

examples supplement

The Examples Supplement to the **Informal Logic Newsletter** is our end of the year feature for those who face the task of teaching informal logic or critical thinking and who need a robust and regularly updated supply of examples to use for classroom purposes, for assignments and tests.

We would like to thank those who contributed the material for this year's edition: Christopher Tindale (Wilfrid Laurier University), Trudy Govier, and John Hoaglund (Christopher Newport College).

Once again we encourage our readers and subscribers, especially those with a portfolio of examples, to share the wealth by sending some of it along to us so that we can publish it in next year's Examples Supplement.

These first six examples were sent to us by Professor Christopher Tindale of Wilfrid Laurier University. He notes that the last two were "uncovered by members of my Applied Logic course."

A

BACKGROUND: At one point in The Dragons of Eden Carl Sagan discusses the evolution of man and in particular the amazing and sudden growth in the skull size. In conjunction with this, anatomical evidence indicates, there was an accomodating reshaping of the human pelvis. He continues on pp. 92-93:

So far as I know, childbirth is generally painful in only one of the millions of species on Earth: human beings. This must be a consequence of the recent and continuing increase in cranial volume. Modern men and women have brain cases twice the volume of Homo habilis'. Childbirth is painful because the evolution of the human skull has been spectacularly fast and recent... The incomplete closure of the skull at birth, the fontanelle, is very likely an imperfect accomodation to this recent brain evolution.

The connection between the evolution of intelligence and the pain of childbirth seems unexpectedly to be made in the Book of Genesis. In punishment for eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God says to Eve, "in pain shalt thou bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). It is interesting that it is not the getting of any sort of knowledge that God has forbidden, but, specifically, the knowledge of the difference between good and evil--that is, abstract and moral judgments, which, if they reside anywhere, reside in the neocortex.

ANALYSIS: In the first paragraph Sagan hopes to establish that the increase in cranial volume is the obvious cause of painful childbirth in human beings. Has he provided us with a case of Questionable Cause? At first glance his inference may seem reasonable, but unless he can deal with some clear criticisms his support does not seem adequate. Accepting the possibility that pain is restricted to this one species we ask: (1) Does it not depend upon the size of the child, the shoulders in particular, and its position at birth as to how pain is stimulated? (2) If the cranial volume has increased so dramatically in such a short time, why could not the pelvis, as Sagan even implies, respond in a similar fashion?

We remain unconvinced as to whether the cause of painful childbirth has been correctly identified. As for the appeal to Genesis, does this serve as further support for the thesis at hand? It appears that Sagan intends this to be taken seriously.

B

BACKGROUND: In the Summa Theologica we find Aquinas' famous proofs for God's existence. In the "Second Article" he states that a demonstration can be made in two ways, (i) through the cause, (ii) through the effect. In the case at hand the effect is what is better known to us and directs us to a knowledge of the cause:

The existence of God is not self-evident to us...Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effect which are known to us.

ANALYSIS: Unfortunately, as is clear, one of the premises of the argument is such that in order to accept it we must already assume the conclusion, namely, that God exists in order to have effects. Due to this Begging the Question Aquinas' conclusion has lost any thrust it might have had.

In his defense, he was a man of faith who sought only to reconcile his faith with reason, as such he had no compunctions about assuming what needed to be proved.

C

BACKGROUND: In response to a letter by F.M., G.F. wrote the following brief letter to the Toronto Sun (Nov. 24, 1981):

F.M. (Letters, Nov. 12) calls Canadians "foul-minded, disrespectful gossips." I've been living in Canada for 15 years and I consider Canadians to be the most open-minded and tolerant people on the earth. If you don't like it here, go back to your own country. We don't need people like you in Canada.

ANALYSIS: Is G.F. writing tongue-in-cheek, or do we have an example of the fallacy of Inconsistency? It depends on whether we see him actually believing what he is saying, and thus unaware of his inconsistent attitude. Of course, his is only one man's experience, and he might not himself be a Canadian, although he associates himself with them ("we"). Regardless, it serves well in the classroom.

D

BACKGROUND: Paul Hellyer addressed an audience at Wilfrid Laurier University in March 1982. The following was reported in the student newspaper (Cord Weekly March 18, 1982):

Hellyer, a former Liberal cabinet minister who resigned from the party and later joined the Progressive Conservatives, identified the symptoms of inflation, explained its cause, and prescribed a cure.

According to Hellyer, inflation is the result of wage increases. Every time unions make a gain in wages, corporations raise the price of the goods they produce to compensate themselves.

ANALYSIS: Indeed this report is accurate, but did Hellyer explain the cause of inflation by recalling this vicious circle? We would appear to have a Questionable Cause brought on by a confusion of cause and effect. Wage increases are deemed responsible for the rise in inflation, yet it is not clear why the opposite could not hold true other than that Hellyer wants the blame to be associated with the unions and their demands. As it stands it represents an over-simplified view of the economic situation.

E

BACKGROUND: The author of the following letter (excerpt) to The New York Times, March 15, 1982, attacks the proposed medicare bill identifying it as "socialized medicine":

What, then, is wrong with socialized medicine? Little imagination is needed to see that this measure would commit us to the complete takeover by government of everything traditionally reserved for the individual. As the late great Senator Robert A. Taft--a true American--warned, "if we are going to give medical care free to all people, why not provide them with free transportation, free food, free housing and clothing, all at the expense of the tax payer...Socialization is just a question of degree, and we cannot move much farther in that direction unless we do wish a completely socialistic state." In a word, if medicare is sound, then a government-sponsored, -financed, and -controlled program is sound for every--I repeat every--aspect of our life. But this principle must be rejected. As Americans, freedom must be our watchword.

ANALYSIS: Clearly the author understands "socialized medicine", if medicare amounts to such as the harbinger of undesirable consequences culminating, since he seems in agreement with Taft, in a complete socialist state. We would question the causal reasoning. Although no exact chain of causal progression is laid out, there might be enough here to charge Slippery Slope.

F

BACKGROUND: In writing to the editor of the Kitchener-Waterloo Record (Feb. 24, 1982), W.M. responds to an earlier letter written by a clergyman who considered the Bible to be no more than a book of parables:

Every clergyman should know that this blessed book has turned sinners into saints. It has encouraged the living and brought hope and comfort to the dying. There are millions around the world who would testify to the Bible's power, and say with the Psalmist, "Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee." (Ps: 199:11)

Cowper, the English poet, said, "When nations are to perish in their sin, it is in the church the leprosy begins."

ANALYSIS: If we see the conclusion to be that the Bible is not just a collection of parables, then the above excerpt suggests premises of support. At the least there seems to be an appeal to the authority of numbers, and it is not immediately clear why the poet Cowper should appear as an authority in the present case.

G

BACKGROUND: This passage is an excerpt from Phyllis Schafly, "Nuclear Superiority is the Key to Peace," which is reprinted in The Arms Race: Opposing Viewpoints, ed. David Bender, St. Paul, Greenhaven Press, 1982. The passage was submitted by Dr. Trudy Govier:

The surest key to peace is for the United States to have military superiority over all other nations in the world. That is not just speculation, not merely a hope, not an untried hypothesis, but a fact proved by historical experience.

For the benefit of those too young to remember, and those who ought to remember but are blinded by their own pacifist biases, President Reagan explained one of the world's most important events. During the years when the United States "could have dominated the world with no risk to itself.. when the United States had the only undamaged industrial power in the world...(when) our military might was at its peak, and we alone had the ultimate weapons--the nuclear weapon--with the unquestioned ability to deliver it anywhere in the world", America chose not to take one single step toward aggression, imperialism, or world domination.

Instead, as the President so eloquently described, "the United States followed a course unique in all the history of mankind. We used our power and wealth to rebuild the war-ravaged economies of the world, including those of the nations who had been our enemies."

In all history there is no record of any other nation holding such power in its hands and failing to use it to assert dominion over other nations and men. We proved that the peace and freedom of the world are safe when America has military superiority.

The following five examples were provided by Professor J. Anthony Blair.

H

BACKGROUND: In early 1975 the Faculty of Physical Education at the University of Windsor was renamed the Faculty of Human Kinetics. The Windsor Star editorialized about this change (January 1975) as follows:

Where's it going to end?

Undertakers become morticians. Real estate men become realtors. Janitors become maintenance personnel. Garbage men become sanitary engineers. Reporters become journalists. Bartenders become mixologists.

And now, Heaven help us, physical education students at the University of Windsor become kinesio-ologists. And the faculty of physical and health education becomes the faculty of human kinetics.

George McMahon, dean of student services, has called the change "academic snobbery." Perhaps that should inspire the university senate to set up a new degree of Academic Snob (AS). And there should certainly be an honorary degree for Dean McMahon for his heroic if losing battle. Perhaps an honorary DPE--Defender of Plain English.

ANALYSIS: The Star is condemning the UW for renaming the faculty of physical and health education. The argument seems to be that the change to "human kinetics" is pretentious. The Star likens the change to others it lists which are allegedly empty and cosmetic also, and it supports its charge further by appealing to the authority of student services dean George McMahon, who had called the change "academic snobbery". We are asked to accept that the change is academic snobbery because Dean McMahon said so.

One problem with the argument is that Dean McMahon is not in a position of authority on the area in question. McMahon's expertise relates to university administration, particularly insofar as it relates to student services. Whether the name change is appropriate depends on whether the faculty's programs are correctly describable as belonging to the field of "human kinetics"--which is something for authorities in that area to judge. The appeal to McMahon's authority is improper.

Second, so far as there is an attempt to associate the faculty's name change with the other name changes listed, or to draw an analogy between them (which of the two models to try to apply is unclear to me)--it can't work because it is question-begging. Even if some or all of those name changes were unwarranted because pretentious, they would be similar to the University's change only if it were also pretentious. The latter is just the question at issue, so to the extent that the listing of the other "reclassifications" is intended to support the Star's conclusion, it is question-begging.

These are the only two reasons offered to support the Star's charge, so its argument is not compelling.

BACKGROUND: The following was a letter to the consumer advocate column in the Vancouver Sun (April 1981):

I have a question for your column. I recently started buying a certain brand of frozen cauliflower and broccoli mix. The outside of the package shows small chunks of cauliflower and broccoli flowerets. But inside the package were very large pieces of cauliflower and only stems and mashed pieces of broccoli. I have bought two packages now, and they have both been the same. Has anyone else had this problem?

ANALYSIS: In this letter the writer describes an experience he's had with a particular brand of frozen cauliflower and broccoli, and poses the question for readers of the Sun's column whether they've encountered the "problem" too. Presumably he wants to find out if he just got a couple of exceptional packages, or if there is a consistent difference between package illustration and contents (and perhaps, then, a case of deceptive advertising). He does not try to persuade the reader of anything, so offers no argument, and hence commits no fallacy.

It is true that we can reconstruct the writer's own reasoning. He drew the inference that possibly the packaging was misleading on the basis of the fact that there was a difference between the idea of the contents conveyed by the package and the actual contents in two packages he bought. So there is some basis for reading here the following argument of the writer to himself:

1. There was a discrepancy between package and contents in the two packages I bought.



2. Possibly there is a general discrepancy between package and contents.

There is no fallacy in this argument.

BACKGROUND: Jack Anderson, in a May 1982 column in the Detroit Free Press, reported a conversation he had with Dr. Helmut Wakeham, the Philip Morris Tobacco Company vice-president for science and technology. Here is an excerpt:

Dr. Wakeham is asked, "Can you say that cigarets do no harm to the cigaret smoker?"

The doctor replies: "...You cannot get me to admit that cigaret smoking is harmful. ...Anything can be considered harmful. Applesauce is harmful if you get too much of it.

ANALYSIS: I take Dr. Wakeham to be arguing that cigaret smoking cannot be considered any more harmful than anything else. His premise is that anything at all consumed in excess is harmful. He gives evidence for this premise by pointing to the case of applesauce (a seemingly harmless substance) which, if taken in excess, is harmful.

First, the argument to the main conclusion commits irrelevant reason. (This is easier to spot than to argue for.) It is essential to note that whether a product or other thing is harmful is a question about its effects under conditions of normal use. Thus, eg, applesauce is not harmful under normal use--eg, a bowl for dessert now and then, or even every day. So what is relevant to determine whether a thing is harmful is its effects under normal use. Hence, pointing out that excessive use ("too much") of anything is harmful does not say anything about whether normal use is harmful. Thus Wakeham's pre-mise is irrelevant.

In using the applesauce example to support his claim that anything can be considered harmful, Wakeham is presumably considering applesauce as typical of things that would not appear to be harmful, yet which are, when taken in excess. So his evidence cannot fairly be construed as anecdotal. Still, applesauce represents but one kind of thing. What about other kinds--eg, love, or liberty? Or, to stick to things we ingest, is water harmful when taken beyond normal amounts? There is a need for further argument to show at least that the applesauce example is indeed typical, so we may charge Dr. Wakeham with hasty conclusion in this internal argument.

K

BACKGROUND: In 1982, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) considered the possibility of monitoring broadcasts for sex-role stereotyping. The proposed test period was two years. In an editorial entitled "CRTC: A Dangerous Proposal," The Windsor Star responded to the idea (November 23, 1982):

Concerned about sex-role stereotyping on radio and television, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is thinking of monitoring broadcasts.

The CRTC is at pains to declare that there's no intention to censor broadcasts or direct program content. The only purpose, according to the CRTC, is to follow the recommendations of a commission task force that broadcasters and advertisers should be given two years to show that they can regulate their own industry as far as sex-role stereotyping is concerned.

The CRTC hasn't even decided yet how the industry should be given the chance to prove it can regulate itself, but there are ominous signs already that one of the things the commission has in mind is monitoring broadcasts.

That road can only lead to more and more regulation of an already heavily regulated industry.

"The next thing they'll be telling us is the order of our newscasts," says one television network executive. He's expressing a real fear, and pointing out a real danger.

The CRTC even has an answer to that concern. How to judge performance hasn't yet been decided. Even if monitoring is adopted, it could be done by trained and dedicated CRTC staff, or by an independent firm. And the test period would be only two years.

Don't buy that time element. Aside from Allan MacEachen's attempts at budgets, is there a case in Canadian history where any government, or any agency connected with government, started something and stopped it in two years?

Nor does it seem possible that any monitoring the CRTC might decide on would be a part-time thing. Bureaucracies like to perpetuate themselves. It's easy to see how part-time monitoring of

some stations for sex-role stereotyping could lead insidiously to full-time monitoring of all stations for all things--news and public affairs included.

Sex-role stereotyping shouldn't happen. It's wrong. The broadcasting and advertising industries are responsible. They are also competing for the audience. If the audience finds them offensive, they'll soon know it, without being told by a government agency that they're doing wrong.

The CRTC's proposed two-year test period would end, in theory at least, late in 1984. That's a significant date that the CRTC shouldn't forget. This is no time to rush into the Big Brother act.

ANALYSIS: It does look as though the Star commits slippery slope in its editorial condemning the CRTC proposal to monitor broadcasts over a two-year period in order to study the extent of sex-role stereotyping.

The Star argues that if this step is taken, it "can only lead to more regulation of an already heavily regulated industry," and the Star cites as a real danger a TV network executive's prediction that, "the next thing they'll be telling us is the order of our newscasts." In general, the Star claims, "it is easy to see" that the CRTC proposal would lead to "full-time monitoring of all stations for all things--news and public affairs included." The implication is that since the predicted outcomes are clearly intolerable, the first step that could very likely lead to them--the CRTC's monitoring for sex-role stereotyping for a two-year period--should not be taken. So we clearly have the causal-projection type argument that is vulnerable to the slippery slope fallacy here. The question is, are the causal links reasonable or probable?

The Star does offer an argument in defense of its projection. It argues that the government or government agencies rarely stop anything they initiate after a limited time span, once the program has started. This claim is problematic. The records of the dozens of government agencies are not widely known, and it seems on the face of it possible that an agency could institute and terminate a short-term program. Further, it's not clear that the Star's claim is relevant. The agency in question is the CRTC, and it is that agency's record that is strictly relevant to the likelihood of the monitoring being lifted at the end of two years. The dismal records of other agencies (if indeed they are bad) constitute no clear reason to question the CRTC, since different agencies have different mandates, priorities and personnel.

More seriously, it is hard to see how the monitoring of sex-role stereotyping could easily lead to interference with broadcasting in general. Monitoring is simply keeping a record systematically. It involves no infringement of the deeply entrenched and strongly justified principle of independence of editorial control. It is also hard to see how the monitoring of sex-role stereotyping--which is a particular concern of half our population with treatment that undermines its moral, legal and economic rights--would readily lead to monitoring all stations for all things, including news and public affairs. The Star conjures up nameless fears.

So the Star's argument against the CRTC proposal consists of a causal projection which is very much open to question and not strongly defended. The slippery slope fallacy here is a decisive weakness in the Star's argument.

BACKGROUND: Below is an excerpt from J. L. Mackie's book, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (Penguin 1978), p. 195:

As the world is, the death penalty can, I believe, be ruled to be morally completely out of the question. The prearranged killing of someone at a stated time is a special outrage against the humane feelings which are an essential part of morality and this is not outweighed by an extra deterrent effect; in fact, the use of the death penalty is likely to increase criminal violence.

ANALYSIS: Mackie's main conclusion is that in our world the death penalty is immoral. He offers two grounds in support: (1) that executions are an outrage against the humane feelings essential to morality, and (2) that the objection to his conclusion based on the claim that the death penalty is a deterrent, is not sound. He supports this latter claim by arguing that, on the contrary, the death penalty is likely to increase criminal violence. (3).

The two undefended premises are problematic. (1) It is possible, and not unreasonable, to argue that the death penalty is a necessary evil, performed with great distaste. The "cold-blooded" nature of executions may then be viewed as repugnant without therefore undermining the humane sentiments necessary for morality. At least this argument raises a question about Mackie's claim, and so shows that he needs to defend it (eg, by refuting this argument).

(3) One wants to know how the death penalty is likely to increase criminal violence. At least at first glance it would seem that the death penalty would deter murderers: they would fear for their lives, and not consider the risk worth the penalty. Or, perhaps murderers are not deterred by the death penalty, but that might be because they do not consider the sanction before acting. But in that case it is hard to see how having capital punishment would increase violence that might lead to death. For these reasons there is some doubt about (3), and so Mackie owes a defense of it.

Also, both arguments as they stand commit hasty conclusion. In the arguments from (3) to (2), granting that Mackie gives some reason to expect that the death penalty won't have a deterrent effect (eg, some might kill a second time to try to avoid capture and execution for an initial murder), still it doesn't follow that the net effect of abolition would not remove a deterrence. Possibly many who would otherwise kill a first time would refrain out of fear of the punishment. More murders might be saved that way than caused the other way. Mackie needs to produce evidence to show that the overall effect of abolition would not be a net loss in deterrence. Without this further evidence his conclusion is hasty.

Also, in the argument from (1) and (2) to the conclusion there isn't sufficient support for the conclusion. Mackie refers to the moral objectionableness of the act of execution and to the (alleged) lack of deterrent effectiveness. He has not considered the retributivist argument--that a person who murders deserves to die in turn. Thus he needs to refute at least this contrary argument (and possibly others as well) in order to complete his case. In the absence of that refutation his conclusion is hasty.