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SLIPPERY SLOPES AND OTHER CONSEQUENCES

“He that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall”

Jonathan Edwards*

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to illustrate where previous attempts at the characterisation of Slippery Slope Arguments (SSAs) have gone wrong, and to provide an analysis which better captures their true nature. The first part describes Walton’s [10] arguments in support of his views on SSAs and also considers the characterisations put forward by other researchers. All of these 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 puts forward a clearer analysis of what is special about SSAs and proposes an argumentation scheme which allows them to be easily distinguished from other arguments from consequences.

Keywords: argument schemes; Douglas Walton; slippery slope arguments; arguments from consequences

1. Introduction

Two things were said of the “Wise Woman” consulted by Lord Blackadder; first that she was a woman, and, as he correctly guessed, that she was wise¹. And so it is with Slippery Slopes: they must be slopes and they must be slippery. A slope may lead up or down, but a slippery

* From Edwards’s famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741).

¹ This encounter takes place in episode 1, series 2, of the popular BBC comedy “Blackadder” written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton [2].

one will always take one in the same direction, and a slippery place is, as the quotation at the top makes clear, one where one is always in danger of falling. For an argument to qualify as an SSA, therefore, it must show how a path leads downwards, that is, towards undesirable or, still better, disastrous results; and that that path carries with it an immediate jeopardy of a precipitous slide. It is clear that while the slippery slope has often been classed as a fallacy of reasoning, it is in fact a perfectly good form of argument if these two criteria are met: if a measure really does place one on a downward path into consequences one cannot accept, then an SSA against that measure is both fair and reasonable, and has every chance of being persuasive.

And yet, it must be noted at once that, as with all analogies, there is a danger of taking the image of the slope too far, when we are in fact talking about argument and reason, not mud and ice. There is also danger that the analogy may be used to cover types of slopes which are very different from each other and lead to very different types of consequences, and that those slopes may be considered as instances of the same phenomenon simply because the same analogy seems to apply to them. This, I shall argue, is the trap into which Douglas Walton has fallen, and is the ultimate reason that his analysis of SSAs is an unsatisfactory one.

The first task of this paper, then, after a brief introduction to what SSAs have generally been taken to consist of, is to set out Walton's views and discuss where his account falls into confusion. Since the lack of proper distinctions between varieties of arguments from consequences is found to be a major cause of difficulties with Walton's work, this is followed by a careful analysis and separation of such arguments into four types: SSAs, arguments from material consequences, arguments from precedent, and arguments from consistency. In this section I discuss the different forces pushing the argument from premisses to conclusion and describe this as the 'gravity' of argumentation. This allows for the clear distinction between logically and causally driven arguments to be seen.

The final section of the paper contains my own argumentation scheme for SSAs, complete with critical questions. A number of examples are given to show how the scheme is able to differentiate between fallacious and plausible slippery slope arguments.

2. Slippery slopes

As with many of the argument structures traditionally listed as fallacies, one of the key problems with the assessment of SSAs is that the name ‘slippery slope’ has been used loosely and applied to many different types of reasoning. This led Govert den Hartogh to conclude that: “If one tried to give a definition covering present usage, one would not come up with any distinctive argument form meriting a separate discussion” [3, p. 280]. This does not, however, prevent den Hartogh giving an extensive description of what he thinks is the paradigmatic case. There are two points worth making about this rather drawn-out characterisation: the first is that he mixes features of the argument itself with features of what he takes to be its common usage. This is indicative of a habit which has clouded the discussion of SSAs by many authors: there is a feeling that SSAs are employed more or less exclusively by social conservatives against more ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ ideas. den Hartogh goes so far as to “believe that it is seldom worthwhile to address such arguments directly. They should rather be taken as expressions of allegiance to the moral superiority of the status quo position, and be addressed as such” [3, p. 289]. The impression one gets is that social conservatism is not popular among authors on argumentation; but that is unimportant, what matters is that the argument structure is being judged by the people who use it, not on its own merits, which is inexcusable.

The second, and more pertinent, feature of his discussion is the claim that a “causal mechanism exists which, once we accept actions of type A will cause us to accept actions of type N as well” [3, p. 281]. This notion of acceptance is important as it rules out mere chains of consequences where one thing leads to another; the final disastrous step is accepted just as the first seemingly innocent one was. den Hartogh believes such arguments can be divided into causal and logical slippery slopes, saying of the latter “once we accept A, we are rationally committed to accepting B, C, and, eventually, N” [3, p. 281]. I think this distinction is a mistake. It is difficult to know what it would mean to “accept actions of type N” if the chain is one of direct causes, rather than to simply be unable to stop them. I would argue, then, that in a true SSA, we are always “rationally committed” to the final step when we make the first. The consequences of an SSA are argumentational consequences, they affect what we will later accept as good argument, not what will necessarily happen.

This is a question which has split opinion. A number of authors, such as Rizzo & Whitman, have insisted on this logical element: “first and foremost, slippery slopes are slopes of arguments [...] They involve intellectual commitments that, as it were, take on a life of their own” [6, p. 541]. Another way of putting it is: “I would suggest that it is essential for a slippery slope that it is not merely a sequence of events” [8, p. 224]. For these authors, an SSA cannot be simply a ‘one thing leads to another’ chain of consequences. den Hartogh talks frequently of ‘predictions’ in his account, but as Rizzo & Whitman point out, it is the unpredictability of the consequences of accepting the given proposition which make for the real slippery slope. On the other hand, Jefferson notes that “a central distinction is that between logical and empirical SSAs [...] one is an empirical prediction, the other an argument for a relevant similarity between two different cases” [4, p. 672–673]; and she not only accepts the empirical causal variety, but also considers it to be the usual form of the argument. Her characterisation, however, fails to capture the essence of the logical argument: as I show below, SSAs do not rely on the analogy between the starting and end points for their force, although, in fact, there may be a certain similarity between them. Interestingly, though, Jefferson describes two kinds of logical SSA, one reliant on a straightforward moral analogy and a second related to the Sorites paradox, where each step is so similar to the last that no cut off point can be identified and yet the starting and end points are not at all the same, and this thinking is crucial to Walton’s [10] most recent account which I describe below.

Anyone looking for a simple description of the slippery slope in this section will have been left disappointed: its purpose, however, was to bring out that very lack of agreement amongst scholars which has held back the understanding of this form of argumentation. Everyone agrees that a slippery slope argument is one which says that a seemingly innocent first step will lead to a series of ultimately disastrous consequences; but how the one leads to the other, and what the nature of those consequences is are matters for debate. The motivation of this paper in suggesting one model as the ‘real’ slippery slope is to allow it to be compared with and differentiated from other types of argument from consequences; it will be seen below that so-called ‘empirical SSAs’ are not distinct in form from straightforward arguments from material consequences, whereas ‘logical SSAs’ are in that they rely on a completely different mechanism and are supported by very different types of evidence.

3. Walton's slippery slopes

Douglas Walton has written a good deal on SSAs, even producing an entire book dedicated to them [9]; in this paper, however, the focus is on his most recent explication of his views [10]. He begins by noting the difficulties with the definition of what an SSA actually is, and refers to the importance of distinguishing it from the more common general argument from bad consequences; all of which is quite uncontroversial.

His account becomes questionable, however, when Walton starts to introduce examples. While recognising that the literature generally accepts the SSA as a potentially persuasive form, he bemoans the fact that “there is no clear example of it being a rational argument in the literature, at least of a kind that can be used as a paradigm example” [10, 284]. The best he can find is from Burgess [1], where it is suggested that a drug which would eventually kill the patient should not be administered. Why either Burgess or Walton see this as an SSA I cannot understand. It is a situation where an initial step will set in train consequences that lead to a patient's death, but is hardly typical of how SSAs are used in reality and is in no way different from a simple argument from bad consequences. Whether the drug kills the patient after one dose or after a year of increasing doses is immaterial to the argument, which is that he shouldn't be given the drug as it will kill him.

To improve on this, Walton introduces a story about a father (Bob) warning his daughter not to take heroin. It is difficult to say whether Walton considers this an SSA or not since he comments: “it might look to an audience that Bob's argumentation could be classified as a slippery slope argument” [10, p. 286]. The objection to this being considered an example of an SSA is the same — while the initial contact with the drug may lead to a ‘slide’ into addiction and the horrible consequences of that, it does not have the least effect on our acceptance of addiction. It is merely the first step in a chain of events, there is no sense of a commitment being made, and indeed, we know that very many people take drugs without falling into addiction. Despite his insistence that SSAs must be separated from simple bad consequences arguments, Walton fails to see that a chain of consequences is still just consequences. The name of the analogy is important here — drug addiction is certainly a slippery slope; users slide downwards into a terrible place — but that doesn't mean that an argument against using drugs is an SSA: it is a slide in the sense of health and happiness, not a slide in reasoning!

The sequence of events by which someone becomes a drug addict is clearly not linked to moves in argumentation: the addicted person knows they should cease taking the drug but cannot help it. It is not a logical consequence of taking the drug that addiction becomes acceptable. Walton would like to include such scenarios as SSAs because they fit his description:

There are two factors that are combined to make a slippery slope argument slippery [...]. The first is the connection between a so-called gray area caused by indeterminacy, typically arising from vagueness, on a continuum in a contemplated sequence of actions. The second factor is loss of control combined with this indeterminacy. [10, 279–280]

This ‘gray area’ and the link between slippery slopes and the ‘sorites’ fallacy has been mentioned by a number of authors. In his account of the SSA, Govert den Hartogh portrays all ‘logical’ slippery slopes as relying on it, and takes an anti-abortion argument as his example. Here the claim is that if a zygote can be killed, then so can an embryo at any stage and even a child, as each stage of development is slow and there are no sudden jumps where one could draw the line. Thus, allowing the destruction of a zygote leaves us unable to protect the child. den Hartogh finds this claim to be invalid, since the difference between a new-born child and a fertilised egg is clear and the limit for abortion only needs to be set “safely within the core zone of the grey area” [3, p. 285].

There are two points to make about this: firstly, there is no reason to believe that all logic-based SSAs rely on sorites-style vagueness, as examples in the sections below will illustrate. Secondly, in den Hartogh’s example he makes assumptions about the reasons being put forward about why killing babies is a disastrous conclusion. If the argument is that it is wrong to kill people and a baby is a person and we can’t say at what exact moment the baby becomes a person, but we all agree that a zygote is not a person, then the anti-abortion argument rests on the sorites fallacy, in which case it isn’t really an SSA but a sorites fallacy. If, however, the argument is that it is wrong to end human life, and the zygote counts as human life, then it would be a very different argument and would fit onto the scheme for SSAs I develop below, without any recourse to vagueness.

For his part, Walton is wedded to the idea that slippery slopes must have ‘gray areas’ where control is lost and this suggestion is built into

the ten point characterisation of SSAs which he offers. The first of those ten points is unremarkable, but questions begin at number two. Apparently the person employing the SSAs “postulates a sequence of further actions that will move forward as consequences of the agent’s carrying out the initial contemplated action” [10, p. 287]. Walton appears to be focussing immediately on material consequences, not argumentational ones. Actions could be understood as ‘reasonings’ as much as ‘events’ but that interpretation doesn’t find much support in the later points. These consequences then become steadily worse, before we are told in point four that: “There are factors that help to propel the argument and series of consequences along the sequence” [10, p. 287]; but we don’t know what they are. Fortunately, he later explains: “The factors referred to in characteristic 4 are called drivers. A *driver* is a catalyst” [10, p. 288]. Catalysts, however, are substances added to chemical reactions to make them go faster — it isn’t clear that that is what is meant here. These factors, drivers or catalysts do not apparently start the sequence — they are not causes in that sense, but they propel. This again presupposes non-logical arguments, since in a logical SSA, there is no other factor but logic: the same logic which began the sequence. The vagueness here about what drives the argument and how it is related to what starts the argument is worrying: surely the driver, what I later refer to as the gravity of the argument, is the most important factor. Walton cites two examples, public acceptance leading to greater public acceptance, and drug use leading to addiction: both material consequences.

The next few points describe how the agent moves towards a grey area, maintaining control, and then at some point loses that control. This does not seem to fit well with how SSAs are usually understood: the first step is crucial, the slope is slippery at the top, it does not become slippery half way down. This type of argument would never be persuasive because the agent is not committed to the disastrous consequences by taking the first step and, theoretically, can still avoid descending any further. Finally we are told: “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” [10, p. 288]. This doesn’t seem to be what the critic is saying at all. Rather he points out that the first step could lead to others and you might not be able to control where you end up, so be careful. The argument, like the heroin example, relies for its persuasiveness on the likelihood of the consequences not on their logic.

In sum, my objection to Walton's characterisation is this: one doesn't slide down a slope because it's slippery: one slides because of gravity. Empirical and Logical SSAs are driven by a different force — the gravity pushing us down the slope from premisses to conclusion is not the same, which makes a common definition and treatment unhelpful. Empirical SSAs are driven by real-world cause and effect, what I call material consequences, and must be supported by evidence. Logical SSAs are driven by the logical need for consistency — they apply to hypothetical cases, regardless of evidence, and these are the real slippery slopes

4. Arguments from consequences

There are, I propose, four distinct varieties of arguments which rely on the perceived negative consequences of accepting a proposition for their rejection of that proposition. These are arguments from material (that is to say, real-world, empirical) consequences, arguments from precedent, arguments from consistency and finally, slippery slope arguments (or arguments from the loss of principle). The first of these relies on the moral sense of the arguers, and the latter three rely on the law of excluded middle for the force of their reason, the argumentational gravity that leads from premiss to conclusion.

Arguments from consequences have much in common. They all run thus:

1. Accepting proposition p will cause consequence c .
 2. Consequence c is undesirable.
 3. Undesirable consequences must be avoided, where possible.
- Therefore, proposition p must not be accepted, if possible.

However, there is a huge variety of reasoning contained within the words 'will cause', and many ways in which an outcome can be 'undesirable'. In an argument from material consequences, such as we all employ every day of our lives unknowingly, the premisses are modified in this way:

1. Accepting proposition p will cause, by the laws of nature, consequence c .
 2. Consequence c is bad (morally or for me personally).
 3. Bad consequences must be avoided, where possible.
- Therefore, proposition p must not be accepted, if possible.

As far as the structure of the argument is concerned, it makes no difference if c is a direct, immediate, consequence of p or the end point of a very long chain. Indeed, looking at events in the world scientifically, all events which might have a moral import are the ends of very long chains of consequences at the quantum and molecular levels. The form of an empirical SSA does not differ in substance from a simple ‘if I pull the trigger, you’ll be dead’ statement, it simply names more stages in the process, as discussed above in reference to Walton’s drug addiction example.

The critical questions for this type of argument will revolve around whether or not p will, in fact, cause c , and whether or not c is actually bad. So basically they will be:

- (a) What evidence do you have that p will cause c ?
- (b) What are the consequences, c^* , of rejecting p ?
- (c) What evidence do you have that rejecting p will cause c^* ?
- (d) In what way and for whom is c worse than c^* ?

Because any argument from the consequences of an action must take into consideration the consequences of not acting, and both sets of supposed consequences, c and c^* , will require evidence of a form acceptable to all disputants. This analysis, of course, does not touch on the moral strength of consequentialist argumentation in general, although in reality it is likely that a further question about how rejecting or accepting p would sit with one’s rights and duties would be added. What is without doubt is that the gravity of the argument which moves it from premisses to conclusion is normative, the consequences have moral value and we are obliged to maximise that value in our decisions.

The other three types are rather different. At one level they can all be characterised like this:

1. Accepting proposition p means, as a logical consequence, rejecting not p .
2. Rejecting not p is undesirable.
3. Undesirable consequences must be avoided, where possible.

Therefore, proposition p must not be accepted, if possible.

What differentiates the three is the reason why premiss two is true, which constitutes an argument in itself. In arguments from consistency, rejecting not p is undesirable because we have already asserted it elsewhere, and would be committed to $(p \& \neg p)$. There are no other consequences to consider; nobody is injured, nothing is broken; only we are guilty of an

inconsistency, a hypocrisy and may suffer a loss of face. Certainly, one cannot expect to be persuasive if one asserts p and not p simultaneously. The only important critical question would be:

(a) Have I really committed myself to not p ?

Even if the answer is affirmative, p does not necessarily have to be rejected: there are still two possibilities: abandon p , or abandon not p . That is to say, one may stick to one's argument and revise one's previous statements.

In arguments from precedent, rejecting not p now is a problem because we will then be committed to rejecting not p in similar situations in the future. Generally speaking, no two situations are ever *exactly* the same, making it possible to find reasons to reject p in future cases, even though it is accepted in this one. It is also possible over a period of time to simply change one's mind: changing an opinion is not logically equivalent to holding contradictory opinions simultaneously. However, it is clearly dishonest to accept p now with the *intention* of changing one's mind at a later point. Arguments from precedent, then, also rely on a sense of fairness: accepting p now does not mean we must always accept it, but we must intend for it to be accepted in subsequent cases.

Anyone employing an argument from precedent has to focus on showing why the consequences of the setting of a precedent would be harmful and that argument will likely involve an ultimate appeal to real-world, material consequences, since anyone considering carrying out the precedent setting act presumably does not consider the act itself to be morally repellent. There will be some cases so exceptional that the likelihood of the precedent ever being followed is so low that any negative consequences of setting it are negligible. If a case is never likely to be repeated, then it makes little sense to talk of setting a precedent and there is little reason to consider the consequences of setting one. Critical questions would certainly include:

(a) Is this case likely to arise again in the future?

(b) What would the consequences of following the precedent in subsequent cases be?

If the first question is answered in the affirmative, then the argument will take on the form of that from material consequences described above.

The differences between these, obviously closely related, arguments can be illustrated by taking the example of same sex marriage. If two

couples come to the king and ask permission to marry and he says ‘Debbie and Jane can get married because two women may marry each other, but Jonathan and David may not because marriage must involve a man and a woman’ then his decision could be refuted with an argument from consistency: as a consequence of his reasoning about the ladies, he cannot employ his reasoning about the gentlemen, without contradicting himself. If, on the other hand, the king looks at the case of Debbie and Jane and says ‘I don’t usually allow it, but I like you both, so you may marry’ then his courtiers will use an argument from precedent and tell him that once he makes this decision, it will not be fair to make a different decision to other couples, so the king is, in effect, changing the law. The question for the king then is: does he want to change the law? Since he is prepared to allow a same sex marriage in one case, he presumably does not have strong moral objections to such marriages, but does he foresee negative consequences to allowing them as a standard practice?

Arguments from precedent, then, are those where considerations of consistency lead us into an argument from material consequences. Slippery slope arguments have something of this quality about them too sometimes, but because they deal with situations which are not necessarily similar to the one currently under discussion, the need for consistency may lead to conclusions we find abhorrent in themselves: the material consequence of those conclusions may be irrelevant.

5. A slippery slope scheme

My first consideration in laying out this scheme is that if the term ‘Slippery Slope Argument’ is to have any strict technical meaning, it must be as a form of argument clearly distinguished from other forms of argument from consequences. There is no point in having a category referring merely to chains of consequences, as if any real world effects could be the results of a single consequence and not a long chain of actions and reactions. So-called ‘empirical SSAs’ are, therefore, not considered here as they are structurally no more and no less than arguments from material consequences. This section concentrates on a particular group of arguments which appeals to the argumentative consequences of accepting particular statements. Those logical consequences may later have

their own real-world effects, but they do not constitute the essence of the slippery slope.

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 can also be reversed to say that (a) would establish a hitherto rejected principle, the rejection of which is necessary to argue against other proposals. The critical questions, then, would be:

- (a) Does accepting (a) break (p)?
- (b) Is (p) necessary/important in arguing against (b), (c) ... (z)?
- (c) Is (z) undesirable?

These are the three points at which an SSA can go wrong. It may be possible to accept the proposal without breaking (or establishing) the principle; that principle may not be necessary to defend against further proposals; or, the suggested endpoint, proposal (z) may not be considered such a bad thing after all. As I noted above, the undesirability of (z) may be a result of its real world consequences, but it doesn't have to be. The proposal may be morally repugnant without appeal to what would happen if it were followed.

One important point to be raised before we move on is the possibility of conflicting principles leading to a bending rather than a breaking of one of them. It might well be claimed that the fact that a principle was not acted upon in the one case does not mean that it is negated for all futurity. Closer examination, however, shows that this objection merely adds one more stage to the argument, but does not fundamentally change it. When we accept the lawfulness of a killing in self-defence, we do not break the principle that it is wrong to kill (although some moralists might argue with this), rather we establish a new principle that the right to self-preservation trumps that principle. It is that new principle of one consideration trumping another which may set off its own slippery slope. It might be argued that allowing killing in self-defence has led down a slippery slope to the frequent shootings of suspects by American police

officers, even if it cannot be argued that it has led to a murderous free-for-all where killing *per se* is no longer unacceptable.

Some examples will show how this scheme is able to assess SSAs and point out where they go wrong, if indeed they do. Returning to the topic of same sex marriage, the following is taken from the website of an organisation called TFP Student Action, apparently a project set up by the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property. As it stands, the argument is rather confused, but it can be charitably reconstructed to at least apparently make sense:

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? Indeed, radical elements of certain “avant garde” subcultures are already advocating such aberrations. (TFP Student action [7])

There is obviously a big error here in referring to marriage as an aspect of sexual freedom, but the form of the argument is clearly an SSA as I have defined them: accepting the proposal for homosexual marriage would, in the opinion of this group, leave us without ‘logical arguments’ against other, clearly unacceptable proposals. Note too, that this argument does not appeal to the material consequences of accepting homosexual marriage — sadly, paedophilia exists already — rather it suggests that one would be forced to accept such behaviour, something most of us would wish to avoid. The argument can be read in two ways due to the poor use of language: either accepting homosexual behaviour means accepting certain other, generally abhorred, forms of sexual behaviour; or, accepting homosexual marriage means accepting other types of, currently impossible, marriage. For our purposes I shall take the second reading since this deals with a clear legal acceptance in terms of a law change, which is not the case as far as homosexual behaviour in general is concerned.

The argument can be reconstructed thus:

1. Accepting homosexual marriage would mean breaking the principle that marriage is between a man and a woman.
2. Without that principle, we have no arguments against marriages involving children, animals or close relations.
3. Such marriages are clearly undesirable.

Therefore, homosexual marriage should be rejected.

Now, we apply the critical questions. Firstly, does homosexual marriage break that principle? For this to be true that principle must actually exist—in this case, it clearly does—and it must be broken—as indeed it is. Secondly, do we need that principle to defend against the undesirable consequences? Here the argument collapses completely: we already have principles that marriages must be between expressly consenting adults who are not closely related. These are not touched by the changes concerning gender. A man cannot marry a cow, a little girl or his sister, even though they are female. The male plus female requirement is not necessary to stop such unions, so removing it from our legal systems does not leave us without ‘logical arguments’ against them. We do not step on a slippery slope because the principle of male plus female is used for nothing but to prevent two men or two women marrying, so no other arguments are affected by its removal.

Oponents of same sex marriage might argue at this point that having changed the rules of marriage once we are more likely to change them again. That would be an argument from precedent effectively saying that if we changed the rules for one group, we’ll have to change the rules for other groups. However, that is easy to refute. For the similarity to be sufficient, this new group would have to be currently banned from marrying, but accepted in (most of) society, and their sexual practices legal. It is very unlikely such a group will emerge and, if they did, marriages amongst members of any group who fulfilled those conditions would presumably not provoke widespread outrage.

There is a good deal of literature in medical ethics concerned with SSAs and a much more promising one can be made against the legalisation of euthanasia. Suppose we want to argue that allowing doctors to take the lives of some very sick people will lead, via a slippery slope, to ‘euthanasia on demand’ for the suicidal. We might set out an argument thus:

1. Allowing euthanasia to be carried out by doctors breaks the principle that doctors always try to preserve life.
2. Without the principle of always preserving life, there will be no defence against doctors providing assisted suicide to anyone who wants it.
3. Suicide on demand is undesirable.

Therefore, euthanasia should be rejected.

This is a much more respectable argument than the previous one, but still not an obviously persuasive one. Applying the critical questions

we would agree that certainly allowing euthanasia means doctors not always trying to preserve life, but it is questionable whether or not such a principle actually exists. Medical professionals often withdraw treatment and allow a dying patient to slip away without further intervention. This is not the same as administering a lethal dose of a drug, of course, but there we wander into the philosophical debate over acts and omissions which is well outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the existence of this principle is open to debate: more firmly established is the instruction ‘*primum non nocere*’ — ‘first do no harm’, but whether euthanasia constitutes harm is a difficult issue.

The second question may provoke a very interesting discussion. Is a principle of not taking life necessary to prevent doctors assisting in suicide those are not suffering from great physical pain, but merely wish to end their lives? Again, this paper is not the place for a full discussion of this, and clearly many doctors would not act to assist depressed patients in this way, whatever the law, but it does look as though it becomes much harder to argue against assisted-suicide for those suffering psychologically when it is available for those suffering physically. Any doctor who wanted to assist in this way could argue that no harm is being done by ending someone’s misery and it isn’t easy to see exactly what other principles we can rely on to prevent our acceptance of this.

The third premiss is interesting because, in this case, the undesirable consequences can be simply the conclusion itself or the material consequences of that conclusion. That is, we may find the very idea of doctors, trained by society to cure disease and save lives, being able legally to dispatch depressed patients repugnant; alternatively, we may claim that such practice would lead to increased suicide rates, distrust of doctors, pressure on vulnerable people, and so on. However, it is perfectly possible to be unconvinced by either the undesirability of the conclusion or its consequences. We might argue that doctors should use their abilities to help us, in any way we wish, and deny that anyone would be pressured into ending their lives just because it was available at their local surgery.

An SSA against the legalisation of euthanasia expressed in this way does, then, have some merit, but there are a number of lines of defence against it which a ‘pro-choice’ advocate might pursue.

One final point, euthanasia is an obvious candidate for a ‘grey area’ or ‘sorites’ interpretation *à la* Walton. It might be argued that if we allow euthanasia in cases of extreme physical suffering we’ll have no way

of denying it when there is slightly less extreme suffering, and at some point we'll lose control and find that the slightest bit of suffering is a justification. As argued above, however, this is not a slippery slope argument because the consequences of the original decision are not logical or argumentative. The problem here is one of administration. We can still maintain that suicide on demand is unacceptable, while acknowledging that, in practice, it may be difficult to frame a law which prevents it. Such an appeal, then, should be understood as one to the material consequences of the decision, that assisted-suicide might occur too easily, not to the argumentative consequences that we would have to accept its occurrence.

One application of the SSA current in ethical debate and which I consider to be strongly persuasive comes from the discussion of so-called 'designer babies'. Whilst the use of genetic modification techniques to eliminate serious health problems from new-born babies may worry some people, it seems likely that society as a whole will welcome such interventions, not least because they may be very cost-effective for health services. At the same time, an argument which could show that such modifications would lead to children being born according to a list of requirements drawn up by their parents, or a race of super-powered soldiers being bred by a government, would probably be persuasive. Such an argument might take the 'sorites' form, stating that the line between serious defects and human weaknesses is impossible to draw, so allowing any procedures would open the flood-gates to every type of 'improvement'. This would not be an SSA, however, since a principle that genetic modification could only be used to prevent severe disease or disability, however hard to implement in practice, would draw a clear line and those who accepted treatment for blindness, for example, would not be obliged to accept treatment to enhance muscle power.

A classic example of an SSA can be drawn, though, when we consider permitting small cosmetic modifications, such as eye colour. The first step would not be particularly problematic — if parents want a blue-eyed child, why shouldn't they be able to have one? However, once the principle that such modifications can be made only for serious health reasons is broken, it becomes very hard to argue against selecting other characteristics, such as height, skin tone or even cognitive capacity. The argument, then, would run thus:

1. Allowing any cosmetic genetic modification breaks the principle, *p*, that such modifications can only be made for health reasons.
2. Without principle, *p*, there will be no defence against designer babies with a range of customised attributes.
3. The birth of such babies is undesirable.

Therefore, cosmetic genetic modification should be rejected.

I think this argument is quite persuasive and is a good example of a paradigmatic case: the first step (choosing eye colour) is small and harmless; the slope towards ever more radical modifications becomes slippery at once (although there is a grey area as to where such modifications become unacceptable); and the final end point is impossible to foresee, but we can see far enough to know that very undesirable consequences would occur along the way. This obviously relies on the existence of the principle that modification can be only for reasons of health, a principle which may not be universally recognised at this point, but which is very likely to become so as such procedures become more frequent. The weakest point of the argument is the third premiss: there are those, no doubt, who would argue that genetic improvements are the future of mankind, and railing against them is a form of Ludditism: there are many, however, who would not.

6. Conclusion

This paper has set out to examine and define the well-known ‘fallacy’ of the slippery slope. The confusion over the use of the term noted in the introduction made it clear why such a definition was necessary, and the examination of Douglas Walton’s attempt to clarify the structure of the argument form showed clearly that his understanding applies only to a limited set of arguments which are, in fact, only distinguishable from straightforward arguments from material consequences by the elaborate nature of their narration. In addition to a rebuttal of Walton’s scheme, I have outlined a wider account of arguments from consequences, which while almost certainly not exhaustive, attempted to show the place of the slippery slope within that group. Finally, I have presented my own argumentation scheme and critical questions for SSAs. This suggested structure treats only arguments based on the logical consequences of the acceptance of a proposition, which are at once inevitable, as true representatives of the type and bases the mechanism of the argument

on the process of establishing or denying a principle which is then relied upon in other arguments. The force or ‘gravity’ of such arguments is logical, not scientific or material, as in the case of some other consequentialist arguments. This scheme has been tested against three apparent SSAs and has been shown to work well in highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of those arguments.

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