

## 1. What is a Slippery-Slope Argument (SSA)?

A **slippery-slope argument** (also known as a **wedge argument**) is an argument that contends that an action should not be performed because if the action were performed, it would lead (by a series of steps) to a negative, disastrous, or undesirable result.

### STRUCTURE OF A SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

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|----------------|---|
| 1 (premise)    | If A, then B.                               |
| 2 (premise)    | If B, then C.                               |
| 3 (premise)    | If C, then D ( <b>Disaster!</b> )           |
| 4 (conclusion) | Avoid D ( <b>Disaster</b> ), don't allow A. |

Slippery-slope arguments (SSAs) are commonly used to reject *policy reforms* as they contend that a seemingly innocuous change in policy will lead, in a step-by-step fashion, to disastrous consequences.

### EXAMPLE #1 OF A SLIPPERY SLOPE ARGUMENT

- P1 If you legalize marriage for same-sex couples, then men can legally marry men and women can legally marry women.
- P2 If men can legally marry men and women can marry women, then soon people will be able to legally marry animals. .
- P3 If people are legally able to marry animals, then, not too long later, people will be able to legally marry inanimate objects.
- P4 But, people should not be allowed to legally marry inanimate objects. Just imagine if you die and are married to a pet rock. Who will inherit your life savings? Not people, but a pet rock. Ridiculous!
- C Since we don't want to let pet rocks get inheritances, we should **not** allow the legalization of same-sex marriages.

In addition to persuading individuals, SSAs can be used for *humorous* effect:

### EXAMPLE #2 OF A SLIPPERY SLOPE ARGUMENT: FROM A DIRECTV COMMERCIAL

- 1 When your cable company puts you on hold, you get angry.
- 2 When you get angry, you go blow-off steam.
- 3 When you go blow-off steam, accidents happen.
- 4 When accidents happen, you get an eye-patch.
- 5 When you get an eye-patch, people think you're tough.
- 6 When people think you're tough, people want to see how tough.
- 7 And when people want to see how tough, you wake-up in a roadside ditch.
- 8 Don't wake-up in a roadside ditch. Get rid of cable and upgrade to DirecTV

## 2. When is a Slippery-Slope Legitimate and when is it Fallacious?

Some SSAs are *legitimate* while others are *illegitimate* (fallacious). A SSA is fallacious (commits the slippery slope fallacy) when the following condition is met:

Reasons are not provided in the passage from **A** to **D** either because good reasons do not exist OR the possible reasons that do exist are controversial.

In other words, the slippery slope fallacy simply *describes* the chain of steps that lead to the disastrous result—e.g. first this will happen, then this, and then this, and then *disaster*—but (i) fails to explain why one step leads to another and (ii) the chain of steps is controversial.

SSAs are fallacious because they *wrongly* assume that there are good reasons for the steps for **A** to **D** but it is not necessary to state them since they are uncontroversial.

EXAMPLE #3 OF FALLACIOUS SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

- P1 If you legalize weed, tons of people will smoke it every day.
- P2 If people smoke weed every day, they will ultimately want to experiment with new, harder drugs.
- P3 When people want to experiment with new, harder drugs, they neglect their children.
- C Don't let people neglect their children. Keep marijuana illegal.

The above SSA is fallacious because:

- (i) no reason is given for why the legalization of marijuana will lead to rampant marijuana smoking AND the types of reasons that presently *could be given* for the legalization of marijuana will lead to rampant marijuana smoking are *controversial*
- (ii) no reason is given why rampant marijuana smoking will lead to experimenting with harder drugs AND the types of reason that presently could be given would be *controversial*.

Fallacious SSAs tend to be **persuasive** because:

- (1) SSAs do not directly say that a seemingly harmless action **A** will *immediately* lead to disaster. Instead, they argue that a seemingly innocuous action **A** will lead to consequence **B**, and **B** will lead (not directly to **D**) but to a more plausible outcome **C**, and finally that **C** will lead to **D**.
- (2) *SSAs monger fear and worry*. People see this disastrous result **D** and, in a state of fear or worry, credit the argument.

EXAMPLE #4 OF FALLACIOUS SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

- P1 If you vote for Romney, he will ship jobs overseas.
- P2 If he ships jobs overseas, Americans will be miserable.
- C Don't let Americans be miserable! Don't vote for Romney.

The above SSA is fallacious because (i) no reason is given why a vote for Romney means he will ship jobs overseas AND the types of reasons that could be given are controversial and (ii) no reason is given why shipping jobs overseas will make Americans miserable AND the types of reasons that could be given are controversial.

An SSA argument is **legitimate** when either of the following occurs:

- (i) reasons (even if they are not great ones) are given for *every* step leading to the disastrous result, OR
- (ii) reasons are not given BUT there are uncontroversial reasons available for every step leading to disasters (it would simply be pointless to supply them because they are common sense).

In the following example, we avoid the slippery-slope fallacy is avoided by supplying reasons (even though they are controversial):

EXAMPLE #5 OF LEGITIMATE SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

- 1 If you legalize marijuana, tons of people will smoke it every day.
- 1a A recent poll shows that 99% of the population who currently do not smoke marijuana would smoke marijuana if it were legalized (this is false but it is a reason).
- 2 If tons of people smoke marijuana every day, they all will experiment with new, harder drugs.
- 2a Several studies show that people who have used marijuana admit to getting bored with the high that it gives them and try harder drugs because they wanted to see if they could get even higher.
- 3 When people want to experiment with new, harder drugs, they neglect their children.
- 3a A recent study shows that people who use hard drugs get heavily disoriented and so preoccupied that they don't have time for other things, such as taking care of their children.
- 4 Don't let people neglect their children. Keep marijuana illegal.

The other kind of legitimate SSA is when the reasons do not need to be cited because they are obvious:

EXAMPLE #6 OF LEGITIMATE SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

- 1 If you put a loaded gun to your head and pull the trigger, a bullet will be fired
- 2 If a bullet is fired from a gun that is pointed at your head, it is likely that you will die or be seriously hurt
- 3 If you are seriously hurt, you won't be able to come to my birthday party tomorrow.
- 4 Don't put a loaded gun to your head. Come to my birthday party.

In the above example, there is no explanation for why firing a gun at your head will lead to death, but the explanation is so obvious it need not be stated.

*Classroom Activity:* In a small group, create your own slippery slope argument and write it on the board. It can be fallacious, legitimate, for the purpose of selling a product, or for avoiding a negative policy.

#### 4. Slippery Slope vs. Straw Men Arguments

A **strawman fallacy** is a fallacy where an individual distorts an argument by first *weakening* it, then *criticizing* the weakened version of the argument, and finally *concluding* that the criticisms which apply to the weakened version also apply to the stronger version.

#### HOW TO COMMIT THE STRAWMAN FALLACY

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- Step #1 Take a position **P** and distort it into a new position **P-**, which is just like **P** but is more extreme and less plausible.
- Step #2 Criticize **P-** for being too extreme and implausible.
- Step #3 Conclude that **P** is false, implausible, and should be rejected on the basis of the criticisms you raised in step #2.

The straw man fallacy is a fallacious form of reasoning because it purports to show that a position **P** (or argument **A**) is *deficient* in some particular respect but what it actually shows is that a weaker version of either **P** or **A** is deficient. Typically, straw man arguments are formed by making one of the premises of the original argument *more extreme*. In contrast, SSAs **do not involve a distortion of an argument or position**. Rather, they posit that some feature of the position will lead to some *extreme consequence*.

Consider the following example of an argument that commits the straw man fallacy but depends upon *distorting* the argument:

#### EXAMPLE #1 OF STRAWMAN FALLACY

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- 1 John: Marijuana should be legalized for adults over the age of 21.
- 2 Liz: John proposes that marijuana should be legalized for everyone.
- 3 Liz: Studies show that who smoke large amounts of marijuana as adolescents are more likely to be depressed.
- 4 Liz: Therefore, John's proposal to legalize marijuana is short-sided and leads to the extreme result of young children smoking marijuana.

In contrast, SSAs do not *distort* or *misrepresent* the original argument but propose a step-by-step account of why some feature of a position will lead to an extreme result. However, it is possible to commit both fallacies by (i) *distorting* an argument (turning it into a straw man) and then (ii) committing the slippery slope fallacy by arguing (with no reasons) that a disastrous result would follow if the conclusion of the argument were true.

### 3. Defying Gravity: The Inverse Slope or the Ski Lift Fallacy

SSAs work by articulating a sequence of events that culminate in disaster. The **ski lift argument** is essentially the slippery slope argument in reverse except the end result is something **wonderful** rather than something **disastrous**. Here is the basic structure:

#### STRUCTURE OF A SKI LIFT SLOPE ARGUMENT

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- 1 (premise) If A, then B.
- 2 (premise) If B, then C.
- 3 (premise) If C, then G (**Something Great!**)
- 4 (conclusion) We definitely want **G (Something Great!)**, so do A.

Ski lift arguments are fallacious when *reasons are not provided* in the passage from **A** to **G** because good reasons do not exist OR the reasons that do exist are *controversial*.

#### EXAMPLE #1 OF FALLACIOUS SKI LIFT FALLACY

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- 1 If you legalize marijuana, tons of people will smoke it every day.
- 2 If tons of people smoke marijuana every day, people will be really relaxed.

- 3 If people are really relaxed, crime will decrease significantly.
- 4 If crime decreases significantly, the government will have to spend less money on incarcerating felons.
- 5 If the government has to spend less money on incarcerating felons, they can spend more money on little, orphan children.
- 6 Help little, orphan children. Legalize marijuana.

The above argument commits the ski-lift fallacy as a reason is not provided for why the legalization of marijuana will lead to rampant use AND available reasons would be controversial.

*Classroom Activity:* In a small group, pretend you are an advertiser and create an argument that commits the ski lift fallacy. Once you've completed your argument in your group, put it on the board.

### **Exercise Set**

- A. Decide which cases are legitimate warnings of slippery slope dangers and which commit the fallacy.
1. Don't take Adderall during your final exam weeks! Soon you'll be taking it for every exam, not just finals. After that, you'll be taking it regularly just to get through class. And when you become numb to its effects you'll move onto hard drugs like heroine!
  2. If you don't come to class, you will not know the material being taught. Not knowing the material will get you a lower course grade and a lower course grade will lower your GPA.
  3. People should never use tanning beds. If you use them, you will be exposed to harmful rays. These harmful rays are carcinogenic, and you will get cancer and die.
  4. If we increase the strictness on our gun laws, it will surely lead to disaster. If no citizens are able to protect themselves, we will be defenseless to intruders and predators. If we are defenseless there will be exponentially higher amounts of crime in our societies.
  5. If you want to see a change in your body, you have to change your lifestyle! If you eliminate sweets from your diet and replace them with fruit, you will have more energy. With this new energy you will be able to increase your amount of exercise. With increased exercise you'll surely see the pounds melt away!
  6. If you choose to go out and binge drink the night before an exam, you will be hung-over. If you are hung-over, you will not perform at your maximum ability on the exam. If you do not perform at your maximum ability, you will get a lower grade.
  7. If you major in theatre, you will have a hard time finding a job. If you don't have a job, you will become homeless. If you become homeless, you will sit on street corners and beg for quarters. This will lead to a surely miserable life and you will die alone.
  8. If we build a swimming pool, we will want to swim in it. If we want to swim in it, so will our dog. If our dog wants to swim, it will jump in the pool and drown. Don't kill the dog; don't buy a pool.
  9. Marijuana should be legalized. If it is not legalized, the money from the illegal drug trade will continue to fund the black market. Studies have shown that the black market is largely funded by marijuana sales, and the black market also deals cocaine and illegal weapons. If we don't legalize marijuana, more money will go to illegal drug and weapons. Recent studies have also shown that increased drug and weapon markets lead to an increase of violence in schools. Keep your children safe from violence, legalize marijuana.
  10. If we legalize marriage for homosexuals, we must institutionalize all unions that make each member happy. If we must consider all unions that make people happy, we must consider legalizing polygamy, marriage to animals, and marriage to objects. This is obviously ridiculous, so we clearly cannot legalize marriage between homosexuals.
  11. In *The Princess Bride*, the following argument appears when a man is presented with two goblets, one of which is poisoned. "Iocane (poison) comes from Australia, as everyone knows, and Australia is entirely peopled with criminals, and criminals are used to having people not trust them, as you are not trusted by me, so I can clearly not

choose the wine in front of you.” Is this a slippery slope argument?

12. If you don't pass this exam, you will not pass this course. If you do not pass this course, you will not be able to graduate. If you cannot graduate, you will not be able to go to college. If you cannot go to college, you will be unable to find a job. If you are unable to find a job, you will make no money. If you make no money, you will be homeless. Don't be homeless, pass this exam.

13. If you don't pass this exam, and you receive less than a 60, it is statistically impossible for you to pass this class. This class is a necessity for your graduation, so without passing this class you cannot graduate. If you do not graduate, colleges will be unable to accept you. In recent polls, 98% of employers said that they would not hire individuals without a college degree. If you don't go to college, then, you may never find a job. Of those who are unemployed in this difficult economy, 100% of them are homeless. If you are unemployed, you will become homeless. Don't be homeless, pass this exam.

14. If your father tells the prince that you can spin gold out of straw, you will be kidnapped by the prince and locked away. If you are locked away, a little man named Rumpelstiltskin will reveal himself to you. If he reveals himself to you, he will offer to complete your task. If he completes your task, you will lose your firstborn child. Don't lose your firstborn child; tell your dad to shut up.

15. If you eat that cookie, you will have taken in extra calories. Extra calories contribute to obesity. Therefore, if you eat that extra cookie you will become obese.

16. The Penny should not be eliminated from US currency. If it is eliminated, then all prices will need to be rounded up to the nearest nickel. If this happens, the cost of gasoline will rise. When the cost of gasoline rises, it is well documented that food costs also rise. Rising food costs contribute to the hunger problem in this country. Don't contribute to hunger, advocate the penny!

17. If we create a socialist state, everyone will be financially equal. If everyone is financially equal, no one will work hard. If no one works hard, the economy will collapse. If the economy collapses, everyone will starve. Don't starve America, don't make it socialist.