
UNIT 40 PRESUPPOSITIONS, DILEMMAS AND LANGUAGE

Structure

- 40.0 Objectives
- 40.1 Introduction
- 40.2 Valid and Invalid Arguments: More Examples
 - 40.2.1 The Syllogism
 - 40.2.2 Begging the Question, or Arguing in a Circle
- 40.3 Presuppositions
- 40.4 The Dilemma
- 40.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 40.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

40.0 OBJECTIVES

- to introduce you to the syllogism, the argument in a circle, and other such forms of valid and invalid arguments,
- to encourage you to find examples of these argument types in the world around you, and
- to sensitize you to the language forms that may play a part in formulating these arguments.

40.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall look at a few remaining well-known examples of good and bad argument. Many of these examples are in the form of interesting stories that are easy to remember. Use these stories in two ways: to improve your thinking skills, and to read, remember and re-tell as interesting stories, when you are wondering how to keep up a conversation with your friends! More seriously, use these skeletal arguments to judge whether what you hear and see around you is well argued, or not.

We begin with the well-known form of argument called the syllogism.

40.2 VALID AND INVALID ARGUMENTS: MORE EXAMPLES

40.2.1 The Syllogism

The syllogism is a tool for reasoning. It is an old form of skeletal argument. A classic example of a syllogism is the following:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The syllogism consists of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. A premise is a statement the truth of which is assumed – it does not have to be proved.

Here is another example of a syllogism.

Delhi is in India.	[major premise]
I live in Delhi.	[minor premise]
Therefore, I live in India.	[conclusion]

There is a way in which a syllogism can be wrongly constructed, which leads to a fallacy or an unsound argument. To see this, consider the following argument, which is obviously wrong:

All cats are four-legged animals.	[major premise]
All dogs are four-legged animals.	[minor premise]

Therefore, dogs are cats.

What has gone wrong? The error is one of “assuming the consequent”. The major premise has two parts: the antecedent (all cats), and the consequent (are four-legged animals). In the minor premise, the consequent (are four-legged animals) is assumed. But if we look at the examples of the valid arguments above, we see that the minor premise should have assumed the antecedent: it should be of the form:

X is a cat.

Then the argument would have the form:

All cats are four-legged animals.	[major premise]
Wimbledon is a cat.	[minor premise]
Therefore, Wimbledon is a four-legged animal.	[conclusion]

These simple examples are easy to appreciate. It would surprise you, therefore, to see that many arguments in fact commit the fallacy of assuming the consequent, and this becomes apparent only if we reduce these arguments to their skeletal form.

Suppose you exclaim: “This writer is always criticizing us! She is our enemy.” Is your conclusion valid? To see if it is, try spelling it out as a syllogism.

Our enemies criticize us.	
This writer criticizes us.	
Therefore, this writer is our enemy.	

This syllogism commits the error of assuming the consequent.

To construct a valid argument for the same statement, we must restate the major premise.

Those who criticize us are our enemies.	
This writer criticizes us.	
Therefore, this writer is our enemy.	

But now your argument is making a very questionable assumption: that anyone who criticizes us is an enemy. In this way your premise is laid bare to inspection.

We can see the same error in statements of the form “If...then”, or conditionals. For example, compare the valid argument on the left with the unsound argument on the right:

If it rains, the grass is wet.
It has rained.

Therefore, the grass must be wet.

If it rains, the grass is wet.
The grass is wet.

Therefore, it must have rained.

✓ **Check Your Progress 1**

Which of the following arguments are valid, and which are not? Why not?

1. If you are intelligent, you speak good English.
He speaks good English.
Therefore, he is intelligent.

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2. Those who speak good English are intelligent.
He speaks good English.
Therefore, he is intelligent.

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3. If you are a criminal, you go to jail.
Pandit Nehru and Gandhiji have gone to jail.
Therefore, they are criminals.

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4. Where there's fire, there's smoke.
There is smoke here.
Therefore, there is a fire here.

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5. If you are lazy, you are poor.
This man is poor.
Therefore, he is lazy.

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6. If you try hard, you will succeed; or where there's a will, there's a way.
You did not succeed; or you did not find a way to do this.
Therefore, you did not try hard; or Therefore, you lacked the will to find the way.

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40.2.2 Begging the Question, or Arguing in a Circle

The general form of the circular argument is:

‘P is true because of Q; Q is true because of P.’

Here is an example.

i. ‘Mr Mani is an authority on English, because he works at the English university.’

Suppose we ask: What qualifies Mr. Mani to work there? Suppose we are then told:

- ii. 'Mr Mani works at the English university because he is an authority on English.'

Then the argument has come full circle.

Let us take a known fact, such as that litmus paper turns red in an acidic solution. Suppose you have in front of you an unknown piece of paper and an unknown solution. You dip the piece of paper in the solution and say:

- i. 'This solution must be acidic because it turned this paper red.'
ii. 'This paper must be litmus paper because it turned red in this solution.'

Your argument is logically fallacious, because it is circular. You have no independent evidence for the truth of either proposition: either that the solution is acidic, or that the paper is litmus paper.

Now in the real world the chances are that if a piece of paper turns red in a solution, you do conjecture that the solution must be acidic, and the paper must be litmus paper. But these are conjectures (= guesses) rather than logically valid inferences, for it is possible that there are solutions other than acidic ones that have this effect on paper other than litmus.

Here is another example.

- i. 'Classical music is better than pop music; all the best critics say so.'

And who are the best critics?

- ii. 'The best critics are those who like classical music better than pop music!'

Logically this argument is circular, whether or not you agree with its premises and conclusions.

Circular arguments often occur when the definition of a term is changed during the course of an argument, to suit the conclusion we wish to reach. Suppose your friend argues that religious people are better human beings than those who are not religious, because religious people are more dutiful, or do not hurt or harm others, or kill others. Suppose you respond with examples of people who were religious, but were quite irresponsible, or committed a variety of crimes. Then your friend replies, "Oh, those were not truly religious people".

What has happened? Your friend has changed the definition of "religious" to include "is dutiful and does not commit crimes". But this was the very conclusion she was trying to argue for. The question whether a religious person is more moral than others has been begged by the revised definition of a "truly" religious person as someone who is dutiful and does not a crime. What should have been proved has been assumed.

Whenever we react to an "exception to a rule" by saying that someone or something is not a "true" or "real" instance of some category, we are changing the definition of the category to suit our purpose. Vegetarians are virtuous; Americans are industrious; Indians are never on time ... these overgeneralizations can all be refuted by giving instances where they do not hold. If now instead of revising our generalization suitably, we react by rejecting the problematic instances as not valid instances of the category concerned, we are changing the definition of the category to include the conclusion. We are begging the question, or arguing in a circle.

The same fallacy may occur when we hold a belief about some country or community,

and an example is brought to our attention that challenges the belief. Instead of changing our belief, we create a new category. For example, we may believe that those who dress shabbily are intellectually inferior. We are told that some artists and poets tend to dress in the way we disapprove of. Instead of changing our belief that dress is an indicator of intellectual capacities, we say, "Oh, artists and poets are like that – they are exceptional."

By begging the question in this fashion we can continue to hold negative beliefs about people of certain nationalities or communities. Every time we meet a person who does not fit our stereotype, we create a new category for such persons, leaving our original beliefs unaltered.

√ **Check Your Progress 2**

7. State the argument in this story clearly, by stating clearly its premises and conclusions.

The story of the thieves and the pearls (attributed to the French comedian Sacha Guitry)

Some thieves are arguing over a division of seven pearls, worth a king's ransom (i.e., the pearls are so valuable that they could serve to ransom a king).

One of the thieves hands two pearls to the man on his right, and two pearls to the man on his left.

"I," he says, "will keep three."
"How come you keep three?"
"Because I am the leader."
"Oh, but how come you're the leader?"
"Because I have more pearls!"

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8. Suppose you assert all that swans are white. Someone tells you that they saw a black swan in a lake. You say that the black "swan" is not really a swan, and therefore still maintain that all swans are white. Is your reasoning correct?

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9. A question is asked: Is there life on Mars or Venus? Space probes are sent out, and return with the finding that there is no life on Mars or Venus. You are a believer in extra-terrestrial life. You refuse to accept that there is no life on Mars or Venus: "All that has been proved is that the human brain is incapable of perceiving Martian and Venusian forms of life." Is your reasoning correct?

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10. Suppose someone brings you some medicine with the words, "If you have faith, you will be cured". Is it possible to objectively say whether the medicine worked or did not work?

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40.3 PRESUPPOSITIONS

An informal name for presuppositions is 'many questions'.

The story is told of a lawyer who asked a man, "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

Try to answer this question. If your answer is "no", it means that you still beat your wife.

If your answer is "yes", it means you used to beat your wife! Either way, you are guilty of beating your wife.

The problem is with the question. It assumes that you beat your wife, and asks only whether you have stopped doing so. In order to show your innocence, you have to question the presupposition in the lawyer's question. You have to deny that you ever beat your wife. You cannot simply answer the question as it is asked.

Words like begin or start, continue or go on, and stop or cease all trigger a presupposition. Take a look at these examples.

I began to exercise everyday. [began to presupposes that you were not exercising earlier]

I continued to exercise while on holiday. [continued to presupposes that you were exercising earlier, i.e., before your holiday]

I stopped exercising when I fell ill. [stopped presupposes that you used to exercise earlier]

Descriptive words may also come with their own presuppositions. Suppose you have been arrested by mistake after the death of your wife, and are taking comfort in the fact that the law assumes that you are innocent until you are proved guilty. The prosecutor points to you and says: "This scoundrel hounded his wife to her grave ..." You have every right to object to the prosecutor's language, because it assumes what needs to be proved. If it is proved that you are guilty, you would indeed be a "scoundrel who hounded his wife ..." But calling you a scoundrel before the question of your guilt has been decided begs the question whether you are guilty. This is the very question that has to be decided, so the use of such language only serves to arouse negative emotions, and obscures the issue.

The word when, if it introduces an event, presupposes that the event will happen. Look at these examples.

Shut the door when you leave. [presupposes that you will leave]

In contrast, the word if does not presuppose that the event it introduces will happen.

So it is odd to say “Shut the door if you leave”. But which of the two notices below do you prefer?

‘Do not use the lift when there is a fire’.

‘Do not use the lift if there is a fire’.

The first wording, when there is a fire, appears to suggest that some day, there will be a fire. The second wording, if there is a fire, leaves this possibility open.

In fact, there seems to be a scale from a clear presupposition of fire to a clear lack of a presupposition of fire in the four examples below:

...when there is a fire

... in the event of fire

... in case there is a fire

...if there is a fire

All this goes to show that presuppositions are shared knowledge: knowledge about the world and about language. So in a situation where fires are not common and not expected, it is odd to say “Do not use the lift when there is a fire”. If power cuts are common, however, it seems quite acceptable to say: “Use the stairs when there is no power,” although it may seem unnecessary to say so.

40.4 THE DILEMMA

You have probably informally used the expression “I’m in a dilemma” many times, and are familiar with the expression “on the horns of a dilemma.” A dilemma is a situation in which you have to choose between two undesirable things or courses of action. These are the “horns” of the dilemma.

Here is a story, The sophist, illustrating a famous Greek dilemma. A sophist (a person clever in argumentation) advertised that any pupil of his would win his first case at law, or else he would not have to pay any fees for his instruction – his instruction would be free. One clever pupil completed the course, and then announced that he would not practise law. He therefore refused to pay his fees.

The sophist sued the pupil for his fees. The pupil said,

“If I win the case, I do not pay the fees, by the judgment of the court.

If I lose the case, I do not pay the fees, by the original agreement.”

Either way, the pupil suggested, the sophist would not get his fees.
How did the sophist escape the dilemma?

The sophist replied, “On the contrary:

If you win the case, you pay the fees, by the original agreement.

If you lose the case, you pay the fees, by the judgment of the court.”

Notice that the sophist has reversed the argument. This is one of the three ways of getting out of a dilemma. The three ways are:

- i) Reverse the argument
- ii) Take it by the horns (show that one of the alternatives is not undesirable)
- iii) Go between the horns (point out an additional possibility, a third solution to the situation)

- A dilemma is a situation in which you have to choose between two undesirable things or courses of action. These are the “horns” of the dilemma.
- There are three ways of getting out of a dilemma:
 - i) Reverse the argument
 - ii) Take it by the horns (show that one of the alternatives is not undesirable)
 - iii) Go between the horns (point out an additional possibility, a third solution to the situation)

40.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Invalid argument: assumes the consequent
2. Valid argument
3. Invalid argument: assumes the consequent
4. Invalid argument: assumes the consequent
5. Invalid argument: assumes the consequent
6. Invalid argument: assumes the consequent

Check Your Progress 2

7. At issue is the question: Who is the leader? The answer to this is the desired conclusion.
 - i. X has more pearls (premise), therefore X is the leader (conclusion).
Why does X have more pearls?
 - ii. X is the leader (premise), so he has more pearls (conclusion)!

This is arguing in a circle, or begging the question. The conclusion of the first argument has become the premise of the second argument.

8. You have assumed a definition of the swan that includes the colour white, thus begging the question, or arguing in a circle. You have assumed what needed to be proved. You are also guilty of creating a new category to accommodate the new fact.
9. You have changed the definition of life, thereby arguing in a circle or begging the question whether there is life on Mars and Venus.
10. No, because if you are cured, the medicine has worked, and by assumption, you must have had faith. If you are not cured, by assumption, you did not get cured because of a lack of faith! The medicine was not to blame. Heads I win, tails you lose.

Check Your Progress 3

11. i-ii) ‘When’ presupposes that you will graduate, so it sounds more polite than ‘if,’ which suggests that you may not graduate after all!

iii-iv) 'If I grow up' sounds odd, as it seems to assume that you may not grow up.

v-vi) 'When' makes the person sound more confident about his or her chances of going abroad, because it presupposes that this will happen.

12. The leader is proposing a form of a dilemma: Either we agree to single party government, or we let Satan govern the country. (S)he is assuming that the single party now governing the country is god's party. The argument is: in a religious state,

'If there is only one party, it is the party of God.

If a second party is allowed, it will be the party of Satan.'

We can reverse this dilemma and say,

'If there is only one party, it is the party of Sa'

If a second party is allowed, it will be the party of God.'

13. The leader begins by refuting the proposition "The entire country is in your hands:" "This country is not in my hands. It is in the hands of the people."

Why is it in the hands of the people? "... because it was the people who handed the country over" to him/ her ("the person who is their servant").

But notice that once a thing is "handed over", it is no longer "in the hands of" the people who first had it.

One could say the question is being begged what "in the hands of" means. Does it mean actually in the hands of the person speaking, or "in the hands of" someone at some time in the past, who voluntarily handed a thing over? The normal sense of the term "in the hands of" is being changed in this argument to "on behalf of."

There is also a use of terms that carry their own presuppositions: "servant" instead of "leader" suggests humility rather than arrogance, powerlessness rather than power.