

On a Neg-Raising Fallacy in Determining Enthymematicity: if she did not believe or want ...

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Abstract. Many arguments that show *E* to be enthymematic (in an argument for *C*) rely on claims like “if one did not believe *E*, one would not have a reason for believing *C*”. Such arguments are susceptible to the neg-raising fallacy. We tend to interpret claims like “*X* does not believe that *p*” as statements of disbelief (*X*’s belief that not-*p*) rather than as statements of withholding the belief that *p*. I argue that there is a tendency to equivocate in arguments for the enthymematicity of arguments (e.g. Lewis Carroll’s paradox, Hume’s problem) as well as in arguments for the enthymematicity of action explanations (e.g. arguments for psychologism and for explanatory individualism). I conclude with a warning because the equivocation is often helpful in teaching and because neg-raising verbs include philosophically vital verbs: *desire, want, intend, think, suppose, imagine, expect, feel, seem, appear*.

Keywords: belief, desire, enthymematicity, equivocation, explanatory individualism, Hume’s problem, Lewis Carroll’s paradox, negation, neg-raising fallacy, psychologism

In many philosophical discussions, ranging from philosophy of logic through philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, to ethics, a common form of argument is used to demonstrate that certain premises are missing. In this paper, I examine the form of the argument and show that it is highly susceptible to an equivocation, which has its source in what linguists call the “neg-raising” phenomenon (§1). I then show that many of the uses of the argument form are in fact fallacious. In §2 I discuss Lewis Carroll’s regress and Hume’s problem, both of which can be fruitfully subsumed under this pattern. I also consider some examples of allegedly enthymematic action explanations (§3). Finally, I point out that the argument form is particularly dangerous because the equivocation in question is very useful for pedagogical reasons (§4).