



## *Three Basic Fallacies*

### ***Introduction***

As we explained at the end of Chapter 3, the fallacies we take up in this chapter are basic because each stems from a violation of one of the three criteria. *Irrelevant reason* is the generic name for the fallacy that occurs when an irrelevant premise is introduced into an argument. *Hasty conclusion* is the generic name for the fallacy that occurs when the premises do not provide sufficient support for the conclusion. Finally, *problematic premise* is the generic name for the fallacy that occurs when a premise that is not acceptable is introduced into an argument. In our treatment of *problematic premise*, we also introduce two important instances of that fallacy: *begging the question* and *inconsistency*.

These three fallacies are generic in the sense that each of the fallacies we discuss in the following chapters is a more specific instance of one of them.

### ***Irrelevant Reason***

The first fallacy in our catalog is *irrelevant reason*. You may find it referred to by its Latin name, *non sequitur*, which translates to "it does not follow." Example 2 in Chapter 3 was an instance of this fallacy. The fact that lives can be saved by the use of dialysis machines is irrelevant to the issue of lives saved (or not) by the 55-mile-per-hour limit because the issue addressed in the argument is not how best to save lives but, rather, the effects of the reduction of the speed limit on highway safety. In this context, the question of how many lives might be saved by dialysis machines does not address that issue. On that basis, we judge it irrelevant.

We begin our treatment with a paradigm case of this fallacy. A Member of Parliament in Canada once charged, in the House of Commons, that the Federal Department of Health and Welfare had been cooperating with the Kellogg Company in permitting the sale of a cereal (Kellogg's Corn Flakes) that had

“little or no nutritional value.” Marc Lalonde, then the Minister of Health, seeking to rebut that charge, stated:

- 1 As for the nutritional value of Corn Flakes, the milk you have with your Corn Flakes has great nutritional value.

The implication of this claim in this context is that “Kellogg’s Corn Flakes does have significant nutritional value.” It is possible that Lalonde had a much stronger conclusion in mind. Maybe his view was that Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has great nutritional value. But in setting forth his argument, we are required by the principle of charity (discussed in Chapter 1) to attribute to him the minimal statement that brings him into dialectical conflict with the opposing view. In interpreting an incomplete argument, we are obliged by the principle of fair play not to overcommit the arguer (as supplying the stronger implied conclusion would have done). We have thus reconstructed Lalonde’s argument as follows:

- 2 1. The milk that one has with Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has great nutritional value.  
 a. Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has significant nutritional value.

In our view, this is a bad argument because the premise furnishes no support for the conclusion. The nutrient properties of milk have no bearing on the nutrient properties of Corn Flakes, even if the two are usually consumed together. To determine the nutrient value of any food, one needs to measure the value of the food itself (its supply of protein, carbohydrate, fat, and so on), not the value of its companions.

One way to see the irrelevancy here is to construct a *counterexample*; i.e., an argument with a different subject matter, but one that uses the same type of reasoning, reasoning that is clearly bad. To illustrate the irrelevancy of Lalonde’s reasoning, we construct these two counterexamples:

- 3 Salt has great nutritional value because the steak you sprinkle it on has great nutritional value.
- 4 Water has great nutritional value because the soup powder you mix it with to produce soup has great nutritional value.

In these examples, the premise clearly fails to support the conclusion because it is irrelevant to the conclusion. Lalonde’s argument has the same pattern. In sum, Lalonde’s premise is irrelevant to his conclusion, so the argument commits the fallacy of *irrelevant reason*.

The charge of *irrelevant reason*, as indeed any other charge of fallacy, constitutes an initial criticism of the argument and may well solicit a response. Lalonde (or someone who shares his view) could reject the criticism by showing how the premise, in conjunction with some as yet unmentioned assumption(s), would support the conclusion. Alternatively, Lalonde might persuade us that

we had misunderstood his argument. Thus, when we make a charge of fallacy against an argument, we regard it as opening a critical discussion of some specific part of the argument—not as the definitive refutation of the argument.

Here is a second example. Asked to write an essay addressing the question of UFO sightings and whether such phenomena should be taken seriously, one undergraduate argued as follows:

- 5 I think UFO’s should be taken seriously.

I really enjoyed the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It made me stop and think about UFO phenomena because the movie is about UFOs that landed here on earth and how people reacted to them.

The writer seems to be citing the movie *Close Encounters* in support of the implicit claim that UFO sightings should be taken seriously. Note, to begin, that this conclusion is itself vague; it could mean any number of things, from funding research on UFOs to educating people about them to not laughing at people who take UFOs seriously. We discuss vagueness in Chapter 7. The problem with this argument is in the relevance of the premise to the conclusion. What goes on in movies is no evidence of what goes on in the world at large. In movies, human beings can fly; there is life on other planets; and tomatoes become killers. None of these cinematic occurrences are any evidence that such things happen in real life. A movie does not provide relevant evidence about what takes place in the “real world.” So the arguer’s premise is irrelevant to the conclusion.

The two identity conditions of this fallacy may be formulated as below:

#### IRRELEVANT REASON

1. The arguer has put forth a premise as a reason for the conclusion.
2. The premise, considered in conjunction with the other premises, fails to satisfy the relevance requirement.

To suspect an argument of being guilty of *irrelevant reason* is one thing; to argue successfully for your charge of irrelevance is another. The boxed conditions are meant to guide you in the latter task. They tell you what you must do to show that an *irrelevant reason* fallacy has occurred in the argument under consideration.

A word about Condition 2. In the arguments we have considered thus far, there was only one premise. But Condition 2 is important because, although relevance is a property that individual premises of the argument must satisfy in and of themselves, the determination of relevance cannot occur in a vacuum. The other premises must be taken into account.

To illustrate how to use the boxed conditions, we will use the Corn Flakes example. Condition 1 is satisfied. Making the appropriate substitutions in that condition, we arrive at the following claim:

*Condition 1.* Lalonde put forth “the milk you have with your Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has great nutritional value” as a premise for his conclusion that Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has significant nutritional value. It is obvious that Condition 1 is satisfied.

*Condition 2.* The premise is irrelevant to the conclusion.

We must defend this claim, and we do so by replaying the line of reasoning set forth a few paragraphs back: “The nutrient properties of milk . . . companions.” It is never enough merely to *assert* that the premise in question is irrelevant. To tip the scales of logic in your favor, you must justify your assertion. Otherwise the situation remains a standoff: Your undefended claim that the premise is irrelevant against the arguer’s implicit (and likewise undefended) claim that the premise is relevant.

How can we satisfy condition 2? We turn to that difficult problem next.

First, as we said above, relevance (unlike truth) does not inhere in each individual premise but rather in an individual premise taken in conjunction with certain other items of evidence or information. (Sometimes these will be tacit or unexpressed.) Think of the sort of artificial case that makes for dramatic TV fare. The prosecutor asks: “Is the defendant left-handed?” The defense lawyer objects: “May the Court please, Your Honor, that question is surely irrelevant.” Now the prosecutor jumps up and says, “But, Your Honor, we shall establish that the murderer has to have been left-handed, so if the defendant is left-handed, that is relevant to the question of whether he could have been the murderer.” With the addition of that information, the light goes on, and the relevance of the premise becomes clear. Sometimes, then, a charge of irrelevance may be prompted by the arguer’s failure to complete his or her reasoning. When that missing piece is provided, the logical focus changes from the question of the relevance of the original premise to the question of the acceptability of the newly added, relevance-supplying premise. But sometimes irrelevance occurs because the position has not been thought through carefully enough, and no additional premise with any plausibility at all can be found to supply relevance.

Second, one way to test for irrelevance is to assign truth values to the suspected premise and conclusion. (*Truth value* is a generic way of referring to the truth or falsity of a statement.) Assigning truth values requires logical imagination. You must say to yourself: “Let me suppose that *O* is true; does the truth of *O* suggest a truth value for *T* (the conclusion)?” That is, “if *O* is true (just supposing), does that give some basis for judging that *T* is true?” Or try it the other way: “If *O* is false, does that give some basis for supposing that *T* is false?” If, in both cases, the answer is “no,” then you have some reason to assert that *O* is irrelevant to *T*. Let’s try this strategy on the Corn Flakes example.

*O* = The milk you have with your Corn Flakes has great nutritional value.

*T* = Corn Flakes have significant nutritional value.

Suppose *O* is true; does that increase the likelihood of *T*’s being true? No, for Corn Flakes and milk are two different and distinct food substances, each with its independent nutrient properties. Milk doesn’t react chemically with Corn Flakes in such a way as to increase the nutritional properties of the Corn Flakes. Does

*O*’s truth increase the likelihood of *T*’s falsehood? Not at all, for milk does not decrease the nutritional value of Corn Flakes any more than it increases it. Now suppose *O* were false; what difference would that make to *T*’s truth value? If milk were not very nutritional, that would neither increase the nutritional value of Corn Flakes (and so make *T* true) nor decrease it (and so make *T* false). The truth and falsehood of *O* and *T*, then, are totally independent; hence, *O* is irrelevant to *T*.

A second strategy for arguing irrelevance will emerge from consideration of the example we used in introducing the relevance requirement (Example 2 from Chapter 3). Recall that in that argument, which had to do with the new 55-mile-per-hour speed limit, the arguer stated:

6 There are more cost-efficient ways of saving lives . . . such as equipping every house with a smoke detector . . . or putting more dialysis machines in hospitals.

We argued that this premise has nothing to do with the conclusion (which is just another way of saying it’s irrelevant). But how to argue for this? The conclusion has to do with saving lives on the highway; the premise has to do with a much broader and, at any rate, different category: saving lives in general. The strategy here is to categorize the issue addressed in the suspected premise and then show that it is different from the one being addressed in the conclusion.

We conclude our treatment of this fallacy with a classic case. In the early seventies, a doll being sold in toy stores all across North America was found to have the unsavory feature of allowing a small pointed spike to protrude if the head of the doll were removed, a feat that tests showed could be accomplished by infants. When parents discovered this danger, they complained to government agencies. Informed of these complaints, a spokesperson for the company that manufactured the doll stated:

7 All the legislation in the world isn’t going to protect a child from the normal hazards of life.

To begin, we identify the implied conclusion, which we take to be “it would be inappropriate to draft legislation seeking to prevent the manufacture and sale of such dolls.” The premise is relevant to the conclusion only if we assume that the dolls in question fall under the category of the “normal hazards of life.” Admittedly, the category is rather broad and hard to define precisely; but one could classify as *normal hazards* things like busy urban streets, rusty nails left in planks, icy sidewalks, and roving dogs. Certainly the bounds of that category would have to be stretched to include within it a plaything such as a doll which, by its very nature, is not supposed to be dangerous. So although the spokesperson’s claim is true, the premise is irrelevant to the conclusion.

▲ *Global versus Local Relevance.* Relevance as we have been speaking of it thus far might be termed *local relevance*, the relevance of an individual premise to a conclusion. But because conclusions themselves are located in a dialectical context where there are multiple issues and competing points of view, there is

another kind of relevance which we shall call *global relevance*. A claim may be *locally irrelevant* (irrelevant to the conclusion as formulated) but, yet, be *globally relevant* (relevant to the issue that the conclusion addresses). We shall say more of this when we discuss *red herring* in Chapter 5.

We turn next to the fallacy of *hasty conclusion*.

### **Hasty Conclusion**

Even when the premises of an argument pass the relevance test, they may not provide *sufficient* support for the conclusion. When this happens, it is sometimes referred to as "jumping to a conclusion"; the conclusion itself is called *hasty conclusion*. You will also encounter the term *hasty generalization*, a special case of *hasty conclusion* in which a conclusion is drawn from an unrepresentative sample. We had an example of a *hasty conclusion* earlier, in Highly Disappointed's letter to Ann Landers. Consideration of additional examples will help to bring out the specific features of this fallacy.

After visiting the Calgary (Alberta) Zoo, a disgruntled tourist wrote this letter to the *Calgary Herald*:

- 8 We arrived at the park gate at 7:25 P.M., at which time the cashier gleefully took our admission money. Upon entering the zoo and walking across the bridge, we heard the loudspeaker state that the zoo buildings were closing at 8:00 P.M. and that the zoo itself would close at 8:30 P.M. We went to the ticket counter and asked if we could get a pass for the following day. The answer was "no." It is easy to see that Calgary is anything but friendly, but, rather, out to rake off tourists for all they can get.

We can all sympathize with this tourist's disappointment and frustration. Let's assume the facts to be as reported. Still, this small sample of life in Calgary can hardly justify the strong claim the tourist made. This one incident does not show that Calgary is anything but friendly, nor yet that Calgary businesses are out to rake off tourists for all they can get. To determine this, we would need a great deal more evidence about how tourists are treated at other tourist destinations and, indeed, other data about the zoo. The evidence here is much too limited to support the strong (and no doubt strongly felt) conclusion. Indeed, the evidence doesn't even allow us to draw any conclusion about the zoo and its policies. Perhaps this incident was atypical. Imagine a scenario of the following sort: The person at the ticket center was new to the job and didn't understand the zoo's practice of giving passes to people in this situation. In any event, this argument illustrates two common patterns of *hasty conclusion*—the use of anecdotal evidence and of unrepresentative samples.

**Anecdotal Evidence.** One typical form of *hasty conclusion* occurs when the arguer uses anecdotal evidence. Evidence is anecdotal, as contrasted with systematic, when it takes the form of recounting an experience, often in story form, of one person or a few people. An example would be someone who argues like

this: "Professors really have it easy. My parents have their cottage in the Adirondacks, and there's this professor who owns the cottage next to theirs. This guy is there from late May right through mid-September. Professors really have a pretty easy job, eh?" Let's suppose that the facts here are as stated and that the professor really is just loafing during the four-month period. The conclusion drawn from this one incident goes far beyond its probative power. To draw a conclusion about how hard or easy professors have it, one must take a much more systematic approach.

There is a difference between using a story to illustrate a thesis in a premise that has already been established and using a story to prove a point. We refer to the latter situation when we allude to the dangers of anecdotal evidence.

**Unrepresentative Sample.** Another common way of coming to a *hasty conclusion* is relying on an unrepresentative sample. Sampling is a technique used by pollsters. It is a device for gathering information about an entire population from a small subset—a *sample*. A *representative sample* is one in which whatever features in the overall population deemed relevant to the issue at hand are represented in roughly the same proportion as these features are found in the population.

A sample of students taking first-year courses at your university could hardly be considered representative of all students at your university, much less of students in general, because it excludes upper-division and graduate students. Thus, such a sample would not be representative.

Sydney Harris, a syndicated columnist, in an article entitled "Jogging Is an Unnatural Activity for Human Beings," writes:

- 9 While exercise (such as running) is beneficial for the lungs and heart and the whole circulatory system, it is debilitating to the legs. That is why most physical fitness experts recommend swimming as the ideal all-around exercise, not walking or running; because in swimming the legs move easily through the surface and do not pound a hard surface.

While walking may do more good than harm, in terms of total bodily welfare, I cannot believe that jogging is anything but a bonanza for the podiatrist and the orthopaedic surgeons. Some medical specialists indeed have already begun to warn the public of the probable perils in jogging as a daily routine.

Harris clearly believes, and would like his reader to believe, that jogging is not a good method of exercising, on the grounds that it is debilitating to the legs and that specialists have begun to warn the public about the perils of jogging.

The problem with his argument is the evidence that it fails to take into consideration. In this argument, the untapped evidence is of two sorts. First, there is no doubt that jogging leads to injuries in many cases, but in how many cases? How many in relation to the total number of joggers? Under what conditions do injuries arise under conditions of intelligent mileage? If only a relatively few joggers are injured, and then only when they try to run too far too soon and don't rest properly or run with inferior shoes, then Harris's evidence, while relevant, doesn't add up to a good case for his claim.

Second, it may be that though there is a risk of injury to all joggers, the gains to them in better circulation, increased lung capacity, lower weight, improved self-image and greater energy outweigh the dangers. In that case, Harris's evidence fails to support his claim because it is partial in a different sense. We need to know that the risk is widespread (not restricted to a select group) and that the disadvantages outweigh the benefits. Harris fails to provide this further evidence. His conclusion is drawn without taking these factors into consideration, and so he is guilty of coming to a *hasty conclusion*.

The defining conditions of *hasty conclusion* are listed in the box.

#### HASTY CONCLUSION

1. The arguer presents a set of premises as a sufficient basis for a conclusion.
2. The premises, taken together, are not sufficient to support the conclusion because of one or more of the following:
  - a. They do not provide evidence which has been systematically gathered by an appropriate method.<sup>1</sup>
  - b. They do not supply a sufficient sample of the various kinds of relevant evidence.
  - c. They ignore the presence of, or the possibility of, contrary evidence.

As in the case of charging *irrelevant reason*, you have two tasks to perform in making a case for *hasty conclusion*. First, you must properly show that there is an argument and properly identify its premises. That's condition 1. Then you must assert—and support your assertion—that the evidence is not sufficient. That's condition 2. You may do this in several ways:

1. You may show that what the evidence presented does show is less than what the arguer concluded.
2. You may indicate that the arguer failed to supply an additional sort of evidence, evidence that is needed to generate the conclusion. This may be more evidence of the same sort or evidence of a different type. The onus, by the way, is on you to show that this type of evidence is needed.
3. You may argue that the arguer has ignored or overlooked evidence that weighs against the conclusion and so the needed refutation of that evidence is missing.

Whatever the case may be, it is never sufficient for you to merely assert that more evidence is needed; you must defend your assertion.

Let's work an example showing how the two conditions are to be used. The following is a letter from another tourist, this one from Warren, Michigan. She is recounting her experiences during a visit to the area of Windsor, Ontario,

which is just a quick trip across the Detroit River for Detroit-area residents. She writes:

**10** On January 28, I entered your city to enjoy the winter countryside. Anticipating a day of relaxation and pleasure, I was driving along Cabana Road at a very slow and safe speed—keeping with the flow of the traffic—when an officer of your police force approached my car on foot. His vehicle was parked conveniently behind a pickup truck. He was pointing his finger at me. Both the passengers in my car and I were very frightened and thought that there must have been a crime or a health hazard in the area. No, he was flagging me down, not to warn me—since it was clear I was a visitor—but to issue a speeding ticket. (It was evident that he didn't bother to check my driving record—twenty-two years without so much as a parking ticket.)

Yes, you do have a beautiful country, but your police force is using a speed trap on this road. For I had just pulled away from being ticketed when this officer was hailing another poor unsuspecting motorist into this trap.

We think the writer commits *hasty conclusion*. Condition 1 is satisfied. The writer advances two incidents as evidence that the Windsor Police Force is using a speed trap in that area. She feels that she was caught in the trap, and she cites the case of another "poor unsuspecting motorist" who was also caught in that trap.

Condition 2 is satisfied. This evidence is insufficient to conclude that the police force is using a speed trap. Why? First, we must clarify the term speed trap. A *speed trap* is a location where police officers hide in waiting for cars that are speeding. It often contains two additional ideas. First, the police enforce the limit strictly; they do not "give" the motorist anything. If you are going 35 miles per hour in a 30-mile-per-hour zone, you will be ticketed. Second, those who are ticketed are not local drivers but others passing through the local area. Now, even if we suppose that these factors were in operation at the time of this incident and that the writer was not exceeding the limit (to assume the latter, we must bypass pretty bad reasoning), these two incidents would still not be adequate evidence. One would need to have data stretching over a much longer period of time, at least a couple of weeks, to show that the police had, indeed, set up a speed trap. If, during that period, it turned out that only Americans who sped were ticketed, then the evidence would be much stronger. As it is, the writer has some reason to suspect that a speed trap is in operation but stands at some distance from anything like adequate evidence.

A classic example is found in this excerpt from a book, *Off Madison Avenue*, by David Lyon, in which he defends advertising against its critics. At one point, he writes:

**11** I think I can show you that on balance advertising carries a higher proportion of truth than you are likely to encounter in most of the discussions you hear or the books you read. Consider the detergent commercial that you hate the most. You may, if you wish, question whether it actually does make clothes whiter than white;

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Hendrik van der Breggen for calling our attention to an infelicity in the previous formulation of this condition.

you may doubt that it gets out more stubborn dirt than other washday products leave in; you may wonder whether it really leaves your clothes squeaky clean and ever so manageable. But there is one thing you may bank on with a considerable degree of confidence. It is a detergent. Doubt, if you wish, that Winston tastes good but doubt not that Winston is a cigarette.

Lyon's argument is weak. He claims to be showing that advertising carries more truth than most books and discussions. His lone premise for this claim is that advertised products do, indeed, belong to the product type which the advertisements assert they belong to. We don't doubt the premise is relevant, for it reminds us there is some minimal truth in advertising. But to establish the conclusion, he would have to show that there is even less truth in most books and conversations; and that he has not done. Indeed, Lyon ignores (in reaching his conclusion) the contrary evidence right under his nose: that most ads are guilty of *puffery*—inflated claims which are not literally true. The ratio suggested by his own analysis of the detergent commercial is 25 percent (one true claim for every three false ones). So he needs to establish that ordinary forms of speech and communication typically fall below this quotient. But he has not offered any evidence at all for that part of his argument.

It seems clear that as humans, we have a built-in tendency to jump to conclusions on the basis of limited evidence. Sometimes we will get a notion into our heads, cast about for a few scant bits of evidence, and settle immediately into our position. We thereby promote intuitions and half-truths to the status of full and incontrovertible truths without bothering to consider and weigh the evidence. That's the idea behind the saying: "Don't confuse me with the facts." Or we reason from our own personal experience (*anecdotal evidence*) to draw conclusions that run far in advance of it. Or we ignore evidence. Sometimes we suppress evidence. Or we simply fail to bring all the evidence to bear on the situation. We certainly only rarely hunt out evidence that goes contrary to our own predilections. Some of these tendencies may stem from our primitive heritage, when the world was simpler and also more dangerous. Strategies that may work perfectly well in an evolutionary setting (inference from a small sample) may well be disastrous in another.

As arguers and reasonable people, we need to be sensible in our demands for sufficient evidence. There is no handy gauge that registers how much evidence is enough. The onus is on the critic to cite, in each individual case under scrutiny, specific ways in which the evidence put forward is insufficient. In effect, evidence advanced in an argument can be fairly challenged as insufficient only when the critic can cite some item of relevant evidence that would make a difference to the conclusion and has not been taken into account in the argument.

Often, too, the argument can be retrieved and made immune from the *hasty-conclusion* criticism by making a simple change in wording; by, for example, changing "always" to "usually," "in every case" to "in most cases," or "entirely" to "partially." This kind of qualification may be all the arguer needs to make the point. In such cases, the critic needs to be aware of the minimal force

of the *hasty conclusion* charged and can even suggest the qualification that would immunize the argument from the criticism.

This advice can be turned around and put to good use when you are constructing an argument. You have no business thinking your opinion or claim is sufficiently supported until you have gathered enough evidence to answer reasonable challenges. You should be careful to qualify your conclusion so that its generality does not go beyond the limits justified by the evidence you have been able to assemble. These two moves—anticipating and trying to meet challenges, and qualifying the conclusion—will nip many a case of *hasty conclusion* in the bud.

*Local versus Global Sufficiency.* What we have been speaking of is one very important kind of sufficiency, the sufficiency of the evidence embodied in the premises to support the conclusion. But, as was the case with relevance, there is another kind of sufficiency important in argumentation, one that stems from the dialectical nature of argument. We call this *global sufficiency*.

Arguments typically occur in a dialectical setting; i.e., there are competing points of view on an issue and the argument is an attempt to show that one of these views is correct or deserves allegiance. If your argument is to succeed in its attempt to persuade rationally, it is not enough merely to present the reasons or evidence that led you to accept its conclusion. You must also respond to competing points of view on the issue and to the reasons why others might resist your conclusion. You can identify alternative viewpoints and argue that they are defective, or inferior to yours. You need to identify standard objections to your position and show how those objections fail. An argument that does not in some sense address these competing points of view, these dialectical matters, fails to satisfy the requirement of global sufficiency. If you can show that the arguer has failed to address such dialectical material, then you have shown that the arguer has not satisfied the global-sufficiency requirement and therefore is guilty of *hasty conclusion*.

In sum, when you are assessing an argument, you must consider how well it meets the requirements of both local and global sufficiency. Check to see whether some of its premises engage objections or attempt to refute alternative positions. Are there well-known competing points of view that might be acceptable but that have not been shown to be inadequate?

### ***Problematic Premise***

We have seen that the premises must satisfy the relevance requirement, and they must satisfy the sufficiency requirement. What more is there? Here the term "sufficiency" may be misleading. In one common sense of the term, if premises are sufficient, then you would think that's the end of the matter. However, what we mean by sufficiency is that the arguer has cited the appropriate types and amounts of evidence to support the conclusion. The relevancy and the sufficiency requirements both concern the relationship of the premises to the conclu-

sion. But there are other criteria the premises must satisfy. One (acceptability) concerns the relationship of the premises to the audience. The other (truth) concerns the relationship of the premises to the world. We discuss the truth requirement first.

The goal of many arguments is to establish that the way things are in the world shows the conclusion to be true and hence worthy of the audience's belief. For such arguments, it is clear that they must live up to their own standard: The premises must be true. But whether a given premise is true is not something that logic or the study of argumentation can help you to determine (except in very rare cases of what is called *logical truth*), and so we do not propose here to treat the truth requirement separately. If you find that a premise is false, that is an important criticism and could be a good reason to reject the argument. But such criticism is not logical in character, and as that is what we are especially concerned with in this text, we turn to that sort of criticism next.

Whether or not the truth of the premises is at issue, if the premises are to move a particular audience along the route to the conclusion, they must be acceptable to the members of that audience. The perspective we take on acceptability is that of logic. Many audiences will find the sloppy and disordered argument unacceptable, preferring the well-written and the organized. These are matters of style, not logic; they need not affect the strength of the argument's support for its conclusion—i.e., its logical substance. What, then, makes premises acceptable from a logical point of view?

The basic idea governing the logical acceptability of premises derives from the purpose of arguments. Their point is to provide grounds (the premises) to convince a reasonable person to accept a claim (the conclusion) that person originally questioned or did not accept. If the person questions any of the premises, then that premise will have to be either discarded or supported. Once challenged, an unsupported premise cannot be a reason for this person to accept the conclusion. Since we are hypothesizing that the argument is addressed to a rational person, then we can assume that the arguer will be obliged to deal only with reasonable questions and challenges. The arguer, then, has an obligation to respond to any reasonable doubt or question about the argument. Should there be a reasonable question about whether any premise should be accepted, then the arguer has a duty to supply an answer; i.e., a reason why the premise should be accepted.

Thus when an arguer uses as a premise of an argument a claim that he or she fails to defend when it should have been defended, the arguer has violated the acceptability criterion. Here is an example:

In an article on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times* (August 14, 1992), Carolyn See described some historical and current problems in the state of California, while arguing that "we've been dead before, plenty of times. But we always get over it." One claim she made was:

When Ronald Reagan became governor in 1996, he began siphoning money out of what was then the country's finest public education system.

In reference to this claim, one might say: "The writer doesn't prove that charge about Reagan, and that's quite an assumption to make about California's system. Surely in each case some evidence should have been provided." This makes it a case of *problematic premise*.

Not every undefended claim makes an arguer guilty of this fallacy. Consider this claim about gun control made in a letter to *Time* magazine (November 1991):

12 "Guns don't kill people; people do" is a foolish argument. The range of firearms available in the United States market gives unimaginable killing power to just about anybody.

In the context of the current discussion about guns and their availability, we'd have no problem accepting the premise, even though the arguer doesn't defend it.

So when ought we, as the critical audience of an argument, accept its premises? Two considerations apply here, and they pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, the arguer's job is to persuade us, and so it is up to her to argue in defense of any premise she thinks we might not accept without a defense. On the other hand, we can't require that every premise be defended without getting into infinite regress. At some point, the arguer will have to produce as a premise a statement (and typically more than one) for which she provides no support. We call these the argument's *ultimate premises*.

When we come to these ultimate premises, we must make a decision: Is it reasonable to accept these premises without support, or do we think the arguer ought to have provided some support for them? In the latter case, we are making a logical criticism of the argument. We have found an unsupported premise or premises that we feel ought to have been supported. In this case, we say the arguer has violated the acceptability requirement.

We say a premise is *problematic* if it is introduced into the argument without defense and is unacceptable without this defense. Anyone who uses such a premise in an argument commits the fallacy we call *problematic premise*. Before listing the conditions of this fallacy, we shall flesh out our account of acceptability by discussing specific cases where undefended premises are acceptable.

It is reasonable to accept an undefended premise if it is generally known to be true, or at least represents knowledge shared, and known to be shared, by the arguer and the audience. Thus, for example, in parts of the world where Christianity has historically been the predominant religion, it would be permissible to use as an undefended premise that Christmas is December 25. In the United States, Central America, Japan, and Canada, you could assert, without needing to defend it, that the World Series is held in the fall; and in the United States, but probably not elsewhere, you could assert in an argument, without defense, that the first permanent colonists came from Europe.



Even when the premises of an argument are in an area of controversy and not in the domain of common knowledge, there are a few situations in which the requirement that the premises be defended can be waived and it would be reasonable for you to accept an undefended premise. These exemptions are listed in the box.

#### EXEMPTIONS

1. The premise in question has already been defended elsewhere, and all parties know this or could reasonably be expected to know it.
2. The arguer acknowledges that the premise needs defense and accepts the responsibility for providing that defense, if need be, later or on another occasion.
3. The premise is offered "for the sake of argument" in order to show what follows from it.

The situations listed in the box are situations where the requirement to defend in face of a question is suspended, deferred, or transferred, not where it is done away with.

The identity conditions for the fallacy of *problematic premise* are listed in the box.

#### PROBLEMATIC PREMISE

1. The arguer failed to present a defense for a premise offered in support of a conclusion.
2. In the circumstances in which the argument is presented, there is some specific reason why the premise should not be accepted without a defense.

We emphasize that to make a charge of *problematic premise* stick, you need to cite reasons specific to the particular argument in question. We have of necessity been discussing in general terms the sorts of situations where a premise ought to be defended. For any particular argument, unless you can give a specific reason—related to that subject matter and that argument—why the premise needs a defense, your charge will amount to no more than a general and unreasonable accusation that is itself problematic.

Let us bring these conditions and the discussion leading up to them to bear on some examples. First, we examine the text of an argument.

**13** No man can be a total feminist because in order to be a total feminist, he has to know what it feels like to be discriminated against as a woman, and no man can have that experience.

Here is our reconstruction of this argument:

- 14**
1. No man can have the experience of what it feels like to be discriminated against as a woman.
  2. In order to be a total feminist, a man has to know what it feels like to be discriminated against as a woman.
  3. No man can be a total feminist.

We have quarrels with both premises, a minor quarrel with the first, and a more fundamental one with the second. The first comes close to the truism that no man can be a woman. Still, there are cases where women have had sex changes and become men and so, as men, can report from direct experience what it was like to be discriminated against as a woman. Also, a man could masquerade as a woman in order to find out what it feels like to be treated as women are. This would be analogous to what John Howard Griffin did when he put black pigment on his skin and lived and was identified by others as a black person, an experience he reported on in his book *Black Like Me*. These two possibilities represent a minor objection to the first premise because it remains true that for most men, the experience of being discriminated against as a woman is inaccessible.

As for the second premise, it is not clear that a man (such as one who is black or handicapped or homosexual) cannot have direct experience of what it is like to be discriminated against in respects that are sufficiently similar to what a woman experiences to permit him to be a total feminist; that is, to sympathize totally with women. Moreover, it is possible that some men (perhaps not many) who have never been discriminated against themselves are nevertheless sufficiently sensitive and imaginative to have all the sympathy with women needed to make them total feminists. Our verdict, then, is not that the second premise is false but that it is pretty controversial. It may be true, but it needs some support to refute or block the points we have made. This is why we call this argument as it stands guilty of *problematic premise*.

Our second example comes from a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* about smoking. The arguer claims that since smokers die sooner than nonsmokers, and since there are so many smokers, smokers actually save taxpayers vast sums of money in social security and medicaid benefits. In support of his two premises, he writes:

**15** Recent news stories tell us that 33 percent of all Americans smoke. An actuarial study by State Mutual Assurance Company concluded that a healthy nonsmoking 32-year-old man can expect to live 7.3 years longer than a healthy smoking 32-year-old man.

Should we accept these premises? If we seriously want to challenge their truth, we have to do a good deal of work. We have to look up the studies, check their



methodology, and possibly repeat them ourselves. Is the effort worth it? There is no particular reason to question the claim that this data was reported or that it was reliable. Furthermore, even if the figures are on the high side, the conclusions drawn from them (that smokers in America die earlier than do non-smokers, and that the earlier demise of the smokers saves significant amounts in social security and medicaid benefits) would still be warranted. So while we might challenge the strict accuracy of the arguer's figures, we have no basis for a charge of *problematic premise* here. (The argument, as it stands, does commit *hasty conclusion*. We will leave it to you to figure out how, if you haven't done so already.)

This concludes our discussion of *problematic premise*. We now turn to two important variants on this fallacy.

## Variations of Problematic Premise

### Begging the Question

We shall be presenting our treatment of a variety of common species of the three basic types of fallacy (irrelevance, insufficiency, unacceptability) in Chapters 5 through 9. Two exceptions, the fallacies called *begging the question* and *inconsistency*, will be treated here because they are paradigm instances of arguments where the acceptability requirement is violated.

As we have said, arguments come into being against a background of controversy and lack of consensus. Thus the very existence of an argument presupposes the existence of persons who do not, or are not disposed to, accept a particular point of view (the conclusion). Since the purpose of an argument is to lay down a route leading from premises that the audience already believes or is prepared to accept on reflection to the conclusion, it is clear that one may not use as a premise in one's argument the very conclusion one is seeking to establish. If someone requires support for the conclusion, she will be no more inclined to accept that proposition when it's in the role of a premise.

Yet arguers at times deploy in their arguments, as premises or support, statements identical or equivalent to the conclusion. Such a move cannot be allowed. If the conclusion is acceptable, then no argument is needed to support it; and if the conclusion as it stands is not acceptable, then it cannot be appealed to as a premise. Arguments violating this stricture that the premises must be acceptable independently of the conclusion commit the fallacy of begging the question. You will sometimes still find this fallacy referred to by its Latin name, *petitio principii* (*petitio*, for short).

A humorous illustration of the flavor of this fallacy—though it is not itself an argument—can be seen in the following exchange from an episode of the British sitcom *Fawlty Towers*:

**16** COLONEL HALL: Who are you? I mean, I don't know your name.

BASIL: (to his wife, under his breath) What is it?

SYBIL: What?

BASIL: My name.

SYBIL: (calmly): This is my husband, Basil Fawley.

BASIL: That's it!

COLONEL HALL: What?

BASIL: How do you do!

COLONEL HALL: How do you do?

BASIL: May I introduce my wife?

COLONEL HALL: She just introduced you.

There is a circle here spawned by Basil's momentary lapse (forgetting his own name) in which Sybil introduces Basil to Colonel Hall. This act presumes that Sybil is known to Hall but that Basil isn't, which is what makes for the circular and inappropriate move when Basil then makes as if to introduce his wife to the Colonel. Something like this can occur in an argument when the arguer uses what he is supposed to be showing—the conclusion—as a premise of his argument.

A premise can be the same as the conclusion without having exactly the same wording. As long as the premise expresses the same proposition as the conclusion, the effect is the same. Here is the classic textbook example, from the nineteenth-century treatise *Elements of Logic* (London, 1862) by Richard Whately:

**17** To allow every man unbounded freedom of speech must always be, on the whole, advantageous to the state; for it is highly conducive to the interests of the community that each individual should enjoy a liberty perfectly unlimited of expressing his sentiments.

The flowery phrasing of the argument serves to disguise that it begs the question. If we structure the argument and use some common sense, we can readily see the flaw.

**18** 1. It is (a) highly conducive to the interests of the community that (b) each individual should enjoy a liberty perfectly unlimited of expressing his sentiments.

2. (b1) To allow every man unbounded freedom of speech must always be, on the whole, (a1) advantageous to the state.

What does it mean for a practice to be (a1) “advantageous to the state” if not that it is (a) “highly conducive to the interests of the community”? These two phrases express the very same notion in different words. And what does it mean to (b1) “allow every man unbounded freedom of speech” if not (b) “each individual should enjoy a liberty perfectly unlimited of expressing his sentiments”? The phrases “unbounded freedom of speech” and “a liberty perfectly unlimited of expressing his sentiments” are synonymous. The premise says that “each individual should enjoy” such a freedom, while the conclusion states, in effect, that every man should be allowed such a liberty. But these statements are merely semantic variations on the same theme. The premise and the conclusion are one and the same proposition expressed in different words. Thus the argument is guilty of *begging the question*.

Whately’s example offends against the requirement of acceptability that the premise must not be the same as the conclusion either in the same words or in the form of a logically equivalent proposition. Our next example shows a violation of the more general stipulation that the acceptance of the premise must not require prior acceptance of the conclusion. This example is from David Ogilvy’s *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1968). Ogilvy was touting his own Rolls Royce ad, in the last paragraph of which he had written, “People who feel diffident about driving a Rolls Royce can buy a Bentley.” He then went on to argue:

- 19 Judging from the number of motorists who picked up the word “diffident” and bandied it about, I concluded that the advertisement was thoroughly read.

We’ve reconstructed Ogilvy’s argument, adding some points omitted from the above excerpt:

- 20
1. Many motorists picked up the word “diffident” and bandied it about.
  2. The word “diffident” occurred near the end of Ogilvy’s 700-word advertisement.
  3. Research shows that readership of advertisements falls off rapidly up to fifty words of copy but drops very little between fifty and five hundred words.
  4. Many motorists read Ogilvy’s Rolls Royce advertisement thoroughly.

Now focus on the first premise. Is it acceptable? That depends on where Ogilvy thinks the motorists picked up the word “diffident”; there’s no doubt he thinks they were influenced to use the word by reading his advertisement. That supposition, however, *begs the question* because if we accept the first premise—that the motorists picked up “diffident” from Ogilvy’s ad—we have already accepted the argument’s conclusion—that many motorists read the Rolls Royce ad thoroughly. Since the acceptability of the first premise depends on our already having accepted the conclusion, that premise cannot be used to prove the conclusion.

Another form of *begging the question* frequently occurs in arguments against abortion and in arguments against capital punishment. The word “murder” plays a key role in both. Consider these condensed arguments:

- 21 Abortion is the murder of an (innocent) fetus, so clearly it is wrong (immoral).  
 22 Capital punishment is legalized murder, so it ought to be abolished.

We agree that if these premises are acceptable, the conclusion follows. The problem arises in deciding whether to accept the premise. Is abortion the murder of the fetus? Is capital punishment legalized murder?

To answer these questions, we must consider carefully the meaning of the word “murder.” It refers to the killing of a human being but, more than that, to killing that (unlike self-defense) is without justification and is therefore wrong. We can accept that abortion and capital punishment are murder only if we already accept that these actions are without moral justification and so wrong. Notice, however, that this is just what the above arguments set out to establish. Their conclusions are that abortion is wrong and that capital punishment is unjustified (and so should be abolished). You can see, then, that we must already accept these conclusions if we are to accept the premises used in these arguments to support them. We are asked, in both cases, to grant in advance the question at issue. Both arguments beg the question, for the acceptance of a premise must not require prior acceptance of the conclusion of the argument.

There is another sort of question-begging that follows a pattern. A critic makes a charge. The respondent replies to the charge by asserting a more general claim which, if true, would falsify the critic’s charge; but the claim cannot be accepted until we know on other grounds that the critic’s charge is false. For example, accused of plagiarism, a student defends herself by saying, “I am not a cheater; I never cheat.” This claim may be true. But, in this context, it is not acceptable because that she never cheats is just what has come into question, and so it cannot be used as a premise to defend the conclusion that she was not in this case guilty of plagiarism.

Here’s another example. The mystery writer Mickey Spillane once defended his book *The Erection Set* against a charge of being pornographic by arguing:

- 23 In the first place I wouldn’t write pornography because it doesn’t sell.

If he means to defend as a conclusion the statement that *The Erection Set* isn’t pornographic and to support the conclusion with the assertion “I wouldn’t write pornography,” it is clear that his argument begs the question because to accept his premise, we must already have accepted the conclusion.

One does *not* beg the question if the general claim introduced to rebut a specific charge is argued for on further, independent evidence. So, for example, our friend accused of plagiarizing could avoid *begging the question* by giving lots of evidence that she is not a cheater, evidence that is entirely independent of whether she plagiarized in the case in question. This would not be the strongest

kind of case against the charge, but it would not, with that addition, be guilty of *begging the question*.

We can now summarize *begging the question* and present its conditions. There are two species to be recognized. In one, the premises contain the conclusion, either expressed identically or stated in a logically equivalent form. This first version of the fallacy is usually found in long compound arguments. The question-begging premise tends to occur in a subordinate argument; the conclusion it begs is one or more steps removed. In the second kind of *begging the question*, the guilty premise is plausible or reasonable only if one already accepts the conclusion. The acceptability of the premise depends on our first accepting the conclusion it is being used to defend. The box states the conditions of the fallacy of *begging the question*.

#### **BEGGING THE QUESTION**

1. A claim is offered in an argument as a premise in support of a conclusion.
2. The claim is (a) equivalent in meaning to the conclusion or (b) in the context of this argument, acceptable only if the conclusion has already been accepted.

We tend to beg the question in our own arguments and overlook it in the arguments of others when we are dealing with issues whose truth strikes us as self-evident. It is difficult to think of reasons for a claim that seems obvious on the face of it. Hence we end up repeating the claim in different terms when we try to argue for it or using premises that of course show it to be true because they presuppose its truth. The message should be clear: When dealing with matters close to your heart that seem ever so true to you, be on your guard against question-begging reasoning.

When you develop your case to show that this fallacy has occurred, your first move should be to identify the conclusion and the offending premise. Your second move is to show (1) that the premise and conclusion mean the same or (2) that in this instance the premise cannot be accepted unless the conclusion is accepted first.

#### *Inconsistency*

Without trying to pinpoint the notion exactly, let's talk for a moment about inconsistency. On the one hand, it is debilitating. Psychological experiments have shown that when subjected to inconsistent treatment by researchers, laboratory animals get so frustrated that they become inactive. Human beings react in the same way. You have probably experienced the frustration of coping with inconsistent demands from parents and teachers. Given the erratic way in which we humans form our beliefs and the sometimes impulsive ways in which we act, it is not surprising that we hold inconsistent beliefs and act in ways that are inconsistent with what we have preached. Another complication is the fact that we sometimes change our minds, whether as a result of careful review of the evidence or because of the sheer force of a more attractive opinion that comes along and captures our fancy. In short, inconsistency is a frustrating but

widespread phenomenon of human life. What we are interested in here is not simply the phenomenon but how and why it threatens the practice of argumentation and hence constitutes a logical failure.

Consistency plays a crucial role in argumentation. We may view a good argument as laying down a rational route from premises to conclusion. The argument, as it were, says to us: If you accept the premises (and you wish to be consistent), you must accept the conclusion. Argumentation, then, assumes that people are sensitive to the requirements of consistency. In short, though we may rightly tolerate some inconsistency in other areas of life, in the practice of argumentation we cannot do so without jeopardizing the whole enterprise.

Two statements are inconsistent when, from the truth of one of them, the falsehood of the other follows. For example, consider:

- 24**
1. Aldo is unfailingly truthful.
  2. Aldo lied to Louise about his age.

If the first statement is true, then the second must be false, and if the second is true, the first must be false; so the first and the second statements are inconsistent. Anyone who asserted the first ought to deny the second and vice versa. Moreover, if I have made use of the first in an argument, I have forfeited any right to use the second in that argument.

There can be other forms of tension between statements that fall short of this strict logical inconsistency. Compare:

- 25**
1. Aldo usually tells the truth.
  2. Aldo lied to Louise about his age.

There is no logical contradiction here. One does sense some tension, but that tension need not be ruinous or worrisome. Someone might use the first statement at one point in the argument and then turn around and use the second later without jeopardizing the process of argumentation nor the argument in which the tension occurred—provided some explanation of how the two statements were compatible in that case were available.

We say a person is inconsistent when he asserts or believes two propositions which cannot both be true at once. We also say a person is inconsistent if she asserts one thing yet acts in a manner that would not be justified if her assertion were true. Children often make such observations about the conduct of their parents, as this one did: "My dad gets bombed every night, double-bombed on weekends; my mother fills the house with smoke, then raises hell when I smoke and goes crazy if I have a drink. Where do they get off trying to keep me from doing things they say are bad for me when they don't practice what they preach?" This teenager is onto something. Her parents say that smoking and drinking are bad, yet Dad drinks and Mom smokes. Now, true, neither parent has *asserted* two inconsistent propositions, but their actions don't line up with their stated policy. If we take Mom's smoking as in some way endorsing the proposition that it is okay to smoke, then there is a kind of

inconsistency. There is no logical obligation to dismiss someone's advice merely because he or she doesn't follow it, yet such failure to practice what you preach undermines the credibility of the one giving the advice.

The fallacy of *inconsistency* occurs only when an inconsistency undermines an argument. When two premises of an argument are inconsistent, for instance, we are getting conflicting signals from the arguer. She asks us to grant the conclusion on the basis of the premises she offers. However, we don't know which of the two inconsistent premises to accept, and we know we can only accept one. Alternatively, the premise is incompatible with the conclusion. Here again, we are in a bind: We can't accept both the premise and the conclusion. So the argument undermines itself. Finally, the premise may be incompatible with something else the arguer says, either on the same occasion or at some other time. Then we face the question, Which are we to accept, the premise or the incompatible assertion? The effect of inconsistency in an argument is to undercut the acceptability of a premise. We cannot then be justified in taking that premise as support for the conclusion. Inconsistency in arguments short-circuits the segment of the argument in which it occurs.

An illustration of this can be found in the memoirs of Vincent Theresa, a former mafioso, which included the following qualified defense of the brotherhood:

- 26 Not that mobsters are all bad. There are plenty of good things about them the public might be interested in. For instance, does the public know whether mob guys are patriotic or not? The truth is, most are. We don't think about undermining the government. We corrupt politicians, but that's only so we can do business.

Theresa is trying to persuade us that mob guys are not without redeeming features. One main premise is that the mob is patriotic, and this premise is defended by Theresa's contention that the mob has no intention of undermining the government. Theresa then tries to undercut the unspoken counterargument, that the Mafia corrupts politicians, by maintaining that the purpose of such corruption is only to "do business" (and, presumably, not to undermine the government). The trouble is that whatever the Mafia's intentions, corrupting politicians does, in fact, serve to undermine the government. When people find out that politicians are being bought off by the Mafia, they lose confidence in those politicians; and the knowledge that some politicians can be corrupted is bound to undermine one's faith in government. So we are asked to believe that most mob guys are patriotic; at the same time, we are given evidence that they are not. The result is that the argument goes nowhere. Either the premise that the mob is patriotic must be accepted, in which case we must reject Theresa's evidence that the mob corrupts politicians; or, and this is more likely, we must accept Theresa's evidence and deny that the mob is patriotic. We can't do both; we haven't, from the argument and Theresa's comments, any basis for choosing one or the other. We cannot accept the premise.

It is harder to see how inconsistency between assertion and action can undermine an argument. After all, an argument is a piece of discourse, a collection of assertions, while an action is not a statement in any unmetaphorical

sense. Still, actions imply statements in that the principle by which any action is justified can be expressed as a statement. This explains why, when the principle of an adjacent action is incompatible with the premise or conclusion of an argument, we find ourselves at a loss which to accept: the premise and conclusion or the principle. A good example was cited by Trudy Govier in an article in the *Informal Logic Newsletter* (June 1981).

- 27 Several years ago Ontario and Federal government officials in Canada, having exhorted Canadians to spend winter holiday money at home in Canada, nevertheless abandoned our northern country for winter vacations in Florida and the Caribbean. We can imagine the following fairly plausible arguments the Canadian officials might have made:
- 28
1. To help Canada's balance of payments position, as many Canadian dollars should be kept in the country as possible.
  2. The Canadian economy would benefit from increased spending in our winter tourism and entertainment industries.
  3. Canadians should spend their winter holiday money at home in Canada.

Yet many of these same officials vacationed in Florida and the Caribbean. They must have been operating on some such principle as the following:

PR1: It is not imperative that Canadians spend their winter holiday money at home in Canada.

Now the problem with this argument, given this principle, is that if we accept the principle, it tells against the conclusion of the argument. (In that case, incidentally, the stated premises cannot be adequate support for the conclusion.) On the other hand, if we accept the premises, we are led to accept the argument's conclusions, but then we must reject the principle. The same officials enunciated the argument and acted in conformity with the principle. Which are we to believe: their argument or their actions? The two are inconsistent, and we have no way of deciding which is acceptable. Hence the argument's premises are undercut and we cannot accept its conclusion in this situation. We say, in cases where conduct conflicts with argument in this way, that the fallacy of *inconsistency* has been committed.

The conditions for this fallacy are listed in the box.

#### **INCONSISTENCY**

1. In an argument, an assertion serves as a premise for a conclusion.
2. There is an inconsistency between (a) the assertion and some other premise or some other assertion made by the arguer or (b) the premise or the conclusion and some principle of an action performed or recommended by the arguer.

Here is an example that will test your understanding of the conditions and the fallacy of *inconsistency*. Syndicated columnist Joseph Sobran, in a column in the *Detroit Free Press*, took the liberal press in the United States to task for preaching in favor of women's rights and equality for women while, in their practice, failing to hire women in top management positions. After the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, *Time* magazine ran a cover story about women and equality. Sobran wrote: "The story was written by a man, with the aid of a woman or two. Never mind. It said all the right things. It ringingly affirmed that we are all equal." In the same issue of *Time*, Sobran reported, twenty-four out of twenty-six stories were written by men, and only one of the top twenty-four names on the masthead (and none of the top fourteen) belonged to a woman. Sobran also noted that at *Newsweek*, the top seven jobs were held by men, and only three of the top sixteen positions were held by women. He found that similar proportions applied to the "great liberal dailies." At *The New York Times*, two of the top sixteen and none of the top eight names on the masthead belonged to women and at the *Washington Post*, there was one female in the top seven and three in the top seventeen. Sobran continued:

**29** Day after day, these publications favor us with articles and columns designed to raise our consciousness on the subject of women's role in society. Why are we so hypnotized by their pompous cant that when an editorial assaults us with it, we don't automatically look down the page to see how the preacher himself is behaving?

Our question is this: Has Sobran identified instances of the fallacy of *inconsistency*? Note first that unless the articles and columns in question contained arguments for equality for women, we could not speak of a fallacy here, though we could still make the moral judgment of hypocrisy (as Sobran does). Let us assume that some of these press sources do present arguments. Is the fact that an editorial argues for equality for women while the newspaper or magazine in which it appears is dominated by men at top editorial and management levels grounds for a charge of *inconsistency*? We believe the answer depends on the hiring practices and policies of the newspaper or magazine in question. Only if it has a policy of hiring women in order to achieve the balance of men and women at all levels of the organization, and is implementing that policy, would the principle of its conduct be consistent with its editorial position. Otherwise, a charge of *inconsistency* would be applicable. Each newspaper and magazine has to be examined on the merits of its own practices, but we are inclined to agree with Sobran that his statistics make a prima facie case for inconsistency between preaching and performance and, if the preaching is argument, that a case for the fallacy of *inconsistency* could be made.

### Conclusion

A final point should be made to introduce the next part of the book. Treat the presence of a fallacy in an argument as a warning light, not as a stop sign. Rare is the argument that is destroyed completely by the presence of a fallacy. Even

arguments that beg the question usually contain other, non-question-begging premises. And treat the warning light as an amber flash on your own mental dashboard, not as a strobe to beam into the eyes of the arguer whose argument you are assessing. Accusations of "Fallacy!", like personal character attacks, are the least efficient way to elicit a change in your opponent's reasoning or conclusions. Gentle, patient argumentation of your own promises much more success. Keep in mind what Proverbs has to say: "A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words [like "Fallacy!"] stir up anger."<sup>2</sup>

### EXERCISES

*Directions.* For each extract assigned, decide whether there are any arguments present, and, if so, whether they contain any of the fallacies you have studied so far. If you think there is no argument, explain what the function of the passage is. If you think any arguments are logically good ones, try to anticipate possible criticisms, and argue against such criticisms. If you think there are any fallacious arguments, write a critique supporting your judgment (see details below). If you think there is some fallacy not covered (yet), say so. While you may reasonably expect that these passages contain instances of the fallacies taken up in this chapter, understand that some passages may not contain arguments at all, some may contain arguments with fallacies you have not encountered, and some of the arguments may be fallacy-free.

For *each* fallacy you identify, do the following in your critique: (1) identify: the argument's conclusion, the premise(s) in which the fallacy occurs, who commits the fallacy, and the name of the fallacy (if it is not one covered so far, describe it); (2) formulate an argument to convince a neutral observer that the fallacy you allege has indeed been committed; and (3) say whether any fallacy completely undercuts the argument or whether the argument can be repaired, and explain why you think so.

- 1. Background:** *Rolling Stone* carried an article about The Lemonheads (a rock group) that elicited this response:  
The Lemonheads are not worthy of their candy namesake. Proof positive that a pretty face and some chords will get a full page in your mag every time.
- 2. Background:** This is an excerpt from a letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle* (July 13, 1992) about reproduction rights:  
Three cheers for those who ask the question, Don't men have reproduction rights? It takes both a male and a female to make a baby; it ought to take both to decide whether to keep it or not.
- 3. Background:** In the early 1970s, a commission was established in New York City to investigate allegations of corruption in the police department. One of the witnesses before the commission was a police officer who, when apprehended for taking payoffs, "turned" undercover agent. He gave key testimony, claiming that all plainclothes detectives took regular payoffs and that "there's no way one man can go in a division and remain straight." Following his testimony, the police commissioner told reporters:  
That is an absurd charge. I know for a fact that there are plainclothesmen who are not "on the pad."
- 4. Background:** Michigan is one of many states which, at present, does not allow capital

<sup>2</sup> (XV, 1). Thanks to Hendrik van der Breggen for this reference.