Most instances of the fallacies discussed in the previous chapter fall into the broad fallacy categories questionable premise or suppressed evidence. Most of the fallacies to be discussed in this and the next chapter belong to the genus invalid inference.

1. **Ad Hominem Argument**

There is a famous and perhaps apocryphal story lawyers like to tell that nicely captures the flavor of this fallacy. In Great Britain, the practice of law is divided between solicitors, who prepare cases for trial, and barristers, who argue the cases in court. The story concerns a particular barrister who, depending on the solicitor to prepare his case, arrived in court with no prior knowledge of the case he was to plead, where he found an exceedingly thin brief, which when opened contained just one note: “No case; abuse the plaintiff’s attorney.” If the barrister did as instructed, he was guilty of arguing *ad hominem*—of attacking his opponent rather than his opponent’s evidence and arguments. (An *ad hominem* argument, literally, is an argument “to the person.”)

Both liberals and conservatives are the butt of this fallacy much too often. Not long after Barack Obama was elected to the Senate, Rush Limbaugh repeatedly referred to him as “Obama Osama” when criticizing the senator and the Democrats in general. While this may have been intended as a humorous play on words, the underlying *ad hominem* is unmistakable. And Limbaugh (as well as other radio hosts) often referred to him as “Barack Hussein Obama,” not to clarify his full name but to link him to Saddam Hussein. John McCain suffered similar attacks. In the run-up to the primary...
elections in 2008, Vietnam War Veterans Against McCain sent out fliers that accused him of selling out his fellow prisoners of war in Vietnam to save his own skin. In fact, McCain refused an early release offered by the North Vietnamese and stayed in prison with his fellow POWs. In both cases the candidates were attacked, not their political positions.

It is important not to confuse *ad hominem* arguments with those in which the fallacy is *straw man*. The difference is that *straw man* attacks misrepresent an opponent’s position, whereas those that are *ad hominem* abuse an opponent directly.

**Attacks on Character or Credentials Sometimes Are Relevant**

Although attacks on a person usually are irrelevant to that individual’s arguments or claims, sometimes they are very relevant indeed. Lawyers who attack the testimony of courtroom witnesses by questioning their expertise or character are not necessarily guilty of arguing *ad hominem*. They may be trying to gauge the integrity of the witness to determine whether his or her testimony is credible.

The judgment of expert witnesses may be particularly difficult to assess because they often express opinions or arguments against which the typical layperson is unable to argue directly. When doctors, lawyers, or other experts testify, often the best we can do is try to evaluate their honesty or judgment. Evidence that a psychologist testifying in court has been convicted of perjury, or spends a great deal of time testifying in court, would be good reason to prefer the conflicting testimony of experts on the other side of the case.

Of course, negative evidence concerning an expert rarely proves that the authority’s pronouncements are false. At best, character attacks just provide grounds for disregarding their testimony, not for deciding that it is false. If a doctor who advises operating on a patient turns out to be held in low esteem in the profession, it is rash to conclude that therefore no operation is necessary.

What has just been said about attacking the credentials of experts applies to organizations and their pronouncements as well. For example, that a research organization receives most of its funds from the pharmaceutical industry and also regularly issues reports favorable to drug company interests constitutes a very good reason to be suspicious of its output.

**Guilt by Association**

One of the important variations on *ad hominem* argument is that of *guilt by association*. According to an old saying, people can be judged by the company they keep. But is this true? Is it rational to judge people in this way?

The answer is that it is—up to a point and under certain circumstances. In the absence of contrary evidence, a man frequently seen in the company of several different women known to be prostitutes is rightly suspected of being connected with their occupation. Similarly, a person who frequently associates with several known agents of a foreign government is rightly suspected of being an agent of that government.

But suspicion is very different from certitude. Judgments based on a person’s associations rarely have a high degree of probability. Suspecting that someone uses the services of prostitutes is much different from knowing that he does. (It is, however, good reason to look further, assuming we care enough about the matter.) Someone frequently
in the company of prostitutes may turn out to be a sociologist conducting an investigation. A person often seen in the company of foreign spies may turn out to be a friendly counterspy or even just an associate.

Establishing guilt by association between politicians is particularly tricky. When Jack Abramoff, the Republican lobbyist, was indicted for bribery and corruption, a photograph of him shaking hands with the second President Bush hit the media. The obvious implication was that Bush was involved in Abramoff’s nefarious activities, though there was no evidence to suggest that he had ever been with the lobbyist except at a few White House receptions, where it is customary for the president to shake hands with guests. Bush, himself, denied knowing Abramoff at a news conference in January 2006. However, Abramoff claimed that he had seen Bush in almost a dozen settings, and Secret Service records revealed that he had made at least seven visits to the White House—six in 2001 and one in 2004. But so far there is no evidence that Bush was in cahoots with Abramoff and probably there never will be. Unless ongoing investigations prove otherwise, the president cannot be charged with guilt by association.

2. Two Wrongs Make a Right

Those who try to justify a wrong by pointing to a similar wrong perpetrated by others often are guilty of the fallacy sometimes called two wrongs make a right (traditional name: *tu quoque*—“you’re another”). For example, in the 2000 presidential election, over 1,900 Palm Beach County, Florida, citizens voted for two candidates for the same office, thus invalidating their ballots. Democratic Party representatives claimed that the vast majority of these double votes resulted from confusion brought on by an illegally designed ballot, thwarting voter intent. A Republican Party spokesperson dismissed their complaint by pointing out that in the 1996 presidential election over 15,000 ballots in Palm Beach County were invalidated for that reason, without creating a huge uproar. But surely, the fact that the 1996 election had a problem does not justify having the same problem in the year 2000.

Justifying a vengeful retaliation in sports may fall into this category as well. In recent years the baseball commissioner has clamped down on aggressive acts of retaliation between players by fining and suspending them for violence on the field. But in the rough-and-tumble “good old days,” retaliation was the way they settled scores. If a pitcher hit the batter, one of the players on the other team would take him down by sliding into first base, cleats high, when the pitcher was covering the base. The umpires would turn a blind eye, and the players would get revenge and the satisfaction of taking care of the problem themselves. Nonetheless, slamming into a player, like a fullback, because a pitcher on the other team knocked down a batter is using one wrong to justify another.

**Fighting Fire with Fire**

Like most other fallacies, two wrongs seems plausible because of its resemblance to a more legitimate way of reasoning—in this case to the plausible idea that we sometimes are justified in “fighting fire with fire.” Killing in self-defense illustrates this nicely.

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1For more discussion of retaliatory behavior in baseball see, “End of an Age that was Rule by Retaliation,” by Murray Chass, *New York Times*, March 18, 2008.
We feel justified in fighting one evil (the unjustified attack on our own life) by doing what otherwise would constitute another evil (taking the life of the attacker). So the two wrongs fallacy is not automatically committed every time one wrong is counteracted by another. The crucial question is whether the second wrong is genuinely needed to fight, or counteract, the first.²

²This passes over questions concerning retributive justice. If retributivists are right, we sometimes are justified in punishing those guilty of unfairly harming others even though in doing so we fail to fight the original harm (or fail to rehabilitate the criminal or deter others from similar offenses).
**Two Wrongs and Hypocrisy**

The two wrongs fallacy also sometimes seems plausible—not fallacious—for another reason: Those who argue this way may intend to imply that their opponents are being hypocritical, and often this charge is accurate and may even have some merit. The town drunk isn’t the one to tell us we’ve had one too many and are making fools of ourselves, even if we are. (That’s the import of the reply, “You’re a fine one to talk.”) Similarly, the philanderer who finds out about his wife’s infidelity is hardly the one to complain that she has deceived him. But when we become outraged at the chutzpah of our accusers, we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that their hypocrisy doesn’t justify our own failures.

**Common Practice and Traditional Wisdom**

As the traditional Latin name *tu quoque* suggests, the fallacy two wrongs make a right originally was intended to cover only those cases in which an individual or group responds to a charge by charging the accuser or accusers with a similar crime. But over time, it has come to take in related, indeed overlapping, sorts of fallacious arguments. One of these is common practice, committed when a wrong is justified on the grounds that one other person or group, but rather lots of, or most, or even all others do the same sort of thing.

For example, when former Senator George Mitchell released an explosive report naming baseball players who took anabolic steroids, many hard-core fans defended superstars like Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, and Mark McGwire. They argued that these players were taking steroids because lots of other players took them. Since the performance level of everyone on drugs was much better than before, the competition was keener. “How can you blame these guys?” one fan asked. “They did what they had to do to stay competitive.” Well, you can blame them, of course, for rationalizing that it was okay to take performance-enhancing drugs because it was common practice to do so.

Another example is the all-too-common rationalization students use for cheating on tests or plagiarizing papers: “Everyone is doing it.” That may well be, but common practice is hardly justification for academic dishonesty—particularly from a teacher’s point of view.

A related fallacy, sometimes called traditional wisdom, is committed when a wrong or an unsuitable practice is justified on grounds that it follows a traditional or accepted way of doing things. We do, of course, want to learn from past experiences, so we shouldn’t assume that just because things have been done certain ways in the past, that way must be the right, or best, way now. All innovations go against past practices—from the introduction of plows that dig deeper furrows (resisted by North African farmers on the grounds that their fathers and grandfathers had farmed the traditional way) to the elimination of practices based on racial, religious, or gender bias in the United States or to do away with practices based on the caste system in India, which force “untouchables” to do dirty work, such as collecting “night soil.” (Interestingly, new methods of planting seeds without plowing at all may make deep furrow plowing obsolete in its turn.)

In some cases, practices that once made perfect sense no longer do because of changing circumstances or increased knowledge. In others, the fallacy in arguing for
the retention of common practices is due to the wrongheadedness or unfairness of those old ways of doing things. Those who benefit from these practices find it hard to entertain the idea that there could possibly be anything wrong with them. In England, for instance, women for centuries had no legal rights under the common law. It wasn’t just that women were disenfranchised. Fathers could marry a daughter to whomever they pleased, and after marriage a woman’s husband became the owner of her property. It took a very long time for these and similar legal injustices to be rectified; they were defended, for one thing, on the grounds that women had no legal rights because they never had had any. (In nineteenth-century England and America, the idea that women should have the vote was met with great hilarity in all-male circles of power, and political cartoons in newspapers and magazines poked fun at “lady suffragettes.”)

It’s often easier to see the questionable nature of customs in distant times or other cultures than in one’s own. Consider the centuries-old tradition in some Middle Eastern countries of “honor” killing, the practice of killing girls or women who have sexual relations out of wedlock. In the Arab world, an unchaste woman brings shame on the family and sometimes the relatives themselves kill her to “cleanse the honor” that has been soiled. Hundreds of women are killed for reasons of honor each year. Yet activists trying to tighten the laws against honor killings are faced with massive opposition that portrays their campaign as an assault on Arab ways. The traditional wisdom is that an unchaste woman deserves to die.

Similar remarks apply to other societies, a very important example being India, where there also is the inhuman practice of murdering a wife whose family fails to come up with a sufficiently large dowry. Note also that in many Middle Eastern and African countries, traditional wisdom requires that young girls, just before puberty, be given a clitorectomy so as to reduce the temptation to engage in sex out of wedlock.

Of course, those who conform to these customs see them as good; it is other people, both inside and outside these cultures, who find fault with them. The point is that traditional beliefs need to be reevaluated and changed when found wanting.

But, again, we don’t want to go overboard. Every change brings with it risks that may not have been calculated correctly. The “three strikes and you’re out” bills, for example, were generally enacted without careful consideration of the likely consequences of such a serious departure from past practice. The point of such a bill is to assure that those who repeatedly commit serious violent crimes are not released from jail to again commit heinous offenses. But most of these measures enacted so far fail to distinguish correctly between seriously violent repeat felons and others or to consider the cost of incarcerating criminals long past the time when they are likely to commit violent crimes (most of which are committed by young men). They also fail to take account of the motivation these bills provide for two-time losers to shoot to kill rather than allow themselves to be captured and tried a third time.

W. Somerset Maugham summed things up nicely when he said, “Tradition is a guide, not a jailer.”

3Successful resistance to this paternal power forms an important subplot in eighteenth-century novelist Henry Fielding’s psychologically insightful novel Tom Jones, made into a charming movie in the 1960s, a must-see for all movie buffs.
3. **Irrelevant Reason (Non Sequitur)**

Traditional logic textbooks often discuss a fallacy called *non sequitur* (literally, “it does not follow”), usually described as being committed when a conclusion does not follow logically from given premises. In this sense, any fallacy in the broad category *invalid inference* can be thought of as a non sequitur. But other writers describe this fallacy more narrowly.

Let’s replace the ambiguous term *non sequitur* with the expression *irrelevant reason*, used to refer to reasons or premises that are irrelevant to a conclusion when the error doesn’t fit a narrower fallacy category such as *ad hominem* argument or two wrongs make a right.

Both before and after the outbreak of the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf and the Iraq War in 2003, many Americans railed against antiwar demonstrators on grounds that they were giving the Iraqi leaders the idea that Americans were too soft to go to war, too decadent to take the number of casualties winning might require. (The same charge was leveled against Vietnam War protesters 20 years or so earlier.) This charge may well have been true (Iraq certainly misjudged American resolve), but it was irrelevant to the protesters’ arguments against waging war with Iraq (or to those who protested against our fighting in Vietnam).

Sometimes irrelevant arguments defy logic. Shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center, Michael Kelly had this to say in “Pacifist Claptrap.”

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Organized terrorist groups have attacked America. These groups wish the Americans to not fight. The American pacifists wish the Americans to not fight. If the Americans do not, the terrorists will attack America again. And now we know such attacks can kill many thousands of Americans. The American pacifists, therefore, are on the side of future mass murders of Americans. They are objectively pro-terrorist.
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Ah, those crafty pacifists. Little did we realize their murderous intent.

How about this excerpt from a United Airlines commercial?

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We humans are a social animal. That’s why United flies to more places than any other airline.
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This commercial says that the reason United flies to more places is that “we humans are a social animal,” a fact that is totally irrelevant to [United’s] flying to more places than competing airlines. Their use of the phrase “that’s why,” implying that a reason supports a conclusion, is completely off base. The appeal of United’s spiel is to emotion, not to brain power, not to reason. Note, by the way, that a reason is not automatically irrelevant just because it is false. For example, the old superstition about walking under a ladder bringing bad luck is false, but it isn’t irrelevant to the question whether a person should or shouldn’t engage in this practice; were it true, it would be a very good reason indeed for not walking under ladders.

Note also that a reason may be irrelevant when looking at a matter from one point of view but not from another. Take, for example, the remark by a psychological clinician, quoted in *Science News* magazine, that abandoning the old and standard ways of

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classifying mental disorder in favor of new ones “will result in denial of insurance coverage for treatment of serious psychological disturbances.” Looked at from the point of view of psychiatric theory, this remark is irrelevant, but from the point of view of psychiatric practice, it is very relevant indeed.

4. **Equivocation**

A term or expression is used *equivocally* in an argument when used to mean one thing in one place and another thing in another.\(^5\) Accepting an argument that is invalid because we are fooled by an equivocal use of language makes us guilty of the fallacy that you will not be surprised to learn is generally called **equivocation**.

When a TV evangelist said that we all should stop sinning and “be like Jesus,” someone in the audience expressed doubt that he was up to that, pointing out that, after all, “Jesus is the son of God.” In reply, the evangelist told the doubter that he could indeed stop sinning because, “You’re the son of God, too.” But the evangelist was guilty of

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\(^5\) As used in everyday life, the term *equivocation* often connotes the use of equivocation to deceive. As used here, it does not necessarily carry this connotation. We do, of course, have to remember that equivocation is frequently employed in daily life to make invalid arguments appear to be valid.
equivocation, because the doubter meant that Jesus is the son of God in the special way that (according to Christian doctrine) only Jesus is held to be, while the evangelist had to mean that the doubter was the son of God in the metaphorical sense in which (again according to Christian theology) we all are children of God.

Equivocation is a common fallacy because it often is quite hard to notice that a shift in meaning has taken place. As might be expected, given human nature, less than completely ethical manipulators frequently take advantage of the ease with which people can be fooled in this way. The sugar industry, for instance, once advertised its product with the claim that “Sugar is an essential component of the body . . . a key material in all sorts of metabolic processes,” neglecting the fact that it is glucose (blood sugar), not ordinary table sugar (sucrose), that is the vital nourishment. It’s true, of course, that table sugar does turn into blood sugar in the body, but it provides that necessary ingredient without also providing the other sorts of vital nutrients found in fruits, grains, and other more complete food sources that contain plenty of sucrose.

Advertisements of this kind for food and other health products are successful because a large majority of consumers know very little about how the body functions—what sorts of food are required for good health and what sorts are unhealthy. They tend to get their information about these vital matters from television commercials, other advertisements, and TV talk shows. So they are ready-made suckers for every fad that comes down the pike. For example, many food products have been advertised as especially healthy because they are low in cholesterol, or even cholesterol-free, while containing the usual (high) levels of fats, which the body then uses to make cholesterol. The ambiguity taken advantage of here is, again, the difference between what is in a food and what is in the bloodstream. Low blood cholesterol levels are good; low food cholesterol levels combined with high fat content definitely are not good. (Note that some foods advertised to be cholesterol free, or even fat free, contain partially hydrogenated oils, much less heart healthy than the fats listed on packages by law.)

Sometimes legal action is taken against companies for misleading advertising. When Phillip Morris was sued for deceiving smokers into thinking “light” cigarettes were less harmful than regular ones, a company spokesman said that the word light referred to taste, not content, but surely he was equivocating. Most smokers would tend to think that “light” meant that the cigarettes had less tar and nicotine—if only to rationalize their bad habit.

Interestingly, terms that can be used either relatively or absolutely, like rich and poor, sometimes cause trouble. Poverty, for instance, is exceedingly unpleasant anywhere, at any time. But the poor in the United States today are richer in absolute terms with respect to material wealth than the vast majority of people who lived in days of old or who live today in the so-called Third World countries of Africa, Central and South America, and Asia. This important truth is masked by the fact that the term poor, in its relative sense, does apply to those Americans who are poor compared to other Americans, although rich compared to most people who lived in the past or who live in Third World countries today. (Do we make ourselves perfectly clear?)

**But Ambiguity Often Serves Useful Purposes**

Students sometimes get the idea that ambiguity, certainly equivocation, always is bad. But it isn’t. Ambiguous uses of language, especially metaphorical ones, and even equivocations, can be employed for all kinds of good purposes. The well-known psychologist,
Carl Rogers, for example, used equivocation very effectively in the following passage to emphasize a point:

As a boy I was rather sickly, and my parents have told me that it was predicted I would die young. This prediction has been proven completely wrong in one sense, but has come profoundly true in another sense. I think it is correct that I will never live to be old. So I now agree with the prediction that I will die young.  

Ambiguous uses of language also serve to grease the wheels of social intercourse. Benjamin Disraeli, the nineteenth-century British prime minister, often used ambiguity to soften his replies to letters, while still coming close to being truthful, as in his reply to an unsolicited amateur manuscript: “Many thanks; I shall lose no time in reading it.” (In most other contexts, of course, equivocation of this kind is rightly considered to be rather sneaky.)

Ambiguity also serves very useful purposes in literature, particularly in metaphoric passages. It enables writers to introduce multiple meanings quickly into a text in a way that adds significance to what is being said by drawing attention to often rather subtle connections without hitting us over the head with them. For example, the title of Joseph Conrad’s great novel *Heart of Darkness* doesn’t refer just to the central part of the African jungle but also captures some of the moral horror of the principal character, Kurtz, succumbing to the dark temptations of colonial African life, and by extension it draws attention to the corruption and depravity “civilized” people are capable of when they give in to their base instincts. It also suggests the appalling abuses of power resulting from the exploitation of Africans and their lands by European colonials at the turn of the century. The ambiguity lurking in the title of Conrad’s novel thus prepares us for the complex moral issues addressed in his classic work.

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6Carl Rogers, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Fall 1980).
5. Appeal to Ignorance

When good reasons are lacking, the rational conclusion to draw is that we just don’t know. But when we greatly desire to believe something, it’s tempting to take the absence of evidence, and thus absence of refutation, as justification for believing that it is true. Doing this makes us guilty of the fallacy appeal to ignorance (traditionally known as argumentum ad ignorantiam). Some people have argued, for example, that we should believe there is no intelligent life on other planets anywhere in our galaxy, since no one has been able to prove that there is; indeed, until recently, when the existence of other planets was confirmed, it was sometimes argued that there were no planets anywhere other than our own tight little island.

The fallacy in this sort of reasoning can be seen by turning it on its head. If appeals to ignorance could prove that no life exists on other planets, then it equally well could prove just the opposite. After all, no one has proved that life does not exist on any of these planets. In the absence of good evidence for a claim, the right thing to do is to be agnostic on the issue, to neither believe nor disbelieve. Ignorance proves nothing, except, of course, that we are ignorant. During the Iraq War, the Bush administration could have said that the opposition was guilty of appeal to ignorance when it claimed that because no weapons of mass destruction were found, there must not be any hidden weapons. As of this writing, they still haven't been found, but you never know—they may turn up.

There are, however, cases in which the failure of a search does count against a claim. That happens when whatever is searched for would very likely have been found if it existed. Given all the sky watching that has gone on in the past 10,000 years, the claim that there exists a planet-sized object between Earth and Mars is disproved by the failure of anyone to observe it. Similarly, the failure to find evidence of a virus in a blood test justifies a doctor's conclusion that we aren't infected with that virus. These are cases not of reasoning from ignorance but rather of reasoning from the knowledge that we would have found the item looked for if it had been there to find.

In 1950, when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (Republican, Wisconsin), was asked about the fortieth name on a list of 81 names of people he claimed were communists working for the United States Department of State, he responded that “I do not have much information on this except the general statement of the agency that there is nothing in the files to disprove his communist connections.” Many of McCarthy’s followers took this absence of evidence as proof that the person in question was indeed a communist, a good example of the fallacy of appeal to ignorance. This example also illustrates the importance of not being taken in by this fallacy. McCarthy never backed up his charges with a single bit of relevant evidence, yet for several years he enjoyed great popularity and power, and his witch hunt ruined many innocent lives before, finally, McCarthy and “McCarthyism” were brought down in congressional hearings that revealed the true character of this miserable person.
Note, however, the importance of appropriately searching. That telescopes have searched the sky for several hundred years, and naked eyes for thousands, without spotting a god up there proves absolutely nothing about the existence of a god in the sky, since deities are not conceived of as the kind of entities that can be seen in this way.

6. Composition and Division

The fallacy of composition, also sometimes called the salesman's fallacy, but more accurately the consumer's fallacy, is committed when someone assumes that a particular item must have a certain property because all of its parts have that property. Auto dealers, for example, frequently try to get prospective customers to fall for this fallacy by touting low monthly payments while neglecting total costs, hoping their marks will assume that if the monthly payments are low, then the total cost must be low also. Washers and dryers used to be sold by telling customers that it takes “only 50 cents a day” to buy one. Of course, 50 cents a day adds up to $365 in two years (a lot of money until rather recently), something buyers seldom thought to figure out even though the arithmetic involved is on the grade school level.

The fallacy of division is committed when we assume that all (or some) of the parts of an item have a particular property because the item as a whole has it. The fallacy of division thus is the mirror image of the fallacy of composition. While infrequently fallen for in everyday life, cases do happen. An example is concluding that all the rooms in a large, fancy, hotel must be large, as guests often do when making reservations at places such as the posh Plaza Hotel in New York (where in fact lots of rooms are rather tiny).

7. Slippery Slope

In a typical slippery slope argument, an action is objected to on the grounds that once it is taken, another, and then perhaps still another, are bound to be taken, down a “slippery slope,” until some undesirable consequence results. According to a slightly different version, whatever would justify taking the first step would also justify all the others, but since the last step isn’t justified, the first isn’t, either.

Arguing that a slope is slippery without providing good reason for thinking that it is, or when the slope clearly is not, makes us guilty of the slippery slope fallacy. For example, a Canadian-style “single-payer” health care system has often been objected

Earlier editions of this text at this point had a section on a variation of the fallacy slippery slope called the domino theory. Back in the nasty old Cold War days, dominoes were alleged to be in danger of falling all over the globe. Perhaps the chief reason advanced by the Johnson and Nixon administrations for our involvement in the war in Vietnam was that if Vietnam fell to the communists, the rest of Southeast Asia would also, and then countries in Central America (Nicaragua, El Salvador, and so on) and even parts of South America (in particular, Chile). Although we were defeated in Vietnam, it is primarily communist dominoes that have fallen—perhaps the reason that the domino theory has gone out of fashion.
to on grounds that it is a kind of socialized medicine and that its adoption would lead to socialized insurance of all kinds, socialized railroads, airlines, and so on, without sufficient reason being presented for believing this would be the case. (Are there any?) It also sometimes is argued that whatever would justify a single-payer system of health care also would justify all sorts of other socialistic measures, again without justifying this conclusion.

Note, however, that some slopes may well be slippery. The slippery slope fallacy is committed only when we accept without further justification or argument that once the first step is taken, the others are going to follow, or that whatever would justify the first step would in fact justify the rest. Consider this explanation of an economic slide that could have occurred after the housing market crashed in 2007.7

As homeowners see the value of their homes decline, they become more likely to delay purchases of the big items—like automobiles, electronics and home appliances—that are ballasts of the American economy. When those purchases decline, large manufacturing firms, suddenly short on funds, could begin laying off employees. Those workers, uncertain about the future, might in turn stop buying Starbucks lattes and movie tickets, and in a worst-case scenario, that could spur coffee shops and theaters to begin layoffs of their own.

This may seem like a slippery slope fallacy at first glance, but a similar chain reaction did occur during the Great Depression in 1929, resulting in persistent, widespread unemployment. It was, indeed, a slippery slope and one that threatened to repeat itself when the credit markets froze up, and the stock market plunged in 2008.

**Summary of Chapter 4**

1. *Ad hominem argument*: An irrelevant attack on an opponent rather than on the opponent’s evidence or arguments. *Example*: Rush Limbaugh calling Barack Obama “Obama Osama.” Note, however, that not all character attacks are fallacious, as they may not be when challenging the integrity of an allegedly expert witness.

   We’re guilty of the variation on this fallacy called *guilt by association* when we judge someone guilty solely on the basis of the company that person keeps.

2. *Two wrongs make a right*: Justifying a wrong by pointing to a similar wrong perpetrated by others. *Example*: Baseball players justifying aggressive retaliation against a pitcher on the other team because he hit a batter and knocked him down. Note, however, that when fighting fire with fire, what would otherwise be a wrong often isn’t, as when someone kills in self-defense.

   Although there is an air of hypocrisy to a charge coming from an equally guilty party, this doesn’t make an accurate charge any less on target.

   *Variations*: *Common practice*, in which a wrong is justified because commonly engaged in. *Traditional wisdom*, in which a wrong is justified because that’s the way things always have been done.

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3. **Irrelevant reason:** Trying to prove something with evidence that is or comes close to being irrelevant. (Some other term, such as *ad hominem argument*, may also apply.) *Example:* Countering the claims of antiwar protesters by arguing that antiwar talk tells the enemy we don’t have the resolve to fight.

4. **Equivocation:** Using a term or expression in an argument in one sense in one place and another sense in another. *Example:* The TV evangelist’s use of the expression “son of God” to refer to Jesus Christ and to a parishioner. Note, however, that intentional ambiguity, even equivocation, is not always fallacious. It isn’t, for example, when used for metaphoric effect.

5. **Appeal to ignorance:** Arguing that the failure to find evidence refuting a claim justifies believing that it is true. *Example:* Arguing that there is no intelligent life on other planets since no one has been able to prove there is. Note, however, that the failure of *appropriate* searches sometimes does support rejection of a claim.

6. **Composition:** Assuming that an item has a certain property because all or most of its parts have that property. *Example:* Assuming a commodity is inexpensive because of low installment payments.

   **Division:** Assuming that all or most parts of an item have a property because the whole item has it. *Example:* Assuming the rooms in a large hotel are large.

7. **Slippery slope:** Accepting a claim that a slope is slippery when no or insufficient reason has been presented to justify that claim. *Example:* Arguing that adoption of a single-payer health plan will lead to adoption of all sorts of other socialistic measures.

**Exercise 4-1**

Determine which fallacies (if any) occur in the following short passages and justify your answers (as you did when working on Exercise 3-1). (Some of these passages may contain fallacies discussed in the previous chapter.)


2. In a column about *The Assault on Reason*, by Al Gore, David Brooks roundly criticized the book, but wrote that it was “well worth reading. It reminds us that whatever the effects of our homogenizing mass culture, it is still possible for exceedingly strange individuals [meaning Al Gore] to rise to the top.” (*New York Times*, May 29, 2007)

3. Charlton Heston (then president of the NRA), in an interview after the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, told ABC’s *This Week* that he opposed President Clinton’s attempt to limit handgun purchases to one a month. “Before you know it, it becomes no guns.”
*4. Football player Roger Craig, on George Seifert’s promotion to head coach of the San Francisco 49ers: “I think George will do an excellent job, because he’s been searching for a head coaching job for some time, and what better place to start his head coaching job.” (In fact, Seifert did have an excellent record with the 49ers before being canned.)

5. From a 1972 article in the *Hartford Courant* on the possibility of women priests in the Catholic Church: “Citing the historic exclusion of women from the priesthood, . . . the study [of a committee of Roman Catholic bishops] said ‘. . . the constant tradition and practice, interpreted as divine law, is of such a nature as to constitute a clear teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium [teaching authority of the church].’”

*6. Bumper sticker seen in California when a handgun bill was before voters of that state:

Gun Registration Equals Mass Extermination
First Register Guns, Then Register the Jews

7. In an article for the *Atlanta Constitution* (March, 1996) Cynthia Tucker pointed out how the rich and powerful often are given special privileges. “These revelations make the case for affirmative action. People of color, who rarely have power or connections, are just seeking the same favors available to those who [already] have them.”

8. (In this case, the question is what fallacy, if any, Momma failed to put over on her son.)

*9. Jan Berger in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*: “Weeks of patient investigation have revealed that the gas leaked at Bhopal [India—with thousands of casualties] because something went wrong.”

10. Rush Limbaugh on opponents to the war in Iraq (quoted in the *Baltimore Sun*, March 9, 2003): “I want to say something about these anti-war demonstrators. No let’s not mince words, let’s call them what they are: anti-American demonstrators.”

11. Claim made by opponents of an initiative to legalize marijuana for medicinal purposes: “It would be foolish to permit the sale of marijuana to seriously ill
people on the recommendation of their physicians. That just opens the floodgates to the complete legalization of that dangerous drug.”

12. A letter to the editor of Connoisseur magazine defended a previous article favoring bullfighting from “the protesting letters you are sure to receive,” by reminding readers that bulls selected for the arena live twice as long as those destined for McDonald’s and die in a far more noble fashion.

13. When President Bush attempted to justify sending 20,000 more troops to secure Iraq in 2007, congressional leaders asked him why he thought this strategy would succeed when previous efforts had failed. Bush responded, “Because it has to.” (quoted in the New York Times, January 11, 2007)

*14. Indian mystic Vivekananda: “There is no past or future even in thought, because to think it you have to make it present.”

15. From a conversation with a friend (not verbatim): “Sure, I’ve told you before that I believe everyone’s opinion counts on moral matters like abortion. But not everyone’s opinion counts—I wouldn’t want Hitler’s to count. Well, [name deleted] isn’t a Hitler, but she sleeps around like sex was going out of style next week or something. She’s just a slut, and she’s broken up at least one marriage I know about. Why should her opinion count on anything? Why should we listen to her opinion on the abortion business?”

16. President Bush, explaining why he would veto an expansion of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to cover more children:

They’re going to increase the numbers of folks eligible through SCHIP; some want to lower the age for Medicare. And then all of a sudden, you begin . . . to get more people to be a part of a federalization of health care.

17. Jules Crittenden, an embedded journalist for the Boston Herald in the Iraq War, defended himself from criticism for bringing home some illegal “souvenirs” from Iraq (Boston Herald, April 23, 2003): “I understand and share the world’s concern about the disappearance of legitimate Iraqi national treasures that are in fact treasures of human civilization,” Crittenden wrote in an open letter to journalists in this country. “However, those are matters separate from the time-honored tradition among soldiers of bringing home reminders of some of the most intense experiences of their lives. There was no exception to that historical practice in this war . . . [until reporters and soldiers were subject to search by federal agents on returning to the United States].”

18. Argument heard all too frequently in introductory philosophy classes: “We’re perfectly entitled to believe there is a God. After all, every effort by atheists to prove otherwise has failed.”

19. Lewis Carroll, in Through the Looking Glass: “‘You couldn’t have it if you did want it,’ the Queen said. ‘The rule is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today.’ ‘It must sometimes come to jam today,’ Alice objected. ‘No it can’t,’ said the Queen. ‘It’s jam every other day: today isn’t any other day, you know.’”
20. Chris Matthews’s comment on *Hardball* about Fred Thompson, 2008 presidential candidate (quoted in *Extra!*, July/August 2007): “Can you smell the English Leather on this guy, the Aqua Velva, the sort of mature man’s shaving cream, or whatever, you know, after he shaved? Do you smell the sort of—a little bit of cigar smoke? You know, whatever.”

21. Robert Ringer in *The Tortoise Report* touting gold as an investment: “Two thousand years after the human flesh had disappeared, the gold that adorned it [an ancient Egyptian corpse] remained virtually unchanged. That’s a real hard act for paper money to follow.”

22. Margaret Morissey, an anti-garbage activist, was interviewed on *As It Happens*, a Canadian news program (February 2002) about her arrest for blocking trucks from dumping garbage on a hill overlooking St. Brides, Newfoundland. The arrest occurred despite the fact that it was illegal to use the hill as a dumpsite. When she asked the mayor why the dumping was still allowed, he said, “We’ve been doing it for 30 years.”

23. Overheard on the bus to Atlantic City: “I just play the quarter slots when I go to Atlantic City. That way, I don’t lose too much money.”

*24. Sigmund Freud: “Our own death is . . . unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators.”*

25. Excerpt from an article in *Extra!* (June 2003) critical of embedding journalists with military units during the Iraq War: “Embedding was the brainchild of Assistant Defense Secretary Victoria Clarke, formerly with Hill and Knowlton, the PR firm infamous for promoting the false baby-incubator story during the first Gulf War.”

26. When John Bolton was nominated for the position of ambassador to the United Nations in 2005, repeated testimony was given in Senate hearings about his bad temper and his abrasive manner with subordinates. (One person went so far as to call him a “serial abuser.”) But he was defended by Danielle Pletka, a vice president at the American Enterprise Institute, who said, “This is a disgrace, the idea that temperament is suddenly important. There are legions who have gone before John, as well as members of Congress, who have behaved appallingly.”

27. St. Augustine, in *De Libero Arbitrio*: “See how absurd and foolish it is to say: I should prefer nonexistence to miserable existence. He who says, I prefer this to that, chooses something. Nonexistence is not something; it is nothing. There can be no real choice when what you choose is nothing.”

28. When Ralph Nader announced on *Meet the Press* that he was running for president in the 2004 election, he said, “George Bush is a giant corporation masking as a human being.”

29. Item from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (August 28, 2003) about an atheist, Sherrie Wilkins, suing a school board in Camden, New Jersey, over school uniforms: “Citing the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution, Wilkins’ lawsuit argues that atheists should have the same rights as religious parents [since the
school district allows parents to opt out of the requirement on religious grounds. . . . Furthermore, as an atheist, Wilkins said in court documents, she objects to the uniforms because they 'hinder her children's creativity . . . and freedom of expression.' Uniforms also symbolize militarism, which she opposes, she said.”

30. In the run-up to the Senate confirmation of appointments to the Supreme Court, Senate Republicans threatened to strip Democrats (the minority party) of their right to use the filibuster as a way to prevent the confirmation of judges. The Democrats argued that the filibuster had been around for 200 years and scrapping it would be “change rules in the middle of the game.” Further, it would undermine the constitutional principle of “checks and balances” that protected Americans from one-party rule (discussed in “The Framing Wars,” by Matt Bai, New York Times Magazine, July 17, 2005)

31. A lobbyist, whose job is to get people to call or write to members of Congress, responding to the charge that this sort of activity makes the “political playing field” uneven (because big money can afford these endeavors much better than small): “Everyone knows that the playing field isn’t level in this country in the business arena, or in others for that matter. Nobody complains about that. Why fuss about the funding for what I do?”

32. Excerpt from a letter to the editor of the Pacific Sun (September 2000):
“Nowhere on the official Ralph Nader website is there any mention of concern about how women are treated in the media. I can’t help but infer that this kind of human dignity is not high on his agenda.”

33. On a Larry King Live TV show (November 29, 2000), Republican Senator John McCain defended the acceptance of the Florida presidential election results by saying that the votes in the disputed counties had been counted and recounted and that, although there were ways in which the 2000 election in Florida could have been better conducted, we should remember that many elections in the past have been less than perfect; for instance, in Illinois in 1960 (the year John F. Kennedy was elected president amidst claims of chicanery in Illinois and Texas).