



CRITICAL THINKING

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LECTURE 6

Fallacies of Relevance



Summary

In this lecture, we will learn ...

- (1) What it is for an argument to have relevant premises.
- (2) Four Fallacies of Relevance (or rather fallacies of irrelevance)
 - (a) Appeal to Force
 - (b) Appeal to Pity
 - (c) Argument against the Person
 - (d) Straw Man

Part I. What is it to be relevant?

Premise P is **relevant** to conclusion C (given background information K) =_{df} The truth or falsity of the P will **either increase or reduce** the probability for C (given K).

Premise P is **irrelevant** to conclusion C (given background information K) =_{df} The truth or falsity of the P will **neither increase nor reduce** the probability for C (given K).

Argument A

- P1. The grass is wet.
P2. The sprinkler has not been on.
P3. Today is Tuesday.
-

C. It has been raining.

- P1 is **relevant to C**. For P1, if true, will increase the chance for C to be true.
- P2 is **also relevant to C**. For P2, if true, will also increase the chance for C to be true.
- P3 is **irrelevant to C** - in the context of this argument. For P3, whether true or false, has no impact on the chance for C - given the information in the argument.

Argument B

- P1. The grass is wet.
P2. The sprinkler has not been on.
P3. Today is Tuesday.
P4. **Last week's weather forecast said that it would rain this Tuesday.**
-

C. It has been raining.

- Given the extra premise P4 in this new argument, P3 is **now relevant to C**. For P3, if true, will increase the chance for C – given P4.
- Whether a premise is relevant to the conclusion often depends on the background information.

Part II. Four Fallacies of Relevance

- ✦ Fallacies are common mistakes people make in their reasoning or in responding to other people's reasoning.
- ✦ One type of fallacy is called "fallacies of relevance", where the mistake lies in appealing or resorting to irrelevant information. We will look at four of them in some details.

(a) Appeal to Force

Not believing a certain proposition will cause harm.

The proposition is **true**.

P. Not believing that your parents love you will make you miserable.

C. Your parents love you.

(a)* Appeal to Force (inverse form)

Believing a certain proposition will cause harm.

The proposition is **false**.

P*. Believing that animals have a moral right to life will make us feel so guilty and unable to fully enjoy eating meat.

C*. Animals have no moral right to life.

General Structure:

- Arguments of the form "Appeal to Force" usually contain a premise which says that not believing a certain proposition will bring about harm either to the individual listeners or to society at large.
- The threat of harm is then used as an emotional vehicle to motivate the listeners to accept the proposition.

Why is Appeal to Force a fallacy of relevance?

- Whether not believing a certain proposition will cause harm has nothing to do with whether the proposition itself is true.
- The premise in an argument of the form "Appeal to Force", even if true, does not increase the probability for the conclusion to be true. So, it is an irrelevant premise.
- Arguments of this form are not only deductively invalid, but also nondeductively unsuccessful.

(b) Appeal to Pity

Person X is going through a terrible time.

Certain proposition in favour of person X is true.

Argument A

P. Mary is having a terrible time going through a divorce.

C. Mary should have custody of the children.

Argument B

P. Mary is having a terrible time going through a divorce.

C*. As her friend, you should give her extra support.

Beware:

- Not all arguments in the form "Appeal to Pity" are fallacious.
- Each argument in this form needs to be judged on a case-by-case basis.

General Structure:

- Arguments of the form "Appeal to Pity" usually contain a premise which says that a certain person is having a terrible time or some terrible things have happened to the person in the past.
- The pity towards the person invoked by the premise is then used as an emotional vehicle to motivate the listeners to accept some proposition in favour of the person.

When is Appeal to Pity a fallacy of relevance?

- Whether a person going through a terrible time is relevant to a proposition in favour of the person, of course, depends on what the proposition is.
- In Argument A: premise P is **irrelevant** to conclusion C (i.e., P, even if true, would not increase the probability for C.)
 - ♦ For a person having a bad time through divorce is itself no evidence at all for the claim that they should have custody of the children.
 - ♦ Relevant evidence would be things that constitute a good parent - like good character and ability to provide for the children - which are not mentioned by Argument A at all.
 - ♦ So, Argument A is nondeductively unsuccessful.
- In Argument B: premise P is **relevant** to conclusion C* (i.e., P, if true, would increase the probability for C.)
 - ♦ For whether a friend deserves extra support from you does depend on how well or badly they are doing.
 - ♦ Argument B is indeed nondeductively successful.

(c) Argument against the Person (*ad hominem*)

Person X has certain negative features.

Certain proposition (or argument) held by person X is false (or invalid).

Argument A

P. Socrates was a paedophile.

C. Socrates' argument against moral relativism is invalid.

Argument B

P*. John is a pathological liar.

C*. What he has told you about me is false.

Argument C

P**. The author of *The Menu to Happiness* is actually a very unhappy person.

C** *The Menu to Happiness* is not an effective menu.

Beware:

- Not all arguments in the form "ad hominem" are fallacious.
- Each argument in this form needs to be judged on a case-by-case basis.

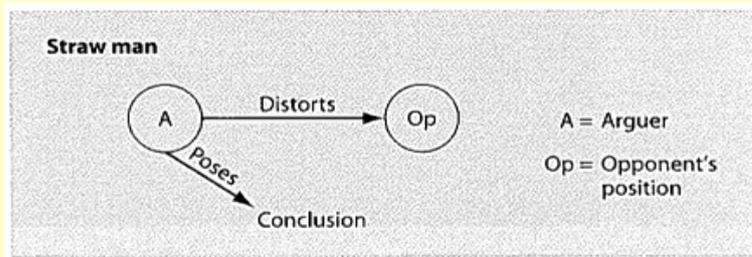
General Structure:

- Arguments of the form "*ad hominem*" contain a premise which refers to certain negative features of a person (e.g., character traits, histories, associations, views held). These are usually features that the arguer expects the listeners to consider negative.
- The premise seeks to alienate the listeners from the person with negative features, or even generate a repulsion towards the person, which may then emotionally motivate the listeners to reject the views held by the person.

When is *ad hominem* a fallacy of relevance?

- Whether a person's certain feature is relevant to the acceptability of a certain view held by the person depends on what the feature and what the view in question are.
- In Argument A: premise P is **irrelevant** to conclusion C.
 - ♦ For whether an argument is valid is purely a matter of the logical relation between its premises and conclusion. We need to look at the argument itself to evaluate if it is valid.
 - ♦ There is no prior reason for thinking that paedophiles are more prone to making invalid inferences. So, whether Socrates was a paedophile would make no difference to whether his argument is valid.
 - ♦ The truth/falsity of P has no impact on the probability for C. Hence, Argument A is nondeductively unsuccessful.
- In Argument B: premise P* is **relevant** to conclusion C*.
 - ♦ P, if true, increases the chance for C to be true.
 - ♦ P, if true, also makes C more likely to be true than false. So, Argument B is indeed nondeductively successful.
- What about Argument C? Is P** relevant to C**?15

(d) Straw Man



General Structure:

The straw man fallacy is widely used in political debates and family arguments. The technique is simple. Instead of arguing against the opponent's actual position, the arguer makes a caricature of the position, which the arguer then attacks. This caricature may well be a position that no one at all defends: it is thus a straw man.

Why is Straw Man a fallacy of relevance?

Because it is not addressing the opponent's actual position at all!

Opponent: The commonwealth government should offer some level of financial compensations to members of the Stolen Generations because (a) financial compensation would make the government apology more sincere, (b) like other victims of crime, they deserve some forms of compensation, and (c) it would not be very costly as the Tasmanian model has shown.

Arguer: If the commonwealth government offers each member of the Stolen Generations millions of dollars as compensation, that would bankrupt the whole country's economy and alienate everyone else. So, no compensation.

actual position

straw man

Opponent: There should be some minimal legal restrictions on religious satires because (a) a religious faith is very much a cultural tradition, (b) after all there are already legal restrictions on displaying other culturally sensitive materials (e.g., warnings on TV before showing images of dead aboriginal people). Extending the current restrictions to directly cover religious faiths is only reasonable.

Arguer: To ban religious satires is to betray the value our society places on the freedom of speech. So, there should be no legal restrictions at all on religious satires.

actual position

straw man

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