

Exercises 03 - Fallacies

1 Relevance

[Copi, Cohen and McMahon, pp. 125-126] Identify and explain the fallacies of relevance in the following passages:

(A) I was seven years old when the first election campaign which I can remember took place in my district. At that time we still had no political parties, so the announcement of this campaign was received with very little interest. But popular feeling ran high when it was disclosed that one of the candidates was “the Prince.” There was no need to add Christian and surname to realize which Prince was meant. He was the owner of the great estate formed by the arbitrary occupation of the vast tracts of land reclaimed in the previous century from the Lake of Fucino. About eight thousand families (that is, the majority of the local population) are still employed today in cultivating the estate’s fourteen thousand hectares. The Prince was deigning to solicit “his” families for their vote so that he could become their deputy in parliament. The agents of the estate, who were working for the Prince, talked in impeccably liberal phrases: “Naturally,” said they, “naturally, no one will be forced to vote for the Prince, that’s understood; in the same way that no one, naturally, can force the Prince to allow people who don’t vote for him to work on his land. This is the period of real liberty for everybody; you’re free, and so is the Prince.” The announcement of these “liberal” principles produced general and understandable consternation among the peasants. For, as may easily be guessed, the Prince was the most hated person in our part of the country.

Ignazio Silone, *The God That Failed* (1949)

(B) Gender feminism is notoriously impossible to falsify: it chews up and digests all counter-evidence, transmuting it into confirming evidence. The fact that most people, including most women, do not see the pervasive and tenacious system of male power only shows how thoroughly they have been socialized to perpetuate it. The more women who reject the gender feminist perspective, the more this proves them in thrall to the androcentric system. Nothing and no one can refute the hypothesis of the sex-gender system for those who see it so clearly “everywhere.”

Christina Sommers, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, June 1992

2 Defective induction and presumption

[Copi, Cohen and McMahon, pp. 142-144] Identify and explain any fallacies of defective induction or of presumption in the following passages:

(A) My generation was taught about the dangers of social diseases, how they were contracted, and the value of abstinence. Our schools did not teach us about contraception. They did not pass out condoms, as many of today’s schools do. And not one of the girls in any of my classes, not even in college, became pregnant out of wedlock. It wasn’t until people began teaching the children about contraceptives that our problems with pregnancy began.

Frank Webster, “No Sex Education, No Sex,” *Insight* 17 November 1997

(B) There is no surprise in discovering that acupuncture can relieve pain and nausea. It will probably also be found to work on anxiety, insomnia, and itching, because these are all conditions in which placebos work. Acupuncture works by suggestion, a mechanism whose effects on humans are well known. The danger in using such placebo methods is that they will be applied by people inadequately trained in medicine in cases where essential preliminary work has not been done and where a correct diagnosis has not been established.

Fred Levit, M.D., “Acupuncture Is Alchemy, Not Medicine,” *The New York Times*, 12 November 1997

(C) “. . . I’ve always reckoned that looking at the new moon over your left shoulder is one of the carelesst and foolishst things a body can do. Old Hank Bunker done it once, and bragged about it; and in less than two years he got drunk and fell off of the shot tower, and spread himself out so that he was just a kind of a layer, as you may say; and they slid him edgeways between two barn doors for a coffin, and buried him so, so they say, but I didn’t see it. Pap told me. But anyway it all come of looking at the moon that way, like a fool.”

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)

3 Ambiguity

[Copi, Cohen and McMahon, pp. 152] Identify and explain the fallacies of ambiguity that appear in the following passages:

(A) No man will take counsel, but every man will take money: therefore money is better than counsel. *Jonathan Swift*

4 Identifying and discussing fallacies

[Copi, Cohen and McMahon, chapter 5] Each of the following passages may be plausibly criticized by some who conclude that it contains a fallacy, but each may be defended by some who deny that the argument is fallacious. Discuss the merits of the argument in each passage, and explain why you conclude that it does (or does not) contain a fallacy. Explain why, in the case of some, it may be plausibly argued that what appears at first to be a fallacy is not, when the argument is interpreted correctly.

(A) The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people actually desire it.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863)

(B) The Inquisition must have been justified and beneficial, if whole peoples invoked and defended it, if men of the loftiest souls founded and created it severally and impartially, and its very adversaries applied it on their own account, pyre answering to pyre.

Benedetto Croce, *Philosophy of the Practical* (1935)

(C) If science wishes to argue that we cannot know what was going on in [the gorilla] Binti's head when she acted as she did, science must also acknowledge that it cannot prove that nothing was going on. It is because of our irresolvable ignorance, as much as fellow-feeling, that we should give animals the benefit of doubt and treat them with the respect we accord ourselves.

Martin Rowe and Mia Macdonald, "Let's Give Animals Respect They Deserve," *The New York Times*, 26 August 1996