assuming as true the very point under question. Suppose the question is whether God exists, and a person argues for the affirmative on the grounds that 'God's existence is clearly stated in the Bible, and the Bible is the divine word of God'. The arguer is not providing an independent reason for God's existence; rather the arguer is assuming the existence of God already in the reasons he or she gives. This is made clear by exposing the argument:

Example 46

1. The Bible asserts that God exists.
2. The Bible is the divine word of God.

3. Therefore, God exists.

The argument is valid. Indeed, arguments that beg the question are usually valid. However, premise (2) is true only if the conclusion (3) is true. In other words, the premise does not offer independent support for the conclusion; it assumes the conclusion. Thus, the argument assumes the very thing that it purports to prove. A person using an argument of this form is often said to be guilty of "circular reasoning," for, as you can see, the support for the conclusion is itself supported by the conclusion.

There are various forms of question begging. The example above illustrates the type of question begging in which the premise itself rests upon or assumes the conclusion it is meant to support. Usually the fallacy is not as obvious as this. In other cases question begging occurs when the arguer uses a premise that is merely a restatement of the conclusion. The premise asserts the conclusion in different words, perhaps so subtly that the arguer may not notice. Consider this example:

Example 47

It is plain to see that suicide is morally wrong because, as any thinking person will admit, no one is ever justified in taking his or her own life.

The example claims that suicide is morally wrong because it is not justified. Saying that it is not justified is merely another way of saying that it is morally wrong. Thus, the arguer has not advanced the issue, for the issue is precisely whether suicide is morally justified.

Question begging also occurs when a question is expressed in such a way that a certain position or a certain answer is already assumed. Consider these two examples:

Example 48

I'm sorry I missed your class today, Professor Hart. Did I miss anything important?

Example 49

Mr. President, are you going to support further unnecessary military spending?

The first question carries the implication that nothing of importance takes place in the class and missing it is thus of little consequence. The second question assumes, before hearing the president's answer, that the military spending is unnecessary. A related form of question begging is called the *complex question*, so called because it typically hides more than one question and assumes an answer, usually incriminating, to one of them. The classic humorous question 'Are you still beating your wife?' is a complex question. It actually involves two questions:

1. Do you beat your wife?
2. Given that you beat your wife, do you still do it?

The original question leaves the respondent no simple yes or no reply, for it assumes already that the answer to (1) is yes. Notice that if the respondent says no, the implication is that he *did* beat his wife. If he answers yes, then again he implies that he beats his wife. Thus, either way he incriminates himself. The only response to such a question is to refuse to answer it as stated and to take it apart, as it were, so that it can be dealt with. Thus, one might say, 'You assume that I beat my wife; and I have never beaten her'.

To recognize the fallacy of begging the question, look for an argument, reply, or question that assumes already the very issue under debate. Be aware that a question-begging argument may appear to offer legitimate, independent support, but on closer examination a premise in fact either itself rests upon the conclusion or restates the conclusion in different words.

3.16 Straw Man

The *straw man* fallacy occurs when an arguer responds to an opponent's argument by misrepresenting it in a manner that makes it appear more vulnerable than it really is, proceeds to attack that argument, and implies that he or she has defeated the opponent. It is called the straw man fallacy because, rather than attacking the "real man," the opponent sets up and knocks over a "straw man."

One form of the straw man fallacy involves a misrepresentation of an opponent's position as much too strong and therefore unacceptable. For example, in the argument below the arguer interprets an inductive argument as a deductive argument and shows that it is invalid.

Example 50

Don't be fooled by statistics showing some sort of correlation between smoking and lung cancer. Any logic student can tell you that it does not necessarily follow that a person will get cancer from smoking cigarettes.

The arguer misrepresents a causal correlation between smoking and lung cancer as a necessary connection and then easily provides an argument against it. The arguer thus appears to have a relevant response to the opponent's position, when in fact no such necessary connection is intended by the opponent.

Another example of interpreting an opponent's position in an unacceptably strong way is this:

Example 51

Councilman Winters says that all homeowners should be required to put fences around their swimming pools in order to warn children. But we all know that any child who really wants to get to a neighbor's pool will find some way to get over any fence.

The arguer is probably right, but Councilman Winters does not claim that putting up fences makes it impossible for children to gain access to pools. The arguer is unfairly interpreting Councilman Winter's argument as involving an extremely strong and rather implausible claim.

Another form of the straw man fallacy occurs when an arguer represents an opponent's position as crucially depending upon some rather minor point which he or she then proceeds to attack. In this kind of case the arguer's response attributes too little to the opponent. Consider this example:

Example 52

Robert Ardrey and others have argued for the theory of evolution by adducing evidence that humans evolved

from a rather smallish, apelike hominid, Australopithecus africanus, who, they say, was an aggressive, territorial hunter and carnivore. In their zeal to establish this theory of theirs, they overlook one crucial fact: we are not all carnivores! How does their theory of descent from the apes account for the fact that many humans, indeed, most humans in the world, live on a diet of vegetables and grains, not meat?

The arguer misconstrues the theory of evolution as dependent on a rather minor point—that the hominids from which we evolved were carnivores—which can then be refuted.

Consider one final example of the straw man fallacy:

Example 53

Mr. Hunter: Among the reasons I have for supporting sport hunting is that it is in point of fact beneficial to the species. If we abolished sport hunting, then the deer populations in many parts of the country would multiply without check, leading to massive starvation as the deer placed impossible demands upon their habitat. There would simply be too many deer and not enough food for them all.

Mr. Audubon: Well, that's the most foolish and cruel argument I've ever heard. How can it be good for a deer to shoot him?

Mr. Audubon distorts the argument by interpreting it to mean that it is beneficial to the particular deer, whereas the argument claims that it is good for the species as a whole.

To recognize the straw man fallacy, look for a response that misrepresents an opponent's argument in order to defeat it more easily. The arguer appears to be attacking the opponent's position, but in fact the arguer is attacking a misrepresentation of it.

3.17 Red Herring

The fallacy of *red herring* gets its name from the practice of using a herring, a particularly smelly fish when cooked, to divert hunting dogs from the scent of a fox. To commit the fallacy of red herring in an argument is to draw attention away from