"Self-evident Truths"

Fallacy Number Eleven

Logical arguments, as emphasized earlier, depend on certain assumptions or premises. If the premises are false, or are such that they cannot be verified, the conclusion does not carry much weight. The London Economist once neatly impaled this type of logic when it criticized a financial writer for “proceeding from an unwarranted assumption to a foregone conclusion.”

Sometimes, to be sure, arbitrary premises are accepted “for the sake of argument” and the conclusion is discounted accordingly. Premises founded on fact are necessary, however, to prove a point seriously. Sometimes we wish to avoid the job of getting the facts together and weighing them, so we state an assumption, taking it for granted there is no disagreement. We may introduce it with a strong leading phrase like:

Everybody knows. . .
Unquestionably. . .
It is only too clear. . .
You can’t deny that. . .
It goes without saying. . .
All intelligent persons agree. . . (An especially mean one, for if you don’t agree you are stupid.)

When you hear one of these tom-toms be on guard; a “self-evident truth” may be lurking just around the corner.
The artist Lichty, in one of his popular “Grin and Bear It” cartoons, pictures a trembling college professor under investigation by a Senate Committee. The stern chairman wags a long forefinger under the witness’s nose:

“You agree that professors are absent-minded, Professor?…

“Then you admit you absent-mindedly might have overthrown the government at some time or other!”

The renowned historian Lord Macaulay was very sure of himself. He would often preface an assertion with the words, “Every schoolboy knows.” An unkind critic undertook to collect the information in the skull of this remarkable schoolboy, and found it would fill a tidy-sized encyclopedia. Imitating the noble lord’s method, a citizen in Brooklyn concludes an angry letter to the New York Herald Tribune about an involved interpretation of the Bill of Rights with the words: “A fact known to every school child.” Maybe the youngsters now are all versed in constitutional law, but not in my day.

Here is a gentleman vigorously arguing that there is life after death. When his opponent demands how he knows it, he replies: “Because it was never the intention of the Creator that it should be otherwise.” In effect, he has presumed to enter into the Creator’s mind.

“True Christians act thus and so,” “Real patriots do such and such,” are warning signals. The speaker assumes it as self-evident that what he means by a “Christian,” or a “patriot,” is the only true meaning. If he happens to be a powerful demagogue trying to monopolize the definition of patriotism, citizens who oppose him are in for trouble.

FIFTH AMENDMENT

“Fifth Amendment Communist” is a glaring example of the fallacy. A witness before an investigating committee refuses to answer a question, pleading the protection of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. The Amendment stipu-
lates that a person does not have to testify against himself, and that he may not “be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.”

The witness makes the appeal because his lawyer tells him to, or because he is actually a member of the Party, or because he does not want to implicate innocent friends. Whatever the reason, good or bad, usually no competent evidence of criminal activities has been found against him. He has had no proper trial, with proper rules of evidence. Yet by refusing to answer the question he stands condemned in the eyes of the committee, and of the public, as a communist—a “Fifth Amendment Communist.” An inference is drawn about his motives, so strong it seems “self-evident.” But “self-evidence” is not legal evidence and when constitutional rights are denied to anyone, even a criminal or a subversive, they are weakened for everybody else. The U.S. Supreme Court, in its decision of April 9, 1956, has this to say:

We must condemn the practice of imputing a sinister meaning to the exercise of a person’s constitutional right under the Fifth Amendment. The privilege against self-incrimination would be reduced to a hollow mockery if its exercise could be taken as equivalent either to a confession of guilt or a conclusive presumption of perjury.

This is not to say that the witness should or should not plead the Fifth Amendment. (Personally I feel that he usually should not.) This is only to point out that the witness has been “proved” to be a Communist not by the facts, but by a “self-evident truth.” If a prosecutor should rise up in a court of law and say: “Your Honor, everyone knows that the defendant is guilty of a monstrous crime!” he would not get beyond the first four words.
WHAT EVERYBODY KNOWS

A St. Louis newspaperman, assigned to the Office of Air Surgeon during World War II, met Dr. K., an authority on physical therapy, and inquired: “Dr. K., why do athletes, particularly those who have gone into strenuous professional games such as football, always die young?”

“You have proof of this statement?” asked the doctor.

“Everybody knows that it is true; you read about it in the papers all the time.”

“Young man, there are a number of large books written on this subject. I am probably the only man who has read them all. Each disagrees with the other, but now you tell me everybody knows!”

“Well—er—what I really meant was, it is my opinion that professional athletes die young.”

“Ah, said Dr. K., “that is your opinion! Good. With opinions I will not spend my time arguing.”

What “everybody knows” would fill many tidy-sized encyclopedias. Today everybody knows that the earth goes round the sun in 365¼ days—at least in the West we know it. But five hundred years ago everybody “knew” the opposite—that the sun moves across the sky while the earth stands still.

Many well-worn sayings and proverbs are widely accepted as proof of a statement¹ Not only is it assumed that no facts are required, but often the saying contradicts modern knowledge. “Nobody works unless he has to,” is as firmly believed as it is psychologically unsound. The human anatomy and nervous system are adapted for work—which does not mean that people enjoy every variety of work—for instance tightening up nut number 16 on an assembly line all day long.

¹ We are getting close to ad populum, appeal to the crowd, developed in Chapter 13.
“Women can’t understand public questions” will probably survive long after the League of Women Voters has made the average female voter better informed than the male.

Fright can turn your hair white overnight.
Nothing succeeds like success.
A miss is a good as a mile.
Genius is the infinite capacity for taking pains.
Spare the rod and spoil the child.
Time is money.

It is very difficult to prove any of these common sayings. “The exception proves the rule” is a useful club to have handy, for it provides an out in any argument. If your opponent comes up with some facts you can’t get around, you accept them, saying, “Yes indeed, but doesn’t the exception prove the rule?” That is, your rule. It is interesting to remember that the proverb has two meanings. In the original one “prove” meant to test—which makes sense. “The exception tests the validity of the rule.”

The Reader’s Digest (October, 1934) collected pairs of proverbs which flatly contradicted one another, such as:

“Look before you leap.” But
“He who hesitates is lost.”

“Leave well enough alone.” But
“Progress never stands still.”

“A man gets no more than he pays for.” But
“The best things in life are free.”

Proverbs and adages, like old shoes, are comfortable and easy. They help keep the conversation going and sometimes reflect real wisdom. But they should never be accepted in lieu of solid proof. Self-evident truths, more perhaps than any other fallacy,
tend to come up from the unconscious. They are usually rooted in culture and language, the way our minds learned to work before we were old enough to remember. Thus they vary greatly around the world. In the American culture it is self-evident that the death of a normal young person is tragic. Other cultures have a different attitude. Mexicans, for instance, say “es mejor con Dios.” “He is better off with God.”

Morris Cohen observes that self-evident truth might equally well be called intuition. “Very few men in the history of philosophy,” he says, “have been able to resist at all times the lure of intuitively revealed truth.” Thus all the early astronomers, including Copernicus, believed that the orbits of the planets were circular. They felt in their bones that any self-respecting planet had to travel in a perfect circle.

It is difficult, says Cohen, to find a proposition for which self-evidence has never been claimed. For the greater part of human history it was self-evident that the world was flat. It was similarly obvious that water could never run uphill, until the discovery of the siphon proved otherwise.

BY DEFINITION

In a variation of the fallacy, a proposition is sometimes declared valid “by definition.” In 1951 Red China’s General Wu appeared before the Assembly of the United Nations to deny that China was an aggressor in Korea.

“It cannot possible be so,” he said.

“Why not?” he was asked.

“Because my government, by definition, is a peace-loving nation.”

Meanwhile a typical piece of Moscow logic takes the form:

“Russia has freedom, America has none.”

“What’s that again?”
“Capitalism, by definition, enslaves the workers.”
This would be news to members of the AF of L-CIO.

Propositions which are “self-evident,” or established by definition, must undergo a rigorous test before we are justified in using them. They may look convincing because they are so familiar, but we will do well to turn them over on their backs and look again.