

## Suppressed Premises

*An essential step of argument evaluation, the adding of presupposed but not explicitly stated premises, is discussed in this chapter.*

↔ **KEY TERMS AND HEADINGS**

Suppressed Premise	Purely Formal Suppressed
Adding Suppressed Premises	Premise
Avoiding Purely Formal	Finding the Correct
Suppressed Premises	Suppressed Premise

**A** **SUPPRESSED PREMISE** OF an argument is an unstated but implicit premise of the argument. To understand and evaluate arguments properly, we often need to make these suppressed premises explicit. In fact, it is rare for someone in an actual discourse to state explicitly all the premises of an argument. There is nothing wrong with using suppressed premises when arguing as long as the suppressed premises are common knowledge or would be accepted by everyone addressed by the arguer and are clearly presupposed by the argument. Although using suppressed premises is permissible when arguing, when *evaluating* arguments, we must make these suppressed premises explicit.

❖    **ADDING SUPPRESSED PREMISES**

Making suppressed premises explicit is essential to argument evaluation for two main reasons: (1) Often an argument would appear very weak, much weaker than it actually is, without adding its suppressed premises. Many arguments appear to be invalid as explicitly stated but are easily made valid by adding an appropriate suppressed premise. Thus evaluating arguments without adding suppressed premises would lead to a very unsympathetic treatment of arguments. This is a violation of the principle of charity—an essential principle of argument analysis and evaluation. (2) Sometimes the most controversial premises of an argument will be left unstated. Although the motivation to do this is obvious and perhaps understandable, it is a cagey tactic that must be resisted. The best resistance is to force arguers (including ourselves) to make explicit, or at least be able to make explicit, these controversial suppressed premises.

Let us see how this works in an actual case. Consider the first two sentences of exercise 2.4, number 7:

Every person has a right to life. So the fetus has a right to life.

This was part of a much longer argument whose conclusion was that abortion cannot be allowed. Although the longer argument contained several other steps, the heart of it is right here, because once we grant that the fetus has a right to life it is much more difficult, and may even be impossible, to justify killing it.

Evaluating the argument simply as it is stated would be quite confusing.

Every person has a right to life.

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So the fetus has a right to life.

What would we say? “After all, it is surely invalid. The premise ‘Every person has a right to life’ doesn’t even say anything about the fetus.” Such a rejection of the argument is altogether too hasty, however.

The correct approach is to supply a suppressed premise that is clearly presupposed by the argument. In this case the suppressed premise is “The fetus is a person.” The argument we should evaluate is the following:

[The fetus is a person.]  
 Every person has a right to life.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 So the fetus has a right to life.

(The suppressed premise is put in brackets to indicate that it is an addition that was not present explicitly in the original.)

Clearly the argument is now valid. In fact, if we wanted to make the validity of the argument absolutely apparent, we could reconstruct it as a PHS or Barbara:

[If something is a human fetus, then it is a person.]  
 If something is a person, then it has a right to life.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 So if something is a human fetus, then it has a right to life.

(In setting out the argument formally in this way, it does not hurt to state explicitly that it is the *human* fetus that is in question.) Expressed this way the argument is not as smooth, but its validity is evident. The first premise says that being a human fetus is a sufficient condition for being a person. The second says that being a person is a sufficient condition for having a right to life. And the conclusion says that being a human fetus is a sufficient condition for having a right to life.

Of course, just because the argument is valid does not mean that it is *sound*. We must now ask whether the premises are true. I will not attempt to answer this question here, but it should be noted that the most controversial premise of the argument was left suppressed—namely, that the human fetus is a person. Most of us would readily agree that all persons have a right to life.<sup>1</sup> That the human fetus is a person, on the other hand, is a highly controversial and doubtful claim. There would be something shady about leaving such a premise unstated.

By writing down the suppressed premise and explicitly adding it to the argument, we have made a great deal of progress and avoided confusion and wasteful detours. The original argument

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<sup>1</sup>Some would claim that this right can be forfeited or lost by certain individuals (e.g., murderers).

Every person has a right to life.  
So the fetus has a right to life.

really depends on the claim that the human fetus is a person, even though this is never explicitly stated in the argument. The validity of the (fully set out) argument is beyond question. All the controversy is focused on the suppressed premise, which is where it should be focused.

Whether a human fetus is a person is not something that is easy to determine and is not something all people are likely ever to agree about. (The next chapter includes a discussion of premise verification and falsification.) We should approach the question of whether the fetus is a person by trying to say what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for being a person (exercise 5.3, question 4) and seeing if the fetus meets those conditions.

When we consider the argument as fully set out, one lingering question may be: Was the suppressed premise “the fetus is a person” actually thought of by the arguer? In some sense it does not really matter. The argument needs that premise even to get off the ground. If the arguer declines to allow that premise (or one equivalent to it) to be added to the argument, then he or she runs the serious risk of simply being stuck with an invalid argument. Without the suppressed premise, the given premise is irrelevant to the conclusion. So, in any case, we can say that the argument requires or presupposes the premise that the human fetus is a person, and assessing this claim is crucial to the evaluation of the argument.

## ✦ AVOIDING PURELY FORMAL SUPPRESSED PREMISES

When supplying suppressed premises, we are supplying the missing pieces of the reasoning, so we want to find a piece that “fits.” When supplying a suppressed premise, we want to supply a premise that will make the argument valid. (If the argument is already valid, then it does not need a suppressed premise.)

Technically speaking, any invalid argument can be made valid by adding premises. Here is the proof: We know that *modus ponens* is a valid pattern of inference. Suppose that the argument

$$\frac{P}{C}$$

is invalid. We can make the argument valid by adding a conditional sentence “If  $P$ , then  $C$ ” as a suppressed premise. The new argument has the form

$$\frac{[\text{If } P, \text{ then } C] \\ P}{C}$$

We now have an argument that is of the pattern *modus ponens* and is valid. Clearly this can be done for any argument. Here is a formula for constructing a suppressed premise that will make any argument valid: Construct the suppressed premise by forming a conditional with the given premise as the antecedent and the given conclusion as the consequent. If there is more than one premise, conjoin the premises, and put the conjunction of the premises in the antecedent.

For any given invalid argument there are, in fact, infinitely many different premises we could add, each of which would make the argument valid. A serious question then is which premise should we add to the argument when evaluating it?

The problem with the premises gotten by the formula is that they are purely *formal* in the sense that they make the argument valid but may give us no insight into what is really going on with the argument. Consider again the fetus argument. If we add the premise “If every person has a right to life, then the fetus has a right to life,” then the argument becomes valid, but clearly this premise does not get to the heart of the matter in the way the premise “The fetus is a person” does. Let us call a premise that sheds no light on the argument and merely makes it valid in a purely formal way a **purely formal suppressed premise**.

What we want to do in supplying suppressed premises is to avoid supplying purely formal suppressed premises. We want to find suppressed premises that help us to see what is really going on with the arguments and help us to focus our evaluation of the arguments in a relevant way. In supplying a suppressed premise we want to find a suppressed premise that does this job. “The fetus is a person” is a suppressed premise that does this job for the fetus argument.

To help make clear what is meant, consider another argument:

Norway has a right to continue whale hunting,  
because whale hunting is a traditional part of  
Norwegian national culture.

The given premise is: “Whale hunting is a traditional part of Norwegian national culture.” The given conclusion is “Norway has a right to continue whale hunting.” Clearly we need to supply a suppressed premise to evaluate this argument properly. The premise “If whale hunting is a traditional part of Norwegian national culture, Norway has a right to continue whale hunting” is a purely formal suppressed premise; it makes the argument valid but that is all that it does. It does not help us to evaluate the argument. Another, better try, would be “Norway has a right to continue doing anything that is a traditional part of its national culture.” With this suppressed premise, however, we would wonder what is so special about Norway? A much more interesting and relevant suppressed premise—one that gets to the heart of the matter—is “Any nation has a right to continue doing anything that is a traditional part of its national culture.” Now we have our finger on what is really going on “behind the scenes” in this argument. The argument that we should evaluate is the following:

Whale hunting is a traditional part of Norwegian national culture.  
[Any nation has a right to continue doing anything that is a traditional  
part of its national culture.]

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Norway has a right to continue whale hunting.

As in the fetus argument, the suppressed premise is very controversial. We should ask “Is it true that any nation has a right to continue doing anything that is a traditional part of its national culture?” Shouldn’t nations be able to change and give up outmoded or immoral practices? Do nations have a right to continue practices that are discriminatory or oppressive even if they are traditional? Should they be forced by international pressure to give up such practices? These are the sorts of questions that we would have to focus on to fully evaluate this argument.

Consider, for example, the following passage from the Humane Society of America. The topic here is whaling by the Makah tribe of Washington state, but the issues are the same.

Traditions and political rights have always had an uneasy relationship, and for good reasons. Europeans had a long tradition of slavery until society declared it unacceptable. The Chinese bound and crippled women's feet. Some African societies practice female genital mutilation. These are practices that our society condemns, regardless of their being traditional. Many people believe that whales are such intelligent, social beings that their killing cannot be justified by tradition. The time for whaling, like these other traditions, has passed.

We should also consider how the Makah or Norwegians would reply to these arguments. Making the suppressed premise “Any nation has a right to continue doing anything that is a traditional part of its national culture” explicit helps us to focus on these difficult questions. A purely formal suppressed premise would not.

## ❖ FINDING THE CORRECT SUPPRESSED PREMISE

1. People sometimes have difficulties finding a suppressed premise that does the job of really making explicit what is going on in the argument. Often such a suppressed premise will involve combining a term from the given premise and a term from the conclusion. For example, in the argument

All men are mortals. So Socrates is a mortal.

the conclusion does not mention men, and the premise does not mention Socrates. What is needed to make the argument valid is a suppressed premise that connects the given premise and the conclusion. Avoid the purely formal suppressed premise “If all men are mortals, then Socrates is a mortal.” In this case the suppressed premise we want is obviously “Socrates is a man.” If you are having trouble formulating a suppressed premise, start by combining a key term

that is mentioned in the premise (but is not mentioned in the conclusion) with a key term from the conclusion (that is not mentioned in the premise).

In the Socrates argument the given premise is a generalization, and the suppressed premise is a specific statement about Socrates. In the South Africa argument both the premise and the conclusion are specific statements about South Africa and apartheid. When the premise and conclusion are both specific statements, a generalization is usually needed to connect them. Generalizations can be either wide or narrow. For example, “All African societies have a right to preserve whatever is essential to them” would make the apartheid argument valid, but it is too narrow. It invites the question “Why just African societies?” “Anything has a right to anything” would also make the argument valid, but it is absurd because it is far too wide. What we want for the suppressed premise is a generalization that is as wide as possible without becoming absurd. The task is to find a suppressed premise with the right degree of generality. Of course, finding a suppressed premise with the right degree of generality can be a matter of interpretation and requires sensitivity and ingenuity. And again there will be more than just one way of stating the correct suppressed premise for a particular argument.

2. Another common problem with suppressed premises is that sometimes we are tempted to use the converse of the correct suppressed premise. The correct terms are there, and it is the correct degree of generality, but the terms are in the wrong order. This can occur even in very simple arguments. For example, consider the following argument:

The roof is leaking. So it must have snowed.

Someone might hastily offer the following as a suppressed premise for this argument: “The roof always leaks when it snows.” Nevertheless, adding this premise to the argument does not make it valid. Indeed the argument with the added premise is of the pattern FAC. (“The roof always leaks when it snows” = “When it snows, then the roof leaks” = “If it snows, then the roof leaks.”)

[If it snows, then the roof leaks.]

The roof is leaking.

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Therefore it snowed.

The premises do not imply the conclusion. “The roof leaks when it snows” and “The roof is now leaking” do not imply that it snowed, because the roof might also leak when it rains. It might be raining, not snowing.

In fact what is needed is the converse of the proposed suppressed premise: “If the roof is leaking, then it snowed.” Now the argument becomes a version of *modus ponens*.

[If the roof leaks, then it snowed.]

The roof is leaking.

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Therefore it snowed.

This suppressed premise is a bit formalistic, but it helps us see that the suppressed premise we need for this argument is not “When it snows, the roof leaks” but rather “The *only* time the roof leaks is when it snows.” In supplying suppressed premises we must be careful not to supply the converse of the correct suppressed premise.

3. Occasionally we may come across arguments that cannot be made valid in any simple, natural way (but, of course, they can be made valid by adding a purely formal suppressed premise). For example:

Pupils may go on the trip only if they have a note from their parents.

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So Louise may go on the trip.

Adding the suppressed premise “Louise has a note from her parents” will not make the argument valid. The given premise says that having a parental note is a necessary condition for going on the trip. It does not say that it is sufficient.

The most charitable interpretation in a case such as this is to treat the given premise as a biconditional. People rarely, if ever, say “if and only if” in everyday discourse. We often say “only if” when we mean “if and only if,” even though “only if” does not strictly and literally mean “if and only if.” Usually our meaning is well understood. So, fully set out, the argument would be as follows:

Pupils may go on the trip [if and] only if they have a note from their parents.

[Louise has a note from her parents.]

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So Louise may go on the trip.

Occasionally we must interpret a conditional premise as a biconditional in order to achieve a natural and charitable interpretation of the argument. Of course, such an argument will be sound only if the biconditional is true.

### ⇐ SUPPRESSED PREMISE EXERCISES

General directions: In each case supply a suppressed premise (or premises) that will make the argument valid. The suppressed premise should be different from the given premises and the conclusion and should work in logical combination with the given premise to imply the conclusion. Be sure to check that after the suppressed premise is added the argument is valid. The suppressed premise should not be a purely formal suppressed premise.



- \* 5. Children should have rights because children are people too.
  
- 6. Children shouldn't have rights because they have no responsibilities.
  
- 7. All the members of Phi Kappa Rho are seniors because every member of the football team is a senior.
  
- 8. My computer just beeped. So I must have just typed a syntax error.

9. Only students are allowed to park in lot Z. Therefore all philosophy majors are allowed to park in lot Z.
10. Vertebrates are mammals. Gorillas are anthropoids. So gorillas are mammals.
11. Good poets aren't good critics, because good poets aren't bitter.
- \* 12. Every member of the basketball team is an athlete. Therefore some English majors are not members of the basketball team.

◀ **EXERCISE 8.2**

For each argument supply a suppressed premise as described in the general directions.

- \* 1. Something can exist only if it is a material thing. So ghosts do not exist.

2. Politicians have no incentive to protect children's rights since children cannot vote.

Robert E. Schell and Elizabeth Hall,  
*Developmental Psychology Today*, 4th ed. (slightly adapted)

3. The morally right thing to do, on any occasion, is whatever would bring about the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness. Therefore, on at least some occasions, mercy killing may be morally right.

James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*  
(Rachels is summarizing the utilitarian  
argument for mercy killing.)

4. We need not be ashamed of our defense mechanisms. They are a part of our nature, they are necessary to our survival; and there is no one who is completely free of them.

Terry O'Banion and April O'Connell,  
*The Shared Journal: An Introduction to Encounter*

- \* 5. Because elementary school teachers work with the youngest children, they are the most important teachers of all.

James W. Noll, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views  
on Controversial Education Issues*

6. It is essential in a democracy that individuals and groups be able to make their views known and fairly select their leaders and public officials. Hence, civil liberties are essential in a democracy.

Ira Katznelson and Mark Kesselman,  
*The Politics of Power*

7. Susan: “You can’t have it all ways babe. We are not children any more.”

Michael Weller, *Loose Ends*

8. Because physical activity is healthful, physical education should be required.

9. Communism is opposed by reform liberals precisely because it violates individual freedom.

Kenneth Hooven, *Ideology and Political Life*

- \* 10. Only doctors are authorized to prescribe medical treatment. Therefore Maynard is not a doctor.

11. Messing with Chris's women is trouble, so I know I'm in trouble now.

Edward Philips, *Sunday's Child*

12. A non-Christian [person living in Great Britain] is bound by [the Christian institution of marriage] . . . , not because it is part of Christianity but because, rightly or wrongly, it has been adopted by the society in which he lives.

Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals*  
(Lord Devlin was a British judge.)

13. We may not often find ourselves wondering, "Why do totally unselfish people suffer, people who never do anything wrong?" because we come to know very few such individuals.

Harold S. Kushner,  
*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

14. I don't know of any claims in my textbook that are wrong but there must be some, because I am a human being.

Howard Kahane,  
*Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*  
(slightly adapted)

15. Homosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence of such members adversely affects the ability of the Armed Forces to maintain discipline, good order, and morale.

"The Pentagon Papers," *Ithaca Journal*,  
November 1990

⚡ **EXERCISE 8.3**

For each argument supply a suppressed premise as described in the general directions.

1. We oppose censorship and classification by governments because they are alien to the American tradition of freedom.

The Motion Picture Production Code

2. He was a Ninja. Therefore he was the only one with the highly special fighting skills needed to defeat the samurai.

*Ninja Magazine*, April 1984

- \* 3. I recognize that it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, since in all fraud and deception there is some kind of imperfection.

René Descartes, *Meditations*

4. Cross-country skiing is . . . an efficient cardiovascular exercise because it works the upper and lower body.

*Shape Magazine*

5. There is no question that legalization of marijuana is a risky business, since it may lead to an increase in the number of people who abuse drugs.

The Playboy Forum, “Decriminalize  
Drugs Now,”

6. If one tells falsehoods to a child who is wholly unable to perceive one’s meaning, there is no lie involved, for one is equivalently talking to oneself.

Edwin F. Healy, *Moral Guidance*

- \* 7. The fetus is not socially perceived as human. It cannot communicate with others. Thus, both subjectively and objectively, it is not a member of society.

John T. Noonan, "An Almost Absolute Value in History,"  
in *Applying Ethics*, eds. Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry  
(Noonan is reporting the argument.)

- 8. I hope that someday we can abolish sport and trophy hunting. Remember, 90 percent of us are non-hunters, therefore I'm assuming that all or most of our 90 percent respects wildlife. Being the majority, I feel we must have some power over the minority of hunters.

*Ithaca Journal*, November 1988

- 9. Lying is wrong. Cheating on your income tax involves telling falsehoods with intent to deceive. So cheating on your income tax is wrong.

10. [For this one give a suppressed intermediate conclusion and another suppressed premise.]

Every form of social deviation can be considered an illness. Criminal behavior is a form of social deviation. Thus, criminals are not to be condemned or punished but to be understood, treated, and cured.

Howard D. Schwartz, ed.,  
*Dominant Issues in Medical Sociology*  
(slightly adapted)