MARTIN HINTON *

SLIPPERY SLOPES REVISITED[1]

S U M M A R Y : The aims of this paper are to illustrate where previous attempts at the characterisation of slippery slope arguments (SSAs) have gone wrong, to provide an analysis which better captures their true nature, and to show the importance of achieving a clear definition which distinguishes this argument structure from other forms with which it may be confused. The first part describes the arguments of Douglas Walton (2015) and others, which are found wanting due to their failure to capture the essence of the slippery slope and their inability to distinguish SSAs from other consequentialist forms of argument. The second part of the paper puts forward a clear analysis of what is special about SSAs: it is argued that all SSAs, properly so-named, claim that reaching a certain conclusion, A, involves the negation of a thitherto accepted principle, P, and that that principle is necessary to argue against further conclusions (B, C, …, Z) which are considered unacceptable.

K E Y W O R D S : Slippery Slope, Douglas Walton, argument schemes, Periodic Table of Arguments, CAPNA.

1. Introduction

The Slippery Slope argument (SSA) is, in itself, a rather slippery customer. A very similar group of arguments is known under a variety of different names: "the thin end of the wedge" and "the camel's nose" being the two best known; and, as if that were not problem enough, a great many different forms of argumentation have been considered as slippery slopes by various scholars. The only

* University of Łódź, Faculty of Philology. E-mail: martin.hinton@uni.lodz.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-0374-8834.

[1] This article revises and refreshes arguments made in my (2018) and brings my thinking into line with broader views on argumentation expressed in my (2021).

thing which everyone seems to agree on is that in an SSA it is proposed that one relatively innocuous step will somehow lead to far worse consequences at some point down the line. Unfortunately, there are many ways in which one thing may lead to another, a fact which has prompted Govert den Hartogh to suggest that no uniform description of what is meant by SSA is possible: "If one tried to give a definition covering present usage, one would not come up with any distinctive argument form meriting a separate discussion" (1998, p. 280), a view which is backed by Lode (1999).

In this situation, the argumentation scholar is faced with a choice: either accept that SSAs form a nebulous concept, the further analysis of which is unlikely to lead to a single conception, or attempt to "clean up" the use of the name with a more precise definition and show why the uses of SSA outside the bounds of this definition are erroneous, since the arguments being referred to by that name would be better characterised differently. Douglas Walton, however, believes that he can find a third way: to identify a common strand to all apparent SSAs. His attempt to do this is described in some detail below, and the criticism offered reveals the impossibility of his task: the moment the definition process begins, certain forms of the SSA are pushed to the fringe and others taken as more paradigmatic, with no justification offered other than that those kept in the centre fit the new paradigm best.

Some scholars have pointed to two main categories of SSAs, the logical and the empirical. Anneli Jefferson describes the empirical version as the "most common variant" (2014, p. 671), though with no supporting evidence, and gives detailed discussion of the two types and instances of their use. She does not, however, give any particular reason why the two different argument structures she discusses should be grouped together as SSAs, other than that convention would have it so. Among those writers who have sought to make the term more precise and narrow the range of arguments accepted as cases of SSA, the common theme has been to require that slippery slopes must have logical, argumentational consequences. Thus, Rizzo and Whitman argue that: "first and foremost, slippery slopes are slopes of arguments […] They involve intellectual commitments that, as it were, take on a life of their own" (Rizzo & Whitman, 2003, p. 541). This element is key if SSAs are to be distinguished from other forms of argument based merely on the unpleasant material consequences of an action. If the SSA is to be distinct, interesting, and deserving of a categorisation of its own, it must be based on the idea that the first step on the slope commits the actor to accept the further steps, or at least prevents him from being able to rationally oppose them, not merely that by acting once he sets off a chain reaction of bad consequences. The scheme for SSAs which I offer in a later section of this paper (see also Hinton, 2018) makes clear the mechanism by which this commitment is made, establishes the logical SSA as the best candidate to be considered a truly distinct form and dismisses the so-called empirical SSA as an example of the argument from material consequences, with no claims to be treated differently.

2. Walton's Scheme

The principal difficulty for researchers in properly defining the SSA is not its varied use so much as the necessity to show that, despite appearing in all traditional fallacy lists, its use is not, in fact, always fallacious. If we accept that SSAs are always poor arguments, then we might simply argue that the fallacy lies in claiming that one thing follows from another without offering any evidence as to how or why that might happen, and relies on inspiring in others an irrational fear of the final catastrophic consequence at the end of the chain. In a chapter entitled *Fallacies and Unfair Discussion Methods*, Harrie de Swart dismisses the SSA claiming: "One makes a slippery slope argument when one takes several related ideas and inappropriately makes a generalization about them all" (2018, p. 494). This is, ironically, a somewhat inappropriate generalisation, and can be said to represent at best an old-fashioned view of SSAs and of fallacies in general, lacking in nuanced discrimination.

Walton, however, agrees with the trend towards regarding SSAs as potentially acceptable forms of argument, making it clear that in his paper:

> [I]t is argued that slippery slope arguments can be reasonable in some instances […]. But as one looks through the literature on slippery slope arguments, it is difficult or even impossible to find a single example of one that meets all the requirements for being a reasonable argument. (Walton, 2015, p. 284)

Walton offers a definition of the SSA and does tentatively propose an example of it in action which "appears to be […] reasonable" (2015, p. 285).[2] As mentioned above, Walton believes he has identified a common theme in all SSAs, namely the "gray area caused by indeterminacy, typically arising from vagueness, on a continuum in a contemplated sequence of actions [and the] loss of control combined with this indeterminacy" (2015, pp. 279–280). The similarities between SSAs, on this line of thinking, and the sorites paradox are obvious. A sorites paradox, also known as the paradox of the heap, occurs when we try to pin down vague terms in order to make distinctions. Since the removal of one grain of sand does not turn a heap of sand into a non-heap, it appears that, no matter how many times one removes a grain, the heap is still there, even when only one grain remains. This lack of a clear cut-off point is reflected in some SSAs concerned with abortion, for instance: since there is no distinct moment at which a fertilised egg becomes a human child, it might be argued that allowing the termination of a zygote commits us to allowing the termination of a zygote plus one day, then plus another day and so on until all unborn children are vulnerable; the moment of birth providing an obvious distinction. It is, however, far from clear that all SSAs, or even the most typical examples, actually involve the concept of vagueness. By basing his definition around the idea of the "gray area",

---

[2] Both the characterisation and the example are repeated in Walton (2017).

Walton is immediately putting at risk his project of providing a characterisation suitable for all types of SSA, as included in current usage.

In his earlier book on the subject, Walton (1992) identified four categories of slippery slope; one of which was those involving vagueness, another those which set a precedent, a third those based on causal mechanisms, and the fourth, the full slippery slope, in which all are combined and an element of changing public opinion added. He admits, however, that this work "fails to identify the core features common to all slippery slope arguments, and therefore does not provide a central definition that applies to all slippery slope arguments" (Walton, 2015, p. 274). This is the role, then, that the grey area is supposed to play. The lack of a core definition, however, was not the only criticism the book received. In his review, Wibren van der Burg notes that Walton allows chains of consequences to count as slippery slopes, citing an example where the pollution of a river leads to the death of much wildlife and a danger to humans. Van der Burg objects: "something is missing. I would suggest that it is essential for a slippery slope that it is not merely a sequence of events, but a sequence of actions […] This is merely a negative argument from long-term consequences" (1993, p. 224).

At first glance, Walton appears to have taken this criticism to heart, and he makes a point of stressing that his scheme allows us to distinguish between SSAs and arguments from consequences, noting that: "We usually think of slippery slope arguments as built around a connected sequence of actions and consequences starting from an initial action or policy and then proceeding through a sequence to an eventual outcome" (Walton, 2015, p. 282). There is a difficulty here, though, in the understanding of "action". Unless an action is the result of a rational process, it is hard to see what the difference is between actions and events in this context. This problem is brought out by the example of a supposedly reasonable SSA which Walton eventually gives.

In Walton's example, a father, Bob, is advising his daughter, Alice, not to experiment with narcotics. He points out to her that while such drug use is associated with gratification, it soon leads to dependency and then into the nightmare of full addiction, with all its terrible effects, from which it is very hard to escape. In this case, it is clear that the grey area refers to the point at which the body begins to become dependent on the drug, and it is that dependence which causes the loss of control, making it increasingly difficult to halt the slide. What is less clear is the degree to which the taking of more drugs by a person sliding into dependency qualifies as an "action". It isn't a rational decision—the person affected knows that he should stop, that it would be reasonable to stop, but carries on anyway under the influence of the chemicals in his brain. I would argue that, although it looks different because it features a human agent, the reasoning here is no different from the polluted river example. The drug taker does not make any intellectual commitments, he is not committed to arguing that taking more at each stage is the right or even a reasonable thing to do. From first try to full addiction is presented as a chain of consequences which would need to be supported by empirical evidence that, in fact, experimentation with drugs does fre-

quently lead to addiction. The example is presented as good because it matches the definition, but it does not offer any support for that definition because it is obviously very different from some of the classic cases of SSAs being employed in debates on social policy and medical ethics.[3]

An unconvincing example does not, of course, invalidate the entire characterisation. Walton lists as many as ten basic characteristics of the SSA, several of which are worth questioning. The first few set the scene relatively uncontroversially, but number 4 runs: "There are factors that help to propel the argument and series of consequences along the sequence" (2015, p. 287). What these factors are is unclear, but an explanation is given later: "The factors referred to in characteristic 4 are called drivers. A *driver* is a catalyst" (2015, p. 288). So SSAs are propelled by "factors" which are "drivers" which are "catalysts". The exact nature of this force does not seem to be an important element in Walton's scheme, and yet it is vital to the way the argument proceeds: if an argument is driven by material cause and effect, it is a very different beast from one driven by force of logic, as I explain more thoroughly below. He does give some examples: "Drivers include such factors as precedent, social acceptance, vagueness and technological change" (Walton, 2017, p. 1518). The members of this group make very odd bedfellows: it is hard to see how a principle like precedent could operate in the same way as a fact like technological change.

A second major issue comes at points 5 & 6. Walton writes: "At the beginning of the sequence the agent retains control of whether to stop moving ahead. […] However during some interval along the sequence of actions, the agent loses control of the possibility of stopping from moving ahead" (2015, p. 287). This has been foreshadowed by earlier talk of the grey area, but here it is made explicit that the first part of the sequence occurs under the control of the agent, that is to say, that the first step is not necessarily slippery at all, and could be reversed, and the second step might not actually happen. This runs contrary to both how SSAs have usually been understood and how they are actually used: it also robs them of all their persuasive power. If the first step does not necessarily lead to the second step, then where is the force of the warning, which is explicitly based on the danger of the first step? It appears that Walton has twisted the meaning of the SSA to fit the theory rather than shaping the theory to the argument. All logical SSAs are, by the force of their logic, slippery at once—there simply is no area of uncertainty where control is lost—control has gone from the very first step. It would make no sense for logic to suddenly kick in half-way down the slope. This applies equally to arguments from precedents (which I do not consider SSAs, see below): once the precedent is set, there is immediately no control over how it will be followed. Walton acknowledges that any argument where the initial action appears to already belong in the grey zone apparently contravenes

---

[3] There is an abundance of such literature and an entire chapter in *Fallacies in Medicine and Health* by Louise Cummings, where she claims "Of all the informal fallacies used in medicine and health, none is more prominent than the slippery slope argument" (2020, p. 65).

the scheme, and offers the bizarre defence that "as the slippery slope argument is stereotypically used, it is not meant to advise the proponent not to take the initial step for the reason that even at this initial step she might already lose control" (2015, p. 303). This is an empirical claim for which no evidence is given and at once dismisses all logic based arguments as not slippery slopes. My intuition would be the exact opposite of Walton's: SSAs are employed, for example by opponents of gay marriage or abortion, to argue against the first step, and it is the danger inherent in that first step which they stress, not some future loss of control.

This difficulty is re-affirmed in the last of the characteristics, where Walton writes: "The critic argues that the agent should not take the first step, because if she does, she will be led to unpredictably lose control, and then will be unable to avoid the catastrophic outcome" (2015, p. 288). This seems wrong for two reasons: firstly, warning someone that "she will be led to unpredictably lose control" seems a rather wishy-washy kind of an argument, and certainly doesn't fit SSAs based on logical consistency or precedent setting; and, secondly, it is hard to imagine what kind of evidence might be offered in support of the argument. Clearly, there is no logical force linking step 1 to the catastrophic end point, since step 2 can still be avoided, so some empirical data would be required; but what kind of empirical data would show that you will unpredictably lose control at some point in the future? It would have to be the kind of data which supported the first step as a likely first link in a chain of causes leading to that outcome as a consequence. That would then be a simple argument from consequences.

Indeed, looking more closely at Walton's characterisation, it seems to have been written specifically to fit the drug abuse example, and clearly doesn't apply to a lot of arguments which scholars have wanted to include under the SSA umbrella. Drug abuse, however, is a very special case, where the agent falls into a trap and ceases to act reasonably. There are initial similarities with arguments against "designer babies" which state that small genetic changes now would eventually lead to greater ones and the coming of a generation of super-humans. The key difference is that the would-be baby designer needs to be convinced that those simple procedures would lead to something more, not that starting such procedures would render society incapable of rational decision making later on, which is the case with narcotics.

In his choice of example, Walton shows how he has conflated the idea of a metaphorical "slippery slope" in life, where things gradually get worse and worse: getting into debt, getting older, losing touch with loved ones, substance abuse; with slippery slope arguments. Simply saying "don't do it—it's a slippery slope" is not the same as employing an SSA.

The original 2015 paper did not feature a full list of critical questions (CQs) for SSAs, but one does appear in Walton's (2017). There are five CQs in all (2017, p. 1524):

CQ1   What intervening links in the sequence of events A_1, A_2, …, A_i needed to drive the slope forward from A_0 to A_n are explicitly stated?

CQ2 What missing steps are required as links to fill in the sequence of events from A_0 to A_n, to make the transition forward from A_0 to A_n plausible?

CQ3 What are the weakest links in the sequence, where additional evidence needs to be given on whether one event will really lead to another?

CQ4 Is the sequence of argumentation meant to be deductive, so that if the first step is taken, it is claimed that the final outcome A_n must necessarily come about?

CQ5 Is the final outcome A_n shown to be catastrophic by the value-based reasoning needed to support this claim?

All of these questions may provide interesting information about a particular argument, however, with the exception of CQ5, they are clearly not critical questions in the usually accepted sense—the sense which Walton himself employs elsewhere. Critical questions are such that they must be answered correctly for an argument to be accepted, but CQs 1–4 do not lead to any kind of evaluation or assessment of the argument in question. As Yu and Zenker point out, CQs are "argument attacks or rebuttals" (2020, p. 16) which may target the data, the inference or the conclusion of an argument; yet CQs 1–4 above, while asking for more information about the argument, do not target anything at all: they are questions, but they are not critical.

The shortcomings of Walton's treatment are important because of the influence which his work, quite deservedly in general, has over the field of argumentation and beyond. His approach has been criticised by Hinton (2018) and Strait & Alberti who state that it "tends toward including arguments that are not really SSAs (e.g., the heap paradox), but also […] excludes arguments that should not be excluded" (2019, p. 1088), as well as being completely ignored by Philip Devine, who finds, quite independently, that "the argument has three forms—analogical, argumentative and prudential" (2019, p. 375), without any reference to Walton. Yet, for many authors it remains authoritative and definitive.

For instance, Louise Cummings (2020) considers SSAs to be of particular importance in questions of medical ethics, and she discusses them at length. She explains confidently that there are four logical features to them: avoidance of negative consequences, progression through interlinked actions, drivers propel series of actions, and that they are defeasible, presumptive arguments. She refers to all SSA-style arguments as logical in order to distinguish them from the metaphorical, and yet the fourth of her features would seem to rule out the possibility of what are usually known as logical SSAs. All of this is supported only by a passing reference to Walton (2017), although her section on evaluation makes no mention of his CQs.

Similarly, Liga & Palmirani set out to demonstrate how tree kernels can be used "to detect the famous 'Slippery slope' argument" (2019, p. 181). The SSA, it seems, is too famous to require any introduction, let alone explanation, and so they give it none. The single reference provided, but not discussed, is Walton (2015).

At the same time, a large-scale study by Blassnig et al. (2019) which looked at informal fallacies in populist rhetoric, including SSAs, considered only Walton's earlier (2008) definition in their brief description of the form. The authors were apparently happy to treat this definition as complete and uncontroversial, presumably unaware of the criticism it had received and the fact that Walton had later developed his own view considerably.

All of this, the problems with Walton's scheme and CQs, the prevalence of SSAs in important medical decisions, and the readiness of researchers to accept definitions without criticisms, highlights the need for a clearer understanding of what is actually going on in such arguments and a better appreciation of how they might be evaluated.

3. An Alternative Characterisation

The argument scheme offered by Walton, and based on the characteristics described above, is rather long and rather complex, consisting of six premises and a conclusion. All this, in spite of the fact that it only covers a limited set of arguments which are only debatably SSAs anyway. Before setting forth my own, simpler, scheme, there are a few points to deal with in terms of providing a better characterisation of the form of the argument.

The first is this: Walton is right to stress that any definition of the SSA must properly distinguish it from straightforward arguments from bad consequences. If the SSA cannot be so distinguished then it is no more than a vague category used popularly to describe certain situations or arguments with little fundamentally in common—a rhetorical device to produce fear and uncertainty in its audience. Walton does give a simple scheme for arguments from bad consequences— A will bring bad consequences, don't do A—but doesn't explain why that does not fit his drug example. In fact, this scheme will fit all SSAs, since SSAs are arguments from bad consequences. Those arguments, however, can be divided by the nature of their consequences—they may be logical or they may be material. Arguments from material consequences, no matter how long and twisting the chain of cause and effect, are essentially all the same. Every serious consequence of an action is a result of a chain of very small events, so whether the consequence is immediate or at the bottom of a slope is of no importance to the argument; thus, the so-called empirical SSA is no such thing, it is a simple argument from material consequence, with greater story-telling. Such argumentation must be supported with empirical facts, and, perhaps, probability statistics. Arguments from logical consequences, however, are something very different. The evidence for them is pure reasoning; they do not need to be backed up by science.

At least three distinct varieties of arguments from logical consequences can be identified, all of them relying at heart on the law of the excluded middle, that we cannot assert both p and not p without being guilty of inconsistency. The first is the simple argument from consistency: having made an assertion in one place, I cannot assert its negation somewhere else unless I am prepared to withdraw the

original statement. If I insist on both my assertion and its negation, the consequence is inconsistency. Secondly, there are arguments from precedent: these are distinct from SSAs and a not a sub-type of them, since precedents are activated when a situation the same or very similar to the one in question appears, thus, the argument runs that if you act in this way now you are committed to acting in the same way again in future cases resembling this one. SSAs are different because they suggest a commitment to a logical step which has consequences very difficult to foresee. To return to the example of designer babies, it is not important whether or not we can imagine what types of genetic modification might be possible in the future, the thought is that whatever they are, we shall have no defence against them once we accept human modification in principle. The consequences of setting a precedent are clear—if the same situation occurs, we are bound, in fairness, to behave in the same way. The consequences of the slippery slope, however, are not so clear: surely, they are bad, but a certain mystery about just how far down the slope leads is part of their power.

It should also be remembered that in all of these cases of logical consequences, there may be no material consequences whatsoever. Being labelled inconsistent is unpleasant, but not painful; the situation for which one set a precedent may never arise again; the horrors at the bottom of the slope may never actually be realised, but our commitment to accepting them if they are is established at the first step. Arguments from logical consequences are clearly very different from arguments from material consequences, and the difference lies in the force driving the argument. This force in the case of so-called empirical SSAs is the physical concept of cause and effect; in the case of arguments from precedent and SSAs, as I have described them, it is the power of logical consistency. Two arguments with a different inferential force can never be united under one argument scheme, not least because the critical questions one would wish to ask are so very different.

4. An Alternative Scheme

My argument scheme for SSAs, first proposed in my (2018), takes as its starting point the idea that all such arguments involve the defence of a particular principle, which, if broken now, would be unavailable to us when arguing against other proposals which might arise later on. The scheme is laid out below, along with critical questions, and examples of how it is capable of filtering reasonable SSAs from unreasonable ones. Thus, an SSA is an argument which states that:

1. Accepting proposal (a) would mean breaking the hitherto accepted principle (p).
2. Upholding (p) is necessary/important to argue against proposals (b), (c), … (z).
3. Proposal (z) is clearly undesirable.
   Therefore, (a) should be rejected.

This scheme can be altered to allow for the establishment of a new principle, hitherto not accepted, rather than the breaking of an old one, with no logical changes. There are three critical questions which this scheme implies:

CQ1   Does accepting (a) break (p)?

CQ2   Is (p) necessary/important in arguing against (b), (c) … (z)?

CQ3   Is (z) undesirable?

The first of these questions is more complicated than it looks since it is quite possible that an apparently broken principle is only being bent a little. For example, when I accept the killing of a man in self-defence, I have not abandoned the principle of not killing men, I have allowed it to be trumped by another principle, and I am not committed to a slippery slope of senseless murder. Also, for a principle to be broken it must be firmly established that it exists and is currently being relied upon. One of the examples below will show that upon deeper thought this may not always be the case.

The second question is where most apparent SSAs will break down. This question tests whether there is a true connection between the case in hand, the first step on the slope, and the other situations or arguments which may come later. It is important to stress that (b) is not a logical consequence of (a), only that objecting to (b), should somebody propose it, has become impossible as a logical consequence of accepting (a). It is to be assumed that when changes are made, they are made one step at a time, but, from a logical point of view, there is already no defence against (z) as soon as (a) is accepted. There is no stipulated length to the slope, and the number of stages to be gone through before the final disaster is reached is a topic on which the literature generally is silent. The question for anyone evaluating the argument is whether or not the removal of the principle at hand does, in fact, preclude any defence against more radical proposals.

Finally, as SSAs must lead downwards, it should be established that what the removal of the principle commits us to accept, or at least leaves us defenceless in arguing against, is, in fact, a catastrophic outcome. It may well be that those who oppose the first step also oppose its logical conclusions, while those who accept it are happy with where it leads. An example of this would be an argument against women's suffrage where a nineteenth century gentleman might have argued that allowing women to vote would commit us, in the long-term, to accept women in parliament and even a woman as Prime Minister! One man's disaster is another woman's progress.

To illustrate how the scheme and the questions work together to assess SSAs and sort the strong from the weak, they need to be applied to examples. Here, there arises a small problem: users of SSAs rarely set them out in full. In order to examine these arguments, then, the theorist must attempt a reconstruction of the thinking behind the argument. While that reconstruction should be done as generously as possible, there is a danger that ideas are being put into the heads of

those who never had them. This should be borne in mind during the discussion of the fairly well-known positions described below.

One of the major roles of argumentation schemes and their accompanying critical questions is to allow us to show exactly where arguments which we instinctively feel are weak go wrong, and thus, to be able to properly refute them. An example of this is the somewhat absurd argument employed by certain American organisations, against the legalisation of same-sex marriage. These groups (see, for example, the TFP Student action website) claim that allowing such unions sparks a slippery slope leading to incestuous, paedophilic, or even inter-species marriages. Reconstructing the argument as generously as possible, it runs something like this:

1. Accepting same-sex marriage would mean breaking the hitherto accepted principle (p) that marriage is always and only between a man and a woman.
2. Upholding (p) is necessary/important to argue against incestuous, paedophilic and inter-species marriages.
3. These marriages are clearly undesirable.

   Therefore, same-sex marriage should be rejected.

Now, applying the critical questions, we see that this argument does pass the first test: there has long been such a principle in existence in most of the world and it would be broken by allowing same-sex marriages. Most people, I suggest, would also agree that the third premise is correct and the types of union mentioned should not be accepted, so the third question is also satisfied. It is the second critical question, however, which reveals the error in the argument: the principles restricting marriages with children, with close relatives and any other objects, animate or otherwise, exist independently of the man plus woman tradition and are unaffected by its removal. A man is not free to marry his sister, a little girl or a cow, despite their all being female. Premise 2 is demonstrably false: principle (p) is not involved in the arguments against those forms of marriage at all. This example, then, illustrates how the scheme and questions are able to specify precisely where the weakness in the argument lies.

Other arguments appear more persuasive and, rather than exposing their absurdity, the scheme works to find points at which they may be questioned and thus helps the debate progress towards better conclusions. SSAs are often referred to in medical ethics, not least in euthanasia debates (Feltz, 2015; Lewis, 2007; Potter, 2019). Sometimes the term here is used to refer to the material consequences of legalisation, but a logical argument can also be made, that once doctors begin to use their skill to assist those suffering from great physical pain to die, there is little argument to prevent their using it to help those experiencing psychological pain from doing the same thing. Thus:

1. Legalising euthanasia would mean breaking the hitherto accepted principle (p) that doctors always try to preserve life.

2. Upholding (p) is necessary/important to argue against assisted suicide on demand.

3. Assisted suicide on demand is clearly undesirable.

   Therefore, legalisation of euthanasia should be rejected.

In this case, all three of the premises are questionable, but none is obviously false. Firstly, although there is no doubt that allowing assisted suicide would break the principle of always preserving life, it is far from certain that that principle is currently in operation. It has become common practice to withhold certain treatments from patients in a terminal condition, as they would only unnecessarily prolong their suffering. This takes us into the distinction between acts and omission and its moral complications, but, without entering such debates, it can be noted that the first premise is, at least, open to question.

The second premise is also worthy of debate. It is hard to draw a clear distinction between what forms of pain, and in what degree, qualify one for a mercy killing and what forms do not. However, it does seem that physicians have an over-riding duty of care to their patients such that any form of assisted suicide would have to be the last resort and in cases such as teenage depression, substance abuse or grief, experience and training would suggest that other methods of alleviating the suffering are possible and should be tried first. Still, once it is legal for a doctor to take life, it becomes a question of an individual's (or perhaps a panel's) judgement as to whether or not the suffering is sufficiently severe and what other methods are worth trying.

Thirdly, although many people would be horrified to find that their local family doctor was assisting patients to kill themselves, there is clearly a libertarian case to be made in favour of freely available access to pain-free, easily administered, life-ending drugs. In short, the bottom of the slope may not seem so bad from a certain point of view.

In this case, then, the scheme helps to pick out which parts of the argument are controversial and require further debate or evidence. Argumentation schemes can be extremely useful in showing those employing certain forms of reasoning what they are actually claiming, giving them the chance to decide whether or not they really want to make such claims and whether or not they have reasonable evidence for them.

5. Slippery Slopes in a Wider Framework

In order to complete the account of the SSA, it is a necessary to state briefly how the structure and its evaluation fit into the fuller theory of argumentation set out in Hinton (2021). In the theoretical underpinning of the Comprehensive Assessment Procedure for Natural Argumentation (CAPNA) introduced in that

book, the identification of fallacies through some comparative analysis that finds similarity between an instance of an argument and a defined named-fallacy is discarded, and does not form any part of the evaluation procedure. It is important to reiterate, therefore, that the discussion of slippery slopes in this paper is a discussion of a form of arguing, not the definition of a fallacy, and that my preoccupation has been to show how it may be separated from other forms, in order to make the name meaningful and clear.

The CAPNA itself is a procedure with three main stages of evaluation: of the process, the reasoning, and the language of natural argument. The discussion in this paper, and the CQs given above pertain only to the stage of reasoning analysis, because the SSA is here being considered, in the abstract, as a form of reasoning. Any particular instance of such an argument form would, by necessity, take place within a process and be expressed in language, and would face procedural questions (PQs) on all three levels. Still, it is worth considering for a moment how the CQs for an SSA might differ from the PQs it would face within the reasoning evaluation of the CAPNA.

The reasoning stage is based upon an identified argument type in accordance with the Argument Type Identification Procedure (ATIP) set out by Wagemans (2020). This procedure involves a reconstruction of the argument, where necessary, and the identification of the relationship between the premise and the conclusion through consideration of the subjects and objects of the sentences expressing them. The nature of the statements, whether they be of fact, value or policy is also noted. The analysis is entirely systematic and procedural: at no point is an attempt made to compare arguments to traditionally named structures. The reasoning of every argument can be evaluated in terms of the acceptability of its data premise, and in terms of the strength of the warrant or "lever" which is necessary to reach the given conclusion.[4]

When this procedure is compared to the scheme above, it is clear that the first PQ (or set of PQs), concerning the data premise, is equivalent to CQ1, and that the second PQ (or set of PQs), concerning the lever, is equivalent to CQ2. Which leaves CQ3 apparently unaccounted for. There is, however, a good reason for this. At a more careful level of analysis, an SSA is actually two arguments: one is that accepting (a) will lead to accepting (z), and a second is that (z) is undesirable and any action that leads to it should be rejected. CQ3, then, is equivalent to the data premise PQ of the second stage of the argument.

This insight, derived from the systematic approach to identifying arguments employed by the ATIP and the CAPNA, goes a long way towards explaining the confusion over slippery slopes. The second stage of the argument is the same for all those wide-ranging examples cited in the varied literature on the topic—the consequence is bad so its cause should be avoided, a value statement leading to a policy statement—but the first stage of the argument is different. The PQs which would be asked of a so-called empirical SSA, where both premise and

---

[4] See Wagemans' (2019) for further theoretical background.

conclusion are factual, would be the same as for any other argument from material consequence. The PQs examining the lever of the SSA as I have described it, however, would be different, because the argument always involves statements of value, thus showing that form to be distinct, and deserving of separate consideration.

This leads to an important realisation: for a slippery slope argument to be distinct from other consequentialist arguments, it must deal with statements of value, of what is true or acceptable, rather than statements of fact. This can be illustrated with the example of drug addiction. The argument that Alice will get addicted to heroin because Alice smokes cannabis, no matter how many intervening steps are placed in between, is an empirical claim about cause and effect, no different from the claim that the water will boil because it is being heated. On the other hand, the claim that Alice's taking heroin becomes acceptable because Alice's smoking cannabis is acceptable, is a claim about values and the logical connection between holding one and holding the other: this, then, is a different form and can be safely referred to as an SSA.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have made four basic claims. Firstly, I have argued that current usage of the term slippery slope argument is inexact and covers a variety of forms of reasoning which cannot be treated as a common argument form. Secondly, I have shown how Douglas Walton's attempt to find a common strand amongst these disparate arguments has led him into error via the quite unnecessary positing of a "gray area" in which control is lost. Thirdly, I have suggested that if SSAs are to be examined at all, they must be differentiated from other forms of argument from consequences, necessitating the restriction of the term to those arguments whose consequences are of a logical, argumentational, rather than a natural or material nature. Lastly, I have proposed an improved and greatly simplified argument scheme, with critical questions, and illustrated with examples how it is capable of recognising the flaws and strengths of slippery slope arguments.

In making these claims, I realise that I may be accused of hijacking the term "slippery slope" and re-defining it to meet my own interpretation. To an extent, I acknowledge this to be the case; however, I would argue that in order for distinct argument forms to be described, it is essential to identify their distinguishing features, not only at the level of appearances, but in the workings of their inference. I have shown also how a systematic procedure of analysis can highlight the differences between forms and proves a much better judge of which arguments are alike and which are not than a simple comparative analysis.

REFERENCES

Blassnig, S., Büchel, F., Ernst, N., Engesser, S. (2019). Populism and Informal Fallacies: An Analysis of Right-Wing Populist Rhetoric in Election Campaigns. *Argumentation*, *33*(1), 107–136. doi:10.1007/s10503-018-9461-2

Cummings L. (2020). *Fallacies in Medicine and Health*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-28513-5_3

Devine, P. (2018). On Slippery Slopes. *Philosophy*, 93, 375–395.

den Hartogh, G. (1998). The Slippery Slope Argument. In H. Kuhse (Ed.), *Companion to Bioethics* (pp. 280–290). Oxford: Blackwell.

Feltz A. (2015). Everyday Attitudes About Euthanasia and the Slippery Slope Argument. In: M. Cholbi, J. Varelius (Eds.), *New Directions in the Ethics of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia* (vol. 64, pp. 217–237). Cham: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-22050-5_13

Hinton, M. (2018). Slippery Slopes and Other Consequences. *Logic and Logical Philosophy*, *27*, 453–470.

Hinton, M. (2021). *Evaluating the Language of Argument*. Cham: Springer.

Jefferson, A. (2014). Slippery Slope Arguments. *Philosophy Compass*, *9*(10), 672–680.

Lewis, P. (2007). The Empirical Slippery Slope from Voluntary to Non-Voluntary Euthanasia. *The Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics*, *35*(1), 197–210.

Liga D., Palmirani M. (2019). Detecting "Slippery Slope" and Other Argumentative Stances of Opposition Using Tree Kernels in Monologic Discourse. In: P. Fodor, M. Montali, D. Calvanese, D. Roman (Eds.), *Rules and Reasoning. RuleML+RR 2019. Lecture Notes in Computer Science* (vol. 11784, pp. 180–189). Cham: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-31095-0_13

Lode, E. (1999). Slippery Slope Arguments and Legal Reasoning. *California Law Review*, *87*(6), 1469–1544.

Potter, J. (2019). The Psychological Slippery Slope From Physician-Assisted Death to Active Euthanasia: A Paragon of Fallacious Reasoning. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, *22*, 239–244. doi:10.1007/s11019-018-9864-8

Rizzo M., Whitman, D. (2003). The Camel's Nose in the Tent: Rules, Theories and Slippery Slopes. *UCLA Law Review*, *51*, 539–592.

Strait, L. P., Alberti, L. (2019). The Role of Decision-Making Agency in Distinguishing Legitimate and Fallacious Slippery Slope Arguments. In B. Garssen, D. Godden, G. R. Mitchell, J. H. M. Wagemans (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 1083–1092). Amsterdam: SicSat.

de Swart, H. (2018). *Philosophical and Mathematical Logic*. Cham: Springer.

TFP Student Action. (2015). 10 Reasons Why Homosexual "Marriage" is Harmful and Must be Opposed. Retrieved from: http://www.tfpstudentaction.org/politically-incorrect/homosexuality/10-reasons-why-homosexual-marriage-is-harmful-and-must-be-opposed.html

Van der Burg, W. (1991). The Slippery Slope Argument. *Ethics*, *102*, 42–65.

Wagemans, J. H. M. (2019). Four Basic Argument Forms. *Research in Language*, *17*(1), 57–69. doi:10.2478/rela-2019-0005

Wagemans, J. H. M. (2020). Argument Type Identification Procedure (ATIP)—Version 3. Retrieved from: www.periodic-table-of-arguments.org/argument-type-identification-procedure

Walton, D. (1992). *Slippery Slope Arguments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walton, D. (2008). *Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Walton, D. (2015). The Basic Slippery Slope Argument. *Informal Logic*, *35*(3), 273–311.

Walton, D. (2017). The Slippery Slope Argument in the Ethical Debate on Genetic Engineering of Humans. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, *23*(6), 1507–1528.