**Week 3 - Instructor Guidance

Ought and Ought Not**In Weeks One and Two we were introduced to some of the foundational issues related to clear thinking.  We saw that there are always some very **basic elements that ought to be present** for a valid and productive debate of the kind formally called an "argument."  When any of these elements are absent we can still discuss, fuss and shout about stuff, but it is unlikely we will have a very productive debate in the end.

In Week Three we learn that there are some things that **ought not**to be present if we are going to have a good, productive conversation.  These things are called "fallacies." There are many of them and they actually have names. A few are common enough that we run into them frequently.

**Related story:**  This past summer my wife - who also teaches rhetoric in her English composition classes - and I went to one of those political "town hall" meetings.  At one point she was pretty riled up about something the Congressman was saying and called out in frustration (**lots**of people were calling out at that point, by the way), "You're only making a slippery slope argument!  That's not logically valid!"   I had to laugh when I heard her. I was sure that no one in the heated atmosphere at that meeting much cared about this kind of reference to a fallacious rhetorical device.  She turned to me and said "I couldn't think of anything else to say. Do you think he understood me?"  I told her, "I don't think it much matters. We're in the middle of a political shouting match here, not an academic conversation."

**To my great surprise** . . . about ten minutes later as another heated and loud debate got going, the Congressman said into his microphone "Now wait a minute folks. As I heard someone say a little while back, much of **this is just a big slippery slope argument** and its not really logically valid.  So let's avoid using **scare tactics** like that, OK?  We're passionate tonight, but we also want a good debate, so let's stick to the facts."

It seems the Congressman had heard my wife's voice after all, and it turns out he was a lawyer by profession. If there is anyone today that relies on knowing how to construct a good argument and has plenty of formal training in rhetoric - and who then also knows how to spot fallacious reasoning when his or her opponent in a courtroom tries to slip some in - its a lawyer.

**Letting Discussions be Discussions**
As we get into our discussions this week, **let them actually become discussions**. If you think someone - me included - has not quite understood something right, please feel free to point it out and to disagree with their point of view.  Do it respectfully, of course, and give your reasons for disagreeing. This is standard procedure for a good philosophy classroom, even for our virtual one.  We'll all learn much better if we use the magic of good debating to clarify our understanding.

James

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**Our Week Three Assignment: Discovering Stereotypes
You'll find that a great place to find and work with fallacies is stereotypes.**Why? Because people have reasons for their stereotypes and those reasons are nearly always grounded on fallacious reasoning resulting in fallacious arguments.  Part of a university education is learning new things, but another part is discovering and "repairing," as you might say, weaknesses in how we've understood something. With this week's interesting project, we might be able to do some of that as we describe stereotypes we've operated with, and then go on to consider the arguments we have made - if only to ourselves - which have justified these stereotypes.  Once we've put those arguments into words, then we'll go ahead and figure out where we were using false reasoning and describe that.  So, its an unusual project, but I think it will be a profitable one.

Let me get us started with a confession of my own about the time I discovered a stereotype I was operating with - and didn't even realize it.

I had taken my daughters and some of their friends from their high school volleyball team to a meet in a large, new sports complex. As I sat in one of the folding chairs there to watch them play, I noticed two people working on their karate in a side room of the complex.  I had taken karate lessons for some years and this sparked my interest. I had not found any karate schools since moving to that area and it occurred to me that these people might know of one within driving distance of where I lived.  So, I kept an eye on them, thinking I would wait until they were through and then go and ask the instructor about this.

Before long they finished up and I went over to see the instructor.  As I was heading for the room, the student left, passing me in the hall.  I smiled and said hello to her as we passed and she did the same back.  When I got to the side room I introduced myself and said to the instructor - who was a tall, powerful looking guy - that I had been looking for a karate school (dojo) without success. Could he help me find one?

He smiled and said "You know, I'm just a beginner. But you can probably catch the instructor. She would know of any schools around here.  I think she's headed for the parking lot."

And so that day I learned something about myself. I had only seen them through the window of the side room. Both were practicing karate. I didn't know anything more than that.  But I had **assumed** that the man was the one in charge, and that the woman was the student.  No reason for this, except I had stereotyped the woman as being less authoritative and someone to be taken less seriously than the man.

The real shocker for me was that one of my self-appointed tasks as a dean of students at a college was to support gender equality, and I often spoke about this very kind of bias to students there.  Now, here I was committing the same bias and the same fallacious reasoning. Although I haven't put this into any kind of argument form before, let's see how it could go:

P) Women are less authoritative than men.

P) I see a woman and a man in a two person karate lesson.

Conclusion: Therefore, the man is the instructor, the woman is his student.

Could anything be more illogical?  Now, what kind of fallacy might this be? Let me think. Not a straw man.  Not a **post hoc ergo propter hoc** (one of my favorite because I like how it sounds) and not an **ad hominem** attack.  I'll call my fallacious reasoning the result of an appeal to the population: an**ad populum**argument.  Although I had not thought about this while making the mistake, I guess I was simply accepting that something was true because so many people accept that it is true. And I did this while I had been preaching against this kind of bias at work! Stereotypes can be tenacious.

Well, I'm not proud of that moment, I can tell you that.  But in the interest of getting everyone off to a good start, I thought I'd share it with you. I hope it helped