

Phil. 103: Introduction to Logic

Class Exercise: More Fallacies of Presumption

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Directions: Identify the informal fallacies in the following passages. Choose from the fallacies of complex question, false cause, *petitio principii*, accident, and converse accident.

1. All persons act in their self-interest. Even so-called altruistic persons only act to help others in order to get something back. Obviously, they would not help others if they got nothing in return.

Petitio principii. The reason that all persons seek gain is used for the conclusion that persons act in their self-interest which in this context are essentially synonymous paraphrases.

2. How can we stop the current apathy, the excessive partying, the constant search for entertainment, and the lack of serious studying by the students in this college? The solution is simply to raise academic standards, and those students will simply drop out.

Complex Question. The speaker assumed without evidence or argument that students are lazy and unmotivated, and, consequently, a solution of raising standards is proposed.

3. I failed my first test in both economics and English literature. It seems clear that I simply was not cut out for college.

Converse Accident. The occurrence of two incidents is insufficient evidence for the generalization that one cannot do well in college.

4. It should be no surprise to learn that in high school boys perform much better than girls in mathematics classes because high school girls do not do math as well as the boys.

Petitio principii. The same claim is being re-stated in passive voice.

5. Who is preventing you from making a 4.0 this semester? No one is, that's who. Don't you think you should do something about it? After all, when you think about it, there's no one standing in your way.

Complex Question. The speaker is pre-supposing without evidence or argument that no one hinders this student's achievement of a 4.0. It can be argued in every case that normal academic social interaction has the hinderance of an opportunity cost.

6. I know of two persons diagnosed with cancer who took massive doses of Vitamin C, and they are now in remission. The conclusion is clear. Massive doses of Vitamin C cure cancer.

Converse Accident. Two cases are insufficient evidence for the generalization to be applied to all cases.

7. You should expect a recession in South Carolina's economy in the near future because of the increasing important legislative role the members of the Democratic Party are taking in the State Legislature.

Non causa pro causa or false cause. The claim is being made that Democrats are the cause of recessions.

8. Governmental Financial Aid to students is totally out of control. Why I know a senior who pays no tuition and is taking in over four thousand dollars a month from his job. On top of that, he drives his new Corvette down to the beach every weekend to party.

Converse Accident. One atypical example is not enough to prove a governmental policy is not working.

9. Many airplane manufacturers have seen their budgets dramatically increase because of the current conflicts in the Near East. It can hardly be surprising, then, these manufacturers are undoubtedly secretly fomenting international incidents to fuel the cry for a stronger American air presence in those countries.

Non causa pro causa or false cause. Simply on the basis of increased profits following Near East conflict, the speaker assumes the corporations making the profits caused the hostilities.

10. Consolidated Telephone Company never has enough operators on duty during the work-week. Why, for the past two days, I been put on hold, waiting for over two hours to take to an operator about wireless calls mistakenly attributed to my account.

Converse Accident. Two instances are insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that operators are never available when they should be.

11. When my math professor turns away from the class and starts writing problems on the board, I get confused because whenever he does so, I cannot understand what he is saying. And when my comprehension falls, I get confused because I don't understand what he is saying.

Probably nonargumentative. The “because” here probably does not denote “for the reason” but instead probably is meant as a cause. (The passage, though, is not false cause since we know that a speaker who turns away is more difficult to understand than one who faces us.) Even so, it is arguable that a *petitio principii* is being advanced if, in context, the speaker is claiming the reason for his confusion is not understanding and the reason for his not understanding is his confusion.

12. I started losing my hair after the birth of my first child. I put on a plaster of a mixture and castor oil and sheep dung every night, and my hair growth came back. Believe me, this remedy works. It worked for my grandmother too.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc or false cause. The renewal of hair growth is claimed to be caused by the the application of the mixture on the basis that latter event preceded the former. Implicitly, in context, there is the additional fallacy of converse accident. That is, since the elixir worked in two cases it will work in all cases. Additionally, of course, it is common for mothers to have some hair loss for a few months after the birth of a child.

13. We know low self-esteem leads to aggression for the reason that aggression is caused by having low self-esteem.

Petitio principii. The reason and the conclusion are suitable paraphrases in that “leads to” and “causes” are substitutable, and so the argument is circular.

14. This great country is constitutionally committed to the doctrine of equal rights for all citizens. This constitutional guarantee should never be abrogated. Consequently, businesses providing discounts to elderly Americans are in direct violation of the U. S. Constitution.

Accident. The generalization concerning equal legal (*i.e.*, civil, or statutory) rights for everyone is being applied to an instance outside the scope of the doctrine, namely the right of a property owner to price goods if not in violation of U. S. property law.

15. Since there were two major accidents on Main Street yesterday morning, it’s clear that the streets of our city are no longer safe anymore. Consequently, the need for the city planning commission to investigate the reasons is never more apparent.

Converse Accident. From the occurrence of two accidents on one street, a generalization about all similar events on all streets of the city is being concluded.

16. Recent studies of chess players have indicated that men have better spatial abilities than women. those studies base their reasoning on the premise that women’s spatial abilities are more often mistaken.

Petitio principii. The reasoning is based on the same statement as that stated in the conclusion. If men had better spatial abilities than women then saying that women's spatial abilities are more often mistaken is essentially saying the same thing in different words.

17. If the Democrats win the next Presidential election, then you might as well prepare yourself for economic hard times. History has shown us that with a Democratic win, you can pretty well count on a stock market downturn.

False cause. The implication is that when Democrats win the Presidency, a economic downturn follows and so the first event causes the second. There is a specific conclusion being drawn from a general premise, but the fallacy of accident does not occur because the specific instance of a Democrat being elected as a cause of an economic downturn is relevant to the generalization being asserted that in the past Democrats winning the Presidency have caused the economy to suffer.

18. The recent decline in the rate of felonies committed by juveniles in the state of New York is accounted for by the drop in serious crimes committed by individuals under the age of twenty.

Petitio principii. The conclusion of this argument is a re-statement of the premise in different words which mean the same thing.

19. The United States is committed to the principles of freedom, liberty, and the presumed innocence of persons charged with a crime. Therefore, it should be against the law to jail suspected felons before their guilt is proved in a fair and impartial judicial proceeding.

Accident. The exception to the generalization about presumed innocence is that a suspected felons can be assumed innocent in order to insure the individual is available at trial. The person might not be granted bail in capital crimes, recognizing in this case the suspect might not innocent.

20. If you want your kids to do well in their university studies, you should have them first enlist in one of the armed services. My neighbor's son did that and now he is graduating *cum laude* from Riverview Community College.

Converse Accident. This passage is not a fallacy of accident because the example of the neighbor's son is being generalized with respect to all persons about to enter college.