

PHIL 140

§§0103 (1:00pm Armory 0103), 0106 (10:00 am Art & Soc 3221), 0107 (12:00 pm Phys 4208)

Discussion Notes**Feb. 8, 2008**

Though the text and Leland Saunders lectures presents a good sample of the most (all too often) commonly occurring argument fallacies, you may find this more ‘unabridged’ table useful as well (especially when you start tackling some of the reading next week, and especially in your second writing assignment.)

Fallacy	Explanation/Example
Question-begging (Latin: <i>petitio principii</i>)	To avoid this fallacy, evidence needs to be presented in the premises in such a manner that’s supportive but independent of the conclusion. Example of question-begging: “The Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, because it’s written in the Bible that it’s the divinely inspired word of God.” Known also as <i>circular arguments</i> are a form of question-begging. There are also <i>question-begging definitions</i> . Consider, for example, a philosophical definition of <i>ethical egoism</i> (i. e., that all human acts are motivated by selfish desires.) Suppose someone offers a counterexample of a altruistic act (i.e., any act of self-sacrifice.) If ethical egoism is defined in such a way as to <i>include</i> self-sacrificing acts as <i>selfish</i> as well, then it’s a question-begging definition
False Alternative (‘either/or’ fallacy)	The fallacy of not giving a full account of all alternatives. Example: ‘Since monism is false, then dualism must be true.’ ‘Either you’re a fool or you’re a knave,’ etc.
False Disjunct	Assuming no combination of possibilities can occur. Example: ‘You can’t vote Independent and Democratic’ (Counterexample: one can vote for a Democratic candidate for senate and an Independent for County Commissioner, etc.)
Ad hominem	Discredits the content of an argument by drawing attention to its speaker. Example: “You can’t trust this scientific report about X because it’s about an ‘agenda’ Y.” Aside from the notion: ‘agenda’ being a very broad and slippery term, this claim is fallacious because the report’s content X is not directly met.
Genetic Fallacy	Similar to ad hominem, the content of argument X is dismissed, based on X’s origin. Example: Consider the claim that a certain religion arose out of superstitious origins. The distant origins of a religion may be irrelevant to its value as a practice today.
Red herring	Points introduced in an argument to divert attention from the real point. Consider, for example, the ‘claim:’ “I was late to work, because I saw a beautiful sunset. The sunset was ...’ The last sentence is a red herring.
Straw Man	Replacing an original point with some extreme or exaggerated version of it. Example: ‘If you want to limit the production of cars, that would leave us with no transportation capability or capacity.’ (But there are obviously many alternatives, depending on the context)
Slippery slope	Similar to straw man: some scenario is falsely introduced to distort a view. Example: ‘Introducing safety mechanisms on handguns will result in the government taking your gun away,’ ‘Proposing a 1% sales tax this year will result in a 10% increase ten years from now,’ etc. These claims are obviously false unless one can “prove” (in the first case) there’s a government conspiracy behind safety mechanisms, and in the second case that there’s a mechanism based on the 1% sales tax increase which will perpetually increase sales taxes per annum. Such ‘proofs’ often rely on conspiracy theories, which usually involve practically all of the fallacies listed above.
Appeal to tradition	Assuming the long-term existence of X guarantees its quality. Example: “Beer brewed since the 15 th century...”
Appeal to novelty	Assuming the novelty of X guarantees its quality. Examples are easy enough to encounter in advertisements.
Appeal to a saying	Similar to ad hominem. Example: using some cliché like ‘The older you get, the

	more set in your ways you become' (which aside from its vagueness, is also strictly false) to justify some discriminatory practice.
Bandwagon	Similar to ad hominem. Assuming the merit or validity of X because of its number of adherents. Example: "One million X can't be wrong!"
Appeal to the few	Similar to ad hominem. Assuming the merit or validity of X based of its <i>small</i> number of practitioners/ adherents. Example: "The few/the proud/ ..." etc
Half-truth (lifting out of context.)	Similar to either/or fallacy. When a <i>true</i> statement is made, however without specifying all the relevant facts in support. Example: 'On road tests, car X got 40 mpg' and it was failed to mention that there was a 20 mph tailwind, and the road had low traction reducing the tires' friction, etc.
Weasel words	Words implying more (or less) than the truth. Watch out for arguments that make essential use of phrases like: 'may include,' 'can be,' 'will remind you of,' 'virtually the same as,' etc. They can suggest much, but often guarantee little or nothing. Many philosophers are guilty of such: ☺
Leading questions	Questions biasing or influencing answers. (Lawyers are especially adept at these maneuvers!) Example: "When you robbed the bank, did you use a gun or knife?" (Answering such a question can entrap the answerer into inadvertently assenting to its assumption.)
Irrelevant Reasons	Premises not supporting the conclusion. Seems obvious enough, but consider the statement: "Vote for Bob for Justice of the Peace, since Bob is well qualified for the job." The premise gives a <i>necessary</i> condition (Bob had <i>better</i> be qualified!) disguised as a <i>sufficient</i> condition.
Bad analogy	"The price of analogy is eternal vigilance" (this is one <i>valid</i> appeal to a saying!) Though analogies are essential in logic and in life, bad analogies occur when they're used to give a stronger conclusion than warranted. For example, the fact that persons A and B share similar characteristics doesn't, of course, guarantee that they'll excel in similar activities.
Hasty generalizations	Similar to bad analogies, when a conclusion is inferred that will recur based on past occurrences (think of the Induction fallacy) Example: "A is a sunny city, I've moved to A several days ago, and all we've had is sunny weather."
Appeal to ignorance	When a lack of evidence is used to justify a conclusion. Example: Claiming that X does not occur is unwarranted <i>unless one examines all possible evidence</i> .
False cause	When someone observes a succession in time between events A and B and assumes they're causally connected (Hume believed we do this all the time!) It's often very difficult to isolate the <i>real</i> causes from a set of prior events.
Equivocation	When an unwarranted inference is made based on a word being used in more than one sense. For example, the brand "Long Life" light-bulbs obviously doesn't imply the bulbs have a long life, from the name alone.
Composition	Assuming the whole possesses the same properties of its parts. Inductive reasoning (i.e. "all observed P are X, therefore all P are X") is an example.
Division	Assuming parts possess same properties as the whole. Example: A good organization (i.e., some organization doing beneficial charity work) doesn't imply that all its members are generous, etc.
Illicit appeal to authority	Though we have no choice as to rely mostly on the information of sources outside our own ken, there's always the danger that those sources are flawed. For instance, many considered Edward Teller, a nuclear physicist who developed the H-bomb, an 'expert' on Cold War policy. He certainly tried to pass himself off as one. But his expertise in nuclear physics doesn't obviously make him an expert in policy.

- **Statement:** (Abbreviated by letters like *p*, *q*, *r*, when examining the form of an argument): A sentence or assertion describing a state of affairs, i.e. a claim that something is (or isn't) the case. (Vaughn, 43). Note that statements have *propositional content*: that is to say, one test the truth-value of statements. ("Is *p* true or false?") Recall (**Feb. 1**) *emotivists* would argue that moral claims then *cannot* be statements.

- **Moral Statement:** A statement whose essential notion(s) deal with moral value(s) (whether or not it's affirming/denying an action is right/wrong, a person's motive or character is good/bad, etc.) Note that some statements moral terms ("ought," "good/bad", etc.) which refer to moral value(s), but they are still not necessarily *moral*. (Example: "Jim ought to buy that car," "She thinks he's a *good* person," etc.) (Vaughn 51)
- **Argument:** A list of (at least two) statements, in which one (the conclusion) is supported by the others (the premises) through rules of reasoning/logic (validity) and truth-value of content of premises (soundness). Arguments can be **deductive**, in which (assuming validity) the premises *necessarily* support the conclusion, or **inductive**, in which the premises probably support the conclusion. Examples of inductive arguments are general claims made from statistics, as well as arguments drawn from analogy.
- **Moral Argument:** An argument consisting of at least three statements. One of the premises must be a moral statement, and one of the premises must be a non-moral one. (Recall universalizing principle, **Feb. 1:** The non-moral premise is necessary to support the *general* nature of the moral conclusion.)
- **Recall Lecture (Monday, Feb. 4).** Assume that the arguments in your readings are valid. This leaves you to test their soundness, i.e. evaluate the plausibility of their premises. A good method is to search for a viable counterexample.

-A remark on conditional statements:

The statement: "If p , then q ," (or ' $p \rightarrow q$ ', where: p is the antecedent statement and q is the consequent) can be seen as the simplest kind of argument (where p is the antecedent, q is the conclusion). However, it cannot be a moral argument, which (recall above) require at least two antecedent statements (i.e., premises, where at least one must be a moral statement and at least one other must be a non-moral statement.¹)

Nevertheless, conditional statements themselves, they have a variety of expressions. Here are some examples:

1. "If p , then q " \Rightarrow "All p -things are q -things."² (Example: "If it's a bird, then it's a mammal," \Rightarrow "All birds are mammals.")
2. "If p , then q " \Rightarrow "Either q or not- p ." (Example: "If it's a bird, then it's a mammal," \Rightarrow "Either it's a mammal, or it's not a bird.")
3. "If p , then q " \Rightarrow " p implies q ." (Example: "If it's a bird, then it's a mammal," \Rightarrow "The fact that it's a bird implies that it's a mammal.")
4. "If p , then q " \Rightarrow " q if p ." (Example: "If it's a bird, then it's a mammal," \Rightarrow "It's a mammal if it's a bird.")
5. "If p , then q " \Rightarrow " p is a sufficient condition for q ." (Example: "If it's a bird, then it's a mammal," \Rightarrow "Being that it's a bird is a sufficient condition for its being a mammal.")

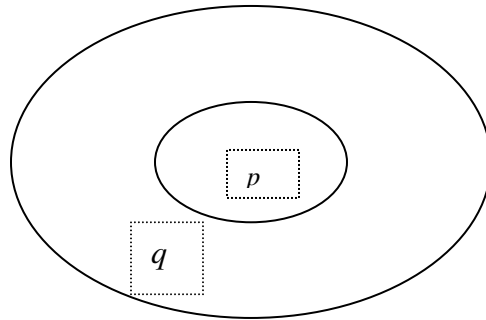
¹ "The role of the nonmoral premise, then, is to affirm that the general moral principle does indeed apply to the particular case. Unfortunately, both moral and nonmoral premises are often left unstated in moral arguments..." (Vaughn 52-53).

² If p and q refer to some simple class or predicates.

6. “If p , then q ” \Rightarrow “ q is a necessary condition for p .” (Example: “If it’s a bird, then it’s a mammal,” \Rightarrow “Its being a mammal is a necessary condition for it to be a bird.”)

7. In addition, any conditional $p \rightarrow q$ is equivalent in form to: $\sim q \rightarrow \sim p$ (where ‘ \sim ’ stands for negation, or ‘not-’), known as the conditional’s “contrapositive.”³ In other words, “If p , then q ” is equivalent to saying: “If not- q , then not- p ”. (Example: “If it’s a bird, then it’s a mammal,” \Rightarrow “If it’s not a mammal, then it’s definitely not a bird!”) This is just Modus Tollens in disguise, since the consequent is being denied (in the second premise) of a condition statement (first premise).

Recall **Feb. 7** lecture: the Venn diagrams provide the correct relationship (pictorially) between p and q :



Consider: p : “I live in Prince George’s County,” q : “I live in Maryland.”

As an exercise, re-phrase the conditional $p \rightarrow q$ according to the seven kinds above, and convince yourself that each different phrasing indicates the same connection between p and q as suggested by the diagram above.⁴

³ Two other variations of conditional statements occur as well: i.) The *converse* of ‘ $p \rightarrow q$ ’ is ‘ $q \rightarrow p$ ’. (The converse to the above example is: “If it’s a mammal, then it’s a bird.”) ii.) The *inverse* of ‘ $p \rightarrow q$ ’ is ‘ $\sim p \rightarrow \sim q$ ’. (The inverse to the above example is: “If it’s not a bird, then it’s not a mammal.”) **Note however that these variations aren’t logically equivalent, i.e. do not say the same thing, as the original conditional.** This is apparent enough in the examples listed here in this footnote, for we recognize them both to be false. To assume equivalence of a conditional statement with its converse, for instance, is to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent—essentially confusing necessity with sufficiency.

⁴ Even in the last case (7.): “If I don’t live in Maryland, I don’t live in PGC,” which presupposes the above containment relation between p and q .

Class Discussion

Due to the relatively high quantity of material we covered this week, we had not quite as much time for discussion (above and beyond clarification of material). Nevertheless, interesting questions and insights were offered in §0103, 0107 especially, which will be mentioned in the appropriate places.⁵

Most of the discussion centered on Mill's version of utilitarianism (i.e., consequentialism) versus aspects of Kant's deontological (i.e. duty-based) position.⁶ As you recall from (p. 84, Vaughn) Mill refined Bentham's Utility Principle, and indeed refined the entire approach, in an effort to safeguard it from some of the objections discussed in **Feb. 6** lecture: For instance, to the charge: "Is a pleasurable life really morally meaningful?" Mill responds with the notion of a hierarchy of pleasures: some are nobler than others (e.g., reading a book versus eating a steak and drinking wine). As Mill wrote: " 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.' " (Vaughn, 85).

Indeed these notions of nobler pleasures overruling coarser ones also led Mill to formulate the Utility Principle to cover both acts and rules. In act utilitarianism, one applies the Utility Principle on a case-by-case basis. In rule utilitarianism, one applies the Utility Principle as a general rule to follow. One can think of the former (act-based) as intending to optimize the greatest distributed to the greatest number *on a short term basis*, while the opposite is true for rule utilitarians (i.e., optimize the greatest good distributed over the greatest number *on a long term basis*. They often produce differing recommended courses of action: Recall the terrorist/police chief example (86-87): As an act utilitarian the police chief would certainly consider killing innocent members of the terrorist's family to bring the terrorist out of hiding to justice—basing his reasoning on the # of people the terrorist has already killed (and still could) far outweighing the # of people the chief would be forced to kill. On the other hand, as a rule utilitarian the police chief would consider the long-term implications that such a precedent would set—setting in motion a 'terror state' in which its police would kill and terrorize far more than the one rogue terrorist is currently doing, and thus refrain from this option to kill members of the terrorist's family.⁷

For the second concern, the "small differences objection," Mill's revision of the Utility Principle seems to take of that objection as well. For contrary to Bentham who just tallies the "hedons" for an aggregate of people, Mill emphasizes that "any given amount of happiness be spread among as many people as possible." (84) This version of classical utilitarianism would seem to meet the small differences objection, since even if *one* person's overwhelming intensity of pleasure in torturing a child might outweigh the net amount over the group if he doesn't torture, still in the former scenario the happiness is clearly *not* spread among as many people as

⁵ I may not be remembering *all* your contributions, if I left your name out, it's not intentional.

⁶ Recall **Feb 1** discussion: The consequentialist would see moral values as *extrinsic*, while the deontologist would see moral value as *intrinsic*.

⁷ Some of the criticisms of rule utilitarianism include: a.) (Recall Leland's remark in **Feb 6**) It's quite difficult if not impossible to prognosticate different long-term scenarios in the efforts to apply the Utility Principle in any meaningful or precise fashion: "A future Mother Theresa could emerge from that police terror-state and not otherwise," etc. b.) Since Mill allows for rules to have exceptions (he's obviously not an absolutist) then it seems one is deciding whether or not to apply the rule on a case-by-case basis...which seems to slide us back down to act utilitarianism!

possible. Moreover, **Erin Coco (§0107)** expressed the valid objection of skepticism as to how Bentham can just simply rank and tally something like ‘pleasure’ (clearly very subjective and qualitative) in some “spreadsheet fashion.”

Perhaps not too surprising was the variety of interesting and insightful response to Kant: for regardless what your reactions are, the views of this great eighteenth-century philosopher are certainly subtle and thought-provoking. Regarding the problem involving adhering to the perfect duty of telling the truth.⁸ This seems to produce a great tension, especially when viewing the demands of the Categorical Imperative against the demands of the Formula for Humanity (though Kant thought they were logically equivalent—i.e., said the same thing). For instance, hiding one’s friend from a pursuing killer (104-105): The Formula for Humanity says one should not treat people just as means so telling the truth to the killer would treat one’s friend as a means to the killer’s ends (though deceiving and lying according to Kant is treating the person lied to as a means: “Kant renders his verdict...you should tell the truth though the heavens fall.”(105)). Then again (as detailed below in footnote 8) telling the truth is a perfect duty.

Still, as **Zina Makar (§0107)** emphasized the second clause states one must also be *willing* to perform such an action. Instead of viewing this clause as just covering the case of imperfect duties (see n. 8 below) perhaps is it more representative to see the Categorical Imperative as a *prescription* for moral action. When pressed further, Zina argued that the Categorical Imperative seems to make better sense as a *sufficient condition* for morally permissible action (I.e., if the action obeys the Categorical Imperative, then it is morally permissible). Kant left the issue open regarding whether the Categorical Imperative should be considered a sufficient or a necessary condition. The prevailing view⁹ reads the imperative as a necessary condition (“If it’s morally permissible, then it must obey the categorical imperative.”) So if one however follows Zina’s suggestion that the Categorical Imperative should be viewed as a sufficiency condition, then it follows that other kinds of actions *not* obeying the Categorical Imperative are still morally permissible. So for instance, lying to protect one’s friend is based on needs and wants, so in this extreme a hypothetical imperative to go ahead and lie could be justifiable. Granted, Kant the absolutist would certainly object to this reading here, however the point is ‘telling the truth though the heavens fall’ is an example of enacting the moral will (for Kant, of course). Though viewing the CI (Categorical Imperative) as just a sufficiency condition for a justifiable action means that other kinds of willing (besides the pure moral will) can (at least logically) be considered justifiable.

One problem however with the sufficiency condition is that it might be too weak. Aside from introducing actions outside the bounds of the Categorical Imperative as permissible, it’s not clear that actions obeying the Categorical Imperative must be part of the moral will. For instance, S. J. Odell (in his PHIL 100 lecture) introduces the case concerning putting on one’s left shoe

⁸ One way to recognize that it’s a perfect duty (i.e., no exceptions) is that when subjecting its negation to the Categorical Imperative—if *lying* were to become universal, would produce logically contradictory scenario (among other things meaningful communication would cease to exist, let alone the meaning of ‘truth’ be lost). Recall Kant’s illustration of the breaking of a promise regarding repaying a loan. This is in contrast with *imperfect duties*, whose negations (when subjected to the Categorical Imperative) wouldn’t produce logically contradictory worlds or outcomes, just an undesirable one. For example, not making use of one’s talents nor being charitable to those in need could be envisioned as universal kinds of behaviors, but the outcome is hardly desirable. Hence the second sub-clause of the Categorical Imperative, that one would have to be *willing* to carry out the action: Anticipating a case in which no one is charitable to each other might give ‘Ebenezer Scrooge’ pause, since (if for no other reason) he might astutely reason that there will come a time when *he* will need someone’s help.

⁹ From my rather limited perspective on the subject

before putting on one's right shoe every morning when getting out of bed. Certainly such an action can be made universal without a contradiction (i.e. it would conform to the Categorical Imperative) though it would seem rather peculiar (if not outright preposterous) to conclude that such an obviously trivial and non-moral action is 'morally permissible.' Of course, one may object to Odell's criticism as being a red herring (since Kant *presupposes* moral action here) but the overall concern about interpreting the Categorical Imperative as just a sufficiency condition is that it may prove too weak.

Regarding another dilemma, **Alexander Marbach (§0107)** mentioned a scenario (involving killing) which seems to be a no-win situation from the Kantian position: Similar to the Peace Corps volunteer/villagers problem (Recall Leland's **Feb 6** lecture) suppose you are confronted with an armed man whom you cannot overpower and who charges you to kill another person or he will do it himself, while you stand idly by. Not to kill (like in the case of not committing suicide Kant writes about) is a perfect duty so the Categorical Imperative would forbid you from killing the third person. Yet by doing nothing you are also responsible for the person's death. (Trying to be hero won't work either because you and the other person will be killed). This dilemma shows in stark terms how unqualified the moral will is for Kant: circumstances and consequences shouldn't mollify one's duty. So even if you cannot *do* your duty (as in this situation) you're still held morally accountable.

Daniel Loveland (§0103) also offered an interesting approach to the issue of lying. For instance, he pointed out, couldn't the case be made that lying to spare one's feelings does *not* violate the Categorical Imperative *if* the maxim of the action is universalized across the *set of all people who would unduly suffer if you told the 'brutal truth'?* (For example, consider the set of all old grandmothers in fragile health with fragile egos who would suffer greatly is told the truth that they don't look pretty, etc.) Though at first this may seem like a consequentialist take on Kant, it really isn't. What Daniel is bringing up is the idea that the Categorical Imperative has a *domain of discourse* through which the generalization takes place. In other words, we shouldn't *unqualifiedly generalize* the idea of 'universal'.

This is the notion of 'restricting the domain' of the Categorical Imperative. Naturally, it's not without its problems, for one could think of a slippery slope into making the domain consist of only one group of people (or for that matter just one person) in which case it seems like *any* action can be rationalized as being consistent within the dictates of the Categorical Imperative, no matter how aberrant or destructive (to others outside that small set) the action is. Like in the case of necessity versus sufficiency, Kant didn't offer details concerning how to 'universalize' properly: one may assume his intentions were that the maxim should apply to the class of all rational agents (whether human, or angelic, or...) (Recall Vaughn 101). So he'd no doubt be loath to qualifying or restricting the domain beyond that general qualification of "all rational agents."

To the question: "Do you believe there are perfect duties?" most objected to the absolutist notion that there are no exceptions (**Alexander Marbach (§0107)**, **Brett Greenspan (§0103)**, etc.) **Steven Fields (§0103)** took his point even further by referring to existentialist notions, which basically appear subjectivist (Sartre). (Recall however some of the problems with subjectivism: no can ever be morally mistaken, nor can there be serious disagreements, etc.) **Sahila Chopra (§0103)** however argued that a parent's obligation to care for one's children is (or should be) considered a perfect duty. **Brett Greenspan (§0103)**, **Margo Rodnan (§0103)** used the 'method of counterexample' to see if there are possible exceptions here (what if the parent is mentally unable or unfit to take care of the child, etc.?) **Sahila** extended her notion of caring for children to go beyond just the child's immediate parents: so extended to the community and to the

society as a whole, taking care of children should be considered a perfect duty. In Sahila's case, as we'll see when exploring notions (from Virtue Ethics) like an ethics of caring, there are many points of comparison—perhaps more than trying to cast obligation to care for children as a perfect duty in strictly Kantian terms.