

Qualifiers

Exercises

1. Oscar Wilde

The following line is taken from Oscar Wilde's, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Explain what is wrong with the argument.

Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their distinguishing characteristic.¹

Answer:

The argument gains its force from the suppressed qualifier 'all'. Its effectiveness depends upon us accepting that in 'every' case this is true. Oscar Wilde's work is full of these witty statements, which depend upon suppressed qualifiers. They are witty precisely because they draw sharp, categorical distinctions, which get us to think about things from a perspective we wouldn't otherwise have entertained. Even though we can doubt whether this is true, it encourages us to think about philanthropic people in an entirely surprising and unexpected way.

2. Sherlock Holmes

¹ Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), Ch. 3, p. 35.
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In Arthur Conan Doyle's stories involving Sherlock Holmes the intention is different, but it works in just the same way, in this case to demonstrate Holmes' legendary skills of deductive detection. In *The Greek Interpreter*, Holmes justifies his assumption that a man in a hotel lobby is an officer in the British army, who has just returned from India:

'Surely', answered Holmes, 'it is not hard to say that a man with that bearing, expression of authority, and sun-baked skin is a soldier, is more than a private, and is not long from India.'²

Explain why this is not a sound conclusion.

[Answer:](#)

Once you analyse the argument you can see it takes the following form:

1. (All) Men who have this bearing, an expression of authority and sun-baked skin are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India.
2. This man has this bearing, an expression of authority and sun-baked skin.
3. Therefore, he is a soldier higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India.

² Arthur Conan Doyle. 'The Greek Interpreter' in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes' Short Stories* (London: John Murray & Jonathan Cape, 1980), pp. 481-2.

As you read the story the argument seems persuasive enough, but, when you bring to light the hidden qualifier 'All', the weakness of the major premise is revealed. It's not true that *all* men with this bearing, an expression of authority and a sun-baked skin are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India. There may be any number of explanations for someone having these three characteristics.

What Holmes means, of course, is that 'many' men who have them are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India and, therefore, this man is 'probably' one too. But this sucks all the certainty out of the argument, leaving it seriously weakened.