

WHERE DO SLIPPERY SLOPES LIVE: IN CONVERSATION, IN REASONING OR IN BETWEEN?

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Abstract: Slippery slope arguments are arguments that have historically been seen as informal fallacies and are prevalent in discussions of ethics, public policy, and legal reasoning. While many accounts of what a slippery slope argument is have been proposed, none encompasses all central features of slippery slope arguments, as there is little agreement on what exactly one is supposed to evaluate. In this article, I aim to offer a way to deal with the issues that have made it difficult to evaluate slippery slope arguments. I propose that progress can be made by combining pragma-dialectical theory with soft Bayesian argumentation, in order to account for both normative and descriptive dimensions along which such arguments are characterized in contemporary argumentation theory.

Keywords: pragma-dialectical theory, Bayesian argumentation, slippery slope arguments, argumentation theory, consequentialist arguments.

1. Introduction

Slippery slope arguments (SSAs) are common across debates in ethics, public policy and legal reasoning, and have been traditionally treated as informal fallacies. SSAs are commonly² understood as arguments, to the

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² SSAs are sometimes confused with other types of arguments, such as consistency arguments, arguments from cumulative effects, straightforward inductive generalizations,

effect that accepting an initial premise (regarding a decision or action) will inevitably lead to the acceptance of another premise that would result in an undesired or disastrous outcome (Hinton, 2020; Rizzo & Whitman, 2019). Even though this has been construed as a distinct type of argument, the definitions provided do not agree with each other, and do not provide a way to solve the problem of how to evaluate SSAs (Walton, 2015).

I tackle this problem by combining the normative framework specific to pragma-dialectical approach with Bayesian argumentation³. I will argue that pragma-dialectical theory provides normative standards for SSAs, but does not have the means to explain why some SSAs are considered valid or fallacious. By combining it with methods from Bayesian argumentation, I argue it can nonetheless explain why some agents find SSAs persuasive or convincing. Providing an account for both normative and descriptive dimensions of SSAs in turn delivers a comprehensive assessment of SSAs.

My plan is as follows: I will first describe the factors that lead to the development of so many different views in the argumentation research surrounding SSAs. Second, I will explain pragma-dialectical theory and how it approaches fallacies, with a focus on SSAs. Third, I shall also describe Bayesian argumentation and how it addresses SSAs. Fourth, addressing the worry that these approaches supposedly conflict with each other, I present a way in which they can be integrated. Lastly, I assess how their integration can be beneficial for the evaluation of SSAs.

straightforward causal arguments, arguments from negative consequence, which should not be labeled as SSAs (M. D. Hinton, 2017; LaFollette, 2005).

³ The current state of the art in argumentation theory is characterized by a coexistence of theoretical perspectives and approaches to SSAs, which, while being considerably different from one another, contribute immensely to understanding argumentation overall (Van Eemeren et al., 2014). Notwithstanding, I choose to discuss only pragma-dialectics and Bayesian argumentation because, it seems to me, the form of the integrated solution I offer applies to other approaches to SSAs as well. Making that case, however, goes beyond the scope of the article.

2. From bad to worse

Aside from a minimal description, scholars working in argumentation theory seem to agree on no other characteristic of SSAs. No single comprehensive definition of SSAs is forthcoming. For example, Lode (1990) claimed that trying to provide a definition that covers current usage would be in vain, because it would not be narrow enough to bring forth a distinctive argument form deserving of separate discussion. Many others have tried to provide comprehensive definitions of SSAs which would allow for the construction of an argumentation form that would differentiate SSAs from other argument forms (see Govier, 1982; Walton, 1992, 2015; Corner et al., 2011; M. Hinton, 2020; M. D. Hinton, 2017). Only these often forms differ.

Lack of consensus concerning definitions or argument forms influences debates regarding how many distinct types of SSAs there are. For example, Walton (1992) classified four categories of slippery slope arguments: precedents, causal mechanisms, conceptual vagueness, and a fourth type that incorporates elements of the first three categories. Jefferson (2014) makes a similar claim, distinguishing between empirical, logical and hybrid SSAs (based on Den Hartogh, 2009 and Van Der Burg, 1991). Logical SSAs arguments, according to Jefferson (2014), are also known as 'no principled distinction' and are not consequentialist arguments. Instead, logical SSAs are concerned with the question of what the decision to take a certain step A commits us to (Jefferson, 2014). Empirical SSAs (also called soritical by Jefferson), are consequentialist arguments that focus on the bad results that would of necessity follow if a certain course of action is taken, and are cumulative (Jefferson, 2014). Empirical and logical forms allegedly combine in hybrid SSAs. On the other hand, Hinton (2020 p.10) claims that the only type of SSA that should be representative is the logical SSA. Empirical or hybrid arguments are more akin to arguments from material consequence (M. Hinton, 2020 p.10). Similarly, Rizzo & Whitman (2003) also insist on the logical type, by claiming that, once the first step is taken, the slope of arguments should abruptly lead to the catastrophic consequence. Furthermore, the distinction between empirical and logical also seems to

relate to the slope metaphor and other like phrases, such as “the thin edge of the wedge” or “the camel’s nose in the tent” (M. Hinton, 2020 p.9). That refers to allowing a minor, seemingly harmless conduct to pave the way for more significant, obviously negative consequences (M. Hinton, 2020 p. 10).

The relation between vagueness and the SSA plays a role for some authors but not for others. Walton (2015) claims that vagueness is an essential component of the slippery slope, insofar as it makes it harder, or even impossible, for the agent to stop at a cutoff point, committing them to the path downwards the undesirable outcome. But is it true that no single example of SSA is a reasonable argument? As such, in agreement with Hinton (2020), it is unclear if all SSAs involve vagueness. Still, the relation between vagueness and SSAs resembles the semantic treatments of sorites. One main difference is that vagueness is a semantic phenomenon (Raffman & Hyde, 2025); even though the vagueness can be partly responsible for SSAs, the indeterminacy of SSAs can be the result of other determinants too. Among those we can count: how the agents involved in the argument express their commitment through linguistic indicators (Liga & Palmirani, 2020) and that the arguments are presented in compressed form, jumping in one step straight to the conclusion (M. D. Hinton, 2017; Walton, 1992, 2015). Examples:

- (1) If homosexual “marriage” is universally accepted as the present step in sexual “freedom,” what logical arguments can be used to stop the next steps of incest, pedophilia, bestiality, and other forms of unnatural behavior? (TFP Student Action, 2015).
- (2) If voluntary euthanasia is legalized, then in the future there will be more cases of “medical murder” (M. D. Hinton, 2017 p.20).
- (3) Legalizing cannabis will ultimately lead to increased use of cocaine or heroin, hence it should remain banned (Hahn & Oaksford, 2006 p.223).

The examples seem to have something in common which is specific to arguments labeled as SSAs: accepting an initial premise culminates in an undesirable outcome that cannot be avoided once we commit to the first initial premise. However, the arguments realize this in different ways. (1) seems to hinge on poor use of language, similar to vagueness, because it can be interpreted as either: allowing same sex marriage will force one to accept behaviors as the one mentioned above or it would force one to accept marriage between siblings, human and non-human animals, adults and children⁴ (M. D. Hinton, 2017). In (2), the initial commitment leads to an unavoidable change in the attitudes of a group of people towards a certain idea or action. (3) revolves around an incremental effect, where use of a psychoactive substance increases the probability of consuming other psychoactive substances in the future rather than a change in attitude, at the level of the population, towards drug consumption.

Different argumentation theorists also have different goals and backgrounds: some study argumentation primarily for normative purposes, in order to develop criteria that can be used to qualify arguments as rational, whereas others study it for descriptive reasons, being interested in how reasoners persuade others (Van Eemeren et al., 2014).

Having different goals in view can also explain why some theorists argue not all SSAs are fallacious. Given that SSAs are often mixed with other types of arguments (see footnote 2), I advocate a cautious approach, on which finding a reliable way to identify when a person commits an SSA doesn't imply deciding whether the arguments made are valid or not. In the next section I aim to provide an argument why the pragma-

⁴ One reason why this argument is fallacious is that there are already "cut off points" in place, mainly laws, that define marriage as an act that can be performed only by two consenting adults who are not related; as such excluding close relatives, non-human animals and children (M. D. Hinton, 2017). The male-and-female requirement does not constitute a counterargument against same sex marriage because the latter respects the rule of being between consenting adults, and there are logical arguments and laws that will not permit marriage in the cases mentioned above (M. D. Hinton, 2017).

dialectical theory can accommodate SSAs as fallacies and specify the circumstances they often occur in.

3. Pragma-dialectical theory

Pragma-dialectical theory is an approach to argumentation developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst, aiming to elucidate argument quality by determining procedural rules of argumentation that can be applied to judge the quality of individual arguments (Collins & Hahn, 2017). The cornerstone of pragma-dialectics is the observation that arguments take place in dialectical contexts, where (at least two) parties take part in argumentative exchange (Collins & Hahn, 2017; Van Eemeren et al., 2009). Argumentation itself is a part of reasonable argumentative discourse that has the goal to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits (Van Eemeren et al., 2009). Resolving a difference of opinion does not mean attaining a state of mutual consensus that resolves the argument once and for all (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.4). The argumentative process can be resumed at any point in the future if the conclusion is deemed unsatisfactory (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.4).

The difference of opinion is resolved on the merits by subjecting the standpoints at issue to a regimented critical discussion (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.521). The means to resolve an argument on the merits are provided by the ideal model of critical discussion (Van Eemeren et al., 2009), which delineates the stages involved in the resolution process and the verbal maneuvers that are essential components of each stage, supplemented by a set of rules that specify which types of speech acts are permissible and functional at each stage of the discussion for the purpose of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. The four stages are: confrontation, the opening stage, argumentation and the concluding stage (Collins & Hahn, 2017, Van Eemeren et al., 2009), abiding to the 10 rules of critical discussion: “freedom rule”, “*discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question*”; “obligation-to-defend rule”, “*discussants who have advanced a standpoint may not refuse to defend a standpoint when requested to do so*”; “standpoint rule”, “*attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually*

been put forward by the other party”; “relevance rule”, “standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or argumentation that is not relevant to the standpoint”; “unexpressed premise rule”, “discussants may not falsely attribute unexpressed premises to the other party, nor disown responsibility for their own unexpressed premises”; starting point rule, “discussants may not present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point”; “validity rule”, “reasoning that in an argumentation is presented as formally conclusive may not be invalid in a logical sense”; “argument scheme rule”, “standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation that is not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning if the defense does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly”; “concluding rule”, “inconclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining these standpoints, and conclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining expressions of doubt concerning these standpoints”; and “language use rule”, “discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulations” (Van Eemeren et al., 2009 p.21-p.24).

In pragma-dialectics, the performance of any speech act that constitute an argumentative move that violates any of the rules for critical discussion is viewed as a fallacy, regardless of what party performs and at what stage of discussion⁵ (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2003; Van Eemeren et al., 2014; van Eemeren & Garssen, 2023). Fallacies are always identified conditionally: an argumentative move is considered a fallacy *only* if the discourse in which it occurs can be viewed as attempting to resolve a disagreement and *only* after determining the extent to which a discourse may be reconstructed in terms of a critical discussion (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.545). However, while critical rules for discussion provide the norms relevant to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits, it does not

⁵ In pragma-dialectics, the cooperative communicative and interactional basis of argumentative discourse is reflected in the way in which participants as defined agonists have the task to defend their standpoint systematically; the role of antagonists is to critically challenge all viewpoints taken by the protagonists until a resolution is achieved together (Van Eemeren et al., 2014).

always make it clear whether or not the pragma-dialectical standards of reasonableness⁶ have been infringed (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.563). The pragma-dialectical approach to fallacy detection in argumentative discourse basically consists of identifying whether the (reconstructed) speech acts expressing the argumentative moves made in the discourse agree with the relevant rules for critical discussion and, in the event of a norm violation, determining the type of fallacy that has been committed (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.564). Such a decision may only be made if it is completely evident what criteria must have been fulfilled in that particular situation in order to satisfy the particular critical norm(s)⁷ relevant to it (Van Eemeren et al., 2014 p.564).

Within the pragma-dialectical framework, committing SSAs requires the protagonist to violate the *argument scheme* rule of the argumentation stage, which concerns the correct use of argumentative schemes (F. H. Van Eemeren, 2018). An argumentation scheme describes the method in which the reason given in support of the standpoint is intended to facilitate a shift in acceptability towards a specific standpoint in certain types of argumentation (Van Eemeren, 2018 p.7). For example: "Bart will love cheese because he is Dutch and it is characteristic of Dutch people that they love cheese" (Van Eemeren, 2018 p.7) is an argumentation scheme. Based on the type of relationship established by the argumentation scheme, particular kinds of *critical questions* are applicable in order to assess the argumentation (F. H. Van Eemeren, 2018 p.7). These critical questions capture the pragmatic rationale for arguing in order to facilitate a shift in acceptability from the reason that is advanced to the standpoint one argues in favor of (F. H. Van Eemeren, 2018 p.45). The protagonist commits a SSAs fallacy when she presents a

⁶ Reasonableness in pragma-dialectics favors a systematic engagement in argumentative discourse following suitably regulated discussion procedures; it can be described as a "critical rationalist" philosophy (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984).

⁷ Moreover, in the pragma-dialectical approach, a functional variety of norms is differentiated in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits, and the norm of logical validity is just one of them (Van Eemeren et al., 2014). Pragma-dialectics discerns a plurality of functional norms, that are neither just categories inherited from the past, nor violations of one and the same norm (e.g. validity).

proposition in which a prediction is made, without any further reason, regarding the undesirable consequence of accepting a premise (a decision or an act), deriving from it an evaluative proposition which claims it is necessary to perform that action (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2003) or, respectively, to refrain from performing it.

It thus seems that pragma-dialectics defines committing an SSA fallacy in such a way that it results from the wrong use of an argument scheme which “good” SSAs are often mistaken for. In this way, it does not restrict SSAs to being the invalid use of a specific argument form. Any consequentialist argument misused by a protagonist who fails to provide a reason why one should or should act on its conclusion counts as a necessary condition for committing an SSA. This way of approaching SSAs narrows them down to a specific violation of the argument scheme rule as the argument progress, making it much easier to filter when an SSA has been committed. Examples in section 2 are thus all fallacies, regardless of whether (1) and (2) concern a change in attitudes, at a population level, whereas (3) relies on incremental effects.

This approach does not, however, explain what make SSAs persuasive for some interlocutors. Therefore, in the next section I will define strict Bayesian and soft Bayesianism approaches to argumentation, and provide reasons for why I choose a soft Bayesian approach over strict Bayesianism.

4. Bayesian Argumentation

The objective of the research initiative known as Bayesian Argumentation is to apply Bayesian inference to argumentation (Collins & Hahn, 2017). From a Bayesian perspective (as construed here), probabilities are subjective degrees of belief (Collins & Hahn, 2017). The central inferential aim is to determine how strongly a conclusion is supported by a given body of evidence, expressed as the posterior probability of the conclusion given the evidence, $P(C|E)$. This posterior probability is calculated on the basis of three components: the prior probability of the conclusion, $P(C)$; the likelihood, representing the probability of the evidence assuming the

conclusion is true, $P(E|C)$; and the overall probability of the evidence, $P(E)$ ⁸ (Collins & Hahn, 2017).

There are two strands of Bayesian argumentation, strict and soft. Strict Bayesian argumentation begins with Bayesian decision theory as a normative framework (Elqayam & Evans, 2013; Hahn & Hornikx, 2016). This status derives from the fact that strict Bayesians work down from the normative account of probability to psychological interpretation of reasoning and behavior in judgement. It places strong constraints on subjective probabilities, which must align with the classical probability calculus (Elqayam & Evans, 2013). Moreover, strict Bayesianism also tries to prove that reasoning maximizes utility⁹ (Elqayam & Evans, 2013). Degrees of belief as well as degrees of convincingness¹⁰ in an argumentative context are simply represented by the probability calculus. Furthermore, strict Bayesians claim that the approach they propose helps identify relevant critical questions and assess their impact on inference, both individually and in combination, particularly in terms of the factors they target (Hahn & Hornikx, 2016). Another feature of the strict Bayesian approach is that it is computationally explicit; for each argument scheme employed by argumentation, it can indicate how posterior degrees of belief may be computed (Hahn & Hornikx, 2016). This is not just an “add-on” used in order to conform Bayesian reasoning with other approaches in argumentation theory, it is actually an essential component of the normative program itself (Hahn & Hornikx, 2016).

By comparison, soft Bayesian argumentation starts with observations of human reasoning and finds them broadly compatible with Bayesian principles (Elqayam & Evans, 2013). But it does not require norm fitting as a general part of a psychological account or close conformity with normative theory based on Bayesian principles. The account is also different in how it interprets degrees of belief. In soft

⁸ Modeled on by this formula $P(C|E) = \frac{P(E|C)P(C)}{P(E)}$ (Collins & Hahn, 2017).

⁹ Utility refers to subjective utility, which is the technical term used to denote psychological value, or goals: whatever an agent holds desirable has subjective utility (Elqayam & Evans, 2013).

¹⁰ Degrees of convincingness refers to how persuasive arguments are.

Bayesian approaches, degrees of belief are considered a psychological construct, and probability serves as a convenient formal language (Elqayam & Evans, 2013). From this point of view, observing that people hold beliefs more or less strongly and act on them does not imply the strong constraint as on a strict Bayesian approach, which suggests that normative constraints are outside of psychological science. Soft Bayesianism is sceptical of the psychological reality of maximization; behaviors such as buying lottery tickets seem to directly contradict the principle (Evans, 2007).

I draw on the soft Bayesian approach. The first reason why I choose it is due to the role biases and heuristics play in human reasoning. More often than not, soft Bayesianism provides evidence that human thinking departs from the dictates of probability calculus. Furthermore, I think that the strict Bayesian normative standard does not touch upon all features that can be ascribed to SSAs. For example, thinking of SSAs strength¹¹, on a strict Bayesian approach, in terms of whether the expected negative value of the undesirable outcome outweighs that of the alternative being considered (Hahn & Oaksford, 2006) does only seem to account for incremental considerations of argument (3), and do not address the concern of attitude change that is implicit in arguments (1) and (2), due to the fact that the framework limits itself only to what can be accounted for by probability calculus. As I see it, subsuming all argument schemes to the probability calculus threatens to obscure how different types of consequentialist arguments actually differ, insinuating that SSAs instantiate a unique argument scheme – “the slippery slope” – that can be either invalid or valid. It leaves it unclear how consistency arguments, arguments from cumulative effects, straightforward inductive generalizations, straightforward causal arguments and arguments from negative consequence could all boil down to one scheme; while similar, they are formalized in different ways (see LaFollette, 2005). An additional worry pertains to how the probability calculus could even

¹¹ Strength, in the case of SSAs, tracks how likely it is that the first premise will lead to an undesirable consequence, and how objectionable that consequence is (Fumagalli, 2020).

in principle work as a norm that guides argumentative discourse; it might assess when an argument is inductively valid or not, but not how a reasonable discussion among interlocutors with different standpoints ought to be conducted.

A soft Bayesian approach to SSAs would still analyze them by factoring in the disutility (undesired future consequence) and its probability of occurrence. But it would not restrict SSAs only to interpretations that align with the probability calculus. By not being so restrictive and starting from observing how people actually reason, it allows for SSAs being fallacies based on consequentialist argumentation schemes without imposing only one scheme on them all. This is plausible because people assess consequentialist arguments using different probabilities.

Moreover, soft Bayesianism's emphasis on the relevance of cognitive psychology (biases, heuristics) to persuasiveness, it is open to empirical studies done in psychology of argumentation. For example, the study conducted by Corner, Hahn, and Oaksford (2011) suggests that SSAs with more probable outcomes were rated higher than those with improbable outcomes. Additionally, probable arguments were judged to be stronger than less probable arguments when the results were extremely negative (Corner et al., 2011). These findings cannot be taken to support a strict Bayesian approach. However, they match the soft approach because people do seem to consider disutility and probability of occurrence, *inter alia*, as instrumental to argument assessment.

5. Is integration possible?

In the introduction, I mentioned that integrating pragma-dialectics and Bayesianism can be problematic. For example, Walton (1992) rejects the conception of SSAs as arguments that predict an outcome based on a probability. The strict Bayesian standard does not allow for much integration. It might adopt different argument schemes, only to then structure them in terms of the probability calculus.

The integration I propose is different: probability can provide insights into evaluating SSAs, but it needs spelling out into specific argument schemes as gleaned from argumentative discourse.

The main idea is to evaluate SSAs more comprehensibly. Pragma-dialectics makes it easier to identify an SSA by finding violations of the rules of critical discussion. Moreover, pragma-dialectics also marks the distinction between arguments that are fallacious due to using vague terms or if an indeterminacy characteristic of SSAs is in play. Violation of the eighth rule is necessary if an SSA will have been committed. Additionally, pragma-dialectics accommodates a plurality of norms.

Unlike its stricter version, soft Bayesianism is compatible with this pragmatic plurality. For example, (3) can be considered fallacious by applying Bayesian probability calculus to determine if the premises, explicit or implicit, respectively, increase the likelihood of the undesirable consequence that may materialize at some point in time if we take the initial step. Soft Bayesian argumentation also provides ways to determine why *some* people find *some* fallacies persuasive while dismissing other arguments even when those are valid – a feature pragma-dialectics lacks. The reason is that soft Bayesianism investigates human reasoning while considering preexisting heuristics and biases that influence what standpoints one is willing to accept in dialogue.

To conclude, mixing pragma-dialectics with soft Bayesian argumentation, in my view, addresses the problem of evaluating SSAs. Furthermore, the paper seeks to initiate a conversation between two perspectives that could benefit from the integration I proposed. The mix specifies a necessary condition for reliably identifying them, and not confuse them with other consequentialist arguments. It accepts a plurality of norms, and thereby allows SSAs to results from the wrong use of multiple types of consequentialist argument. Consequently, it captures both normative and descriptive features of argumentation, and is able to evaluate both logical and empirical SSAs by integrating them under one construct. SSAs live in between dialog and reasoning.

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