I propose to identify and describe an example of fallacious reasoning which I call the Fallacy of Availability. References to such a fallacy do not appear in standard lists of fallacies. Once alerted to it, however, critical thinkers will readily think of examples. The fallacious reasoning occurs when a “remedy” for a problem is adopted or proposed on the grounds that the remedy is seen to be available rather than considered to be efficacious. The practice of critically reading argumentative passages with a view to identifying and classifying fallacies has, quite rightly, lost favour in recent years as a core exercise in thinking and critical reasoning courses. In its place the construction (as opposed to deconstruction) of chains of reasoning is preferable. To this end, however, it is useful for advanced thinkers to be aware of effective reasoning techniques and of inferior, ineffective substitutes. The Fallacy of Availability is a case of inferior, ineffective reasoning.

A DEFINITION AND AN EXAMPLE

In this paper I wish to draw attention to a mistake in reasoning which I dub the Fallacy of Availability. My contention is that the fallacious reasoning occurs when a “remedy” for a problem is adopted or proposed on the grounds that the remedy is seen to be available rather than considered to be efficacious.

I begin with an example.

Let us imagine that at my university I am discussing with a colleague plans for the assessment of our students who are doing a Critical Thinking course. My colleague says,

“I think we should set a multiple choice exam. I’ve come across one in a textbook and it’s easily modifiable for our students. It will fit nicely into the end of year exam timetable, and given the huge number of students we have this year, it will be so much easier to grade - we might even be able to use up to date technology to help with the marking”.

Prima facie, this is a persuasive argument. The premises list a number of positive advantages to a multiple-choice exam, which provide reasons to adopt the proposal recommended. The argument is of the form:

Premise 1. A multiple-choice exam is readily available.
Premise 2. It fits the timetable nicely.
Premise 3. It’s easy to mark.
Premise 4. These are all desirable characteristics.
Conclusion: So implement a multiple-choice exam.

Yet I claim that this chain of reasoning is fallacious. I do so because the argument is a non-sequitur. Normally a non-sequitur’s premises are irrelevant to the conclusion. In this case, it is not so much that the given premises are entirely irrelevant, but that a necessary relevant premise, that of effectiveness, is not considered. An argument that is not a non-sequitur might be of the form:

Premise 1. We wish to assess the knowledge and skills base of the students.
Premise 2. A test of the type ‘T’ will be effective in assessing the knowledge and skills base of the students.
Conclusion: Implement test ‘T’.

If the second premise were “A test of the type “T” will not be effective….” then any other premises about convenience of use would be relatively insignificant.

HIDDEN PREMISES
Now it might be said that the first argument only appears to be fallacious because I have failed to identify the hidden premise that “a multiple choice exam is effective in assessing the knowledge and skill base of the students”. If we add such a premise to the argument, then it is no longer fallacious and no longer the Fallacy of Availability.

To this objection I point out that it can also be said that any fallacy can be turned into a good argument by the addition of requisite premises. Furthermore, it is the case that there are occasions when the relevant premise, that of efficacy, is not included, and only those concerning availability are. There is insufficient justification for the assumption that the recommendation for a multiple-choice exam is based on an expectation of its efficacy, but that expectation has been left unstated. It may well be the case that efficacy has not been sufficiently considered, and that the attractiveness of the multiple choice exam’s availability has overwhelmed considerations of its efficacy. In such an event, the Fallacy of Availability has been committed. The fallacy lies in the reasoning process, and once it has been identified, other examples present themselves.

MORE EXAMPLES
An example I have often observed occurs when an impatient person presses the elevator button again. To summon an elevator, one presses a call button. It is a common experience to become impatient when the elevator is slow to arrive, but as far as I understand the workings of an elevator, pressing the call button again has no effect on hastening the elevator’s arrival. So why do people do it? Because they can. Once again I could, at a stretch, make a guess that such a person knows more than I do about the internal electro-mechanical arrangements of elevators such that they consider
repeated pressing of the call button to be indeed effective, but I very much doubt that such a guess is justified.

Perhaps the classic example of the Fallacy of Availability is “Killing the Messenger”. Apart from being unfair to the messenger, slaughtering the bearer of bad news is unreasonable because it has no effect on the content of the news. It is done because it is something that can be done, albeit in frustration at the inability to do something constructive.

**IS IT A FALLACY?**

Kerry Walters warns us against the belief that good thinking is only that sort of thinking that is described in critical thinking and informal logic text books. I concur, and maintain that the Fallacy of Availability is a mistake in reasoning to be avoided, whether or not it fits neatly into previously assembled categories of errors. Nonetheless, comparing it to other fallacies may well be an instructive exercise, so let us turn to a variety of texts where fallacies are listed and described.

In his classic text “Fallacies”, Hamblin refers to *Ignoratio Elenchi*, variously translated as ‘ignorance of refutation’, as ‘ignoring the issue’ and as ‘irrelevant conclusion’. Certainly these descriptions seem to fit nicely the Fallacy of Availability, though the apparent fit is spoilt somewhat by Hamblin’s later remark that, “So described, this category can be stretched to cover virtually every kind of fallacy” Let us therefore pursue the matter in an attempt to discern what sort of fallacy we may be dealing with.

It would not be useful to confine such an examination too narrowly. Clearly, comparing the Fallacy of Availability to a fallacious argument of the form

\[ p \implies q \]

\[ q \]

Therefore \( p \)

is not particularly enlightening.

On the other hand, it is not useful to use the term fallacy to mean any mistake at all. Let us follow Max Black’s advice, that,

> For our present purpose, this sense is too wide, and we shall consider only errors in reasoning. We need not spend time on obvious errors which, being easily detected, give little trouble. The kind of error in reasoning that deserves our closest attention is that which is persuasive to the speaker or hearer in spite of its unsoundness. We therefore adopt the following definition: A fallacy is an argument that seems sound without being so in fact.

Ennis’ widely quoted definition of critical thinking is “reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Siegel describes a critical thinker as “one who is appropriately moved by reasons…. she has the ability properly to assess the force of reasons in the context in which reasons play a role”. Such a thinker would
recognize the Fallacy of Availability as an example of an argument that is persuasive but unsound. It recommends what to do, but provides reasons of insufficient force. Black continues his analysis thus:

We can roughly divide fallacies into two groups:

A: Those whose persuasiveness is connected with some intrinsic defect of the argument (general fallacies).

B: Those whose appeal arises from some features of the context in which the argument is used (fallacies of circumstances).

In the first group we place fallacies depending for their effect on lack of sufficient attention to the form of argument, the falsity of unstated premises, and so on....In the second group we place the fallacies that appeal especially to the prejudices and other vulnerable characteristics of the hearer.

Although the Fallacy of Availability does have an intrinsic weakness in that insufficient attention has been paid to the relevance of the premises, its persuasiveness lies more with its suitability for inclusion in the second division, described as fallacies of circumstances. Its appeal depends upon the vulnerability of the hearer, that of the desire for an easy solution. If the circumstances were different (say an abundance of resources) the fallacy would not be persuasive. It is a relative of the fallacy of ad Misericordiam. Copi defines ad misericordiam as "the fallacy committed when pity is appealed to for the sake of getting a conclusion accepted". "Ease of implementation" can readily be substituted for "pity".

Since the persuasiveness of the Fallacy of Availability depends upon how the listener (and perpetrator) perceives the circumstances, it falls under Subjectivism. Subjectivism occurs when we believe something is so because we want it to be so. Subjectivism, as its name implies, lacks objectivity. Certainly there may be a happy coincidence between what we wish to be so and the actual facts of the matter, but on the other hand there may be no such coincidence. Merely wishing it were so is insufficient. There are other relevant considerations that are needed to make the reasoning sound.

THE USEFULNESS OF FALLACY ANALYSIS

It should be admitted that the excitement of discovering a previously unlisted fallacy might be tempered somewhat by the fact that the studying of fallacies has fallen out of fashion in recent years, and for good reasons. As Humblin pointed out, there is no good theory or sound classification of fallacies, and there is in principle an infinite number of them.

Fallacies used to be commonly found in critical thinking textbooks, with "critical" assuming the negative sense of the word. Critical thinking tools were for finding fault in others' arguments. As a pedagogical practice, the pointing out of others' mistakes is of dubious benefit. Scriven reports that students so taught find faults in arguments that are actually sound. It is difficult to see how the constant exposure to (an infinite number of) errors would result in the students constructing their own well reasoned arguments. To illustrate with an analogy, it is like teaching students to play the piano by requiring them to listen to recordings of very bad players, rather than practising...
good techniques themselves at the keyboard. Good reasoning is a practice. The teaching of good reasoning allows the students to develop and apply sound thinking strategies so that they can make their way effectively in the world, and provide good reasons for action to those with whom they interact.

Even allowing that critical thinking should be about constructing one's own sound arguments rather than picking out the mistakes in others', it is useful to avoid errors oneself by recognizing and labeling common pitfalls. To this end, the listing of fallacies serves some purpose. In the particular case under discussion here, it is surely easier to avoid the Fallacy of Availability if it is recognized, described and labeled.

One wonders, then, why it has not been listed, described and labeled in critical thinking textbooks heretofore.

Perhaps this is because the fallacy is so subjective. It is easy to commit oneself, but conversely, it is easy to spot when laid out in argument form. The contrast between a valid argument and the fallacy is quite apparent. Thus a simple valid argument might be the following.

1. We want a solution to problem P.
2. Action A is a solution to problem P.
3. Therefore implement action A.

Allowing for the ease of implementation to be relevantly applied in a valid argument might yield the following.

1. We want a solution to problem P.
2. Action A is a solution to problem P.
3. Action B is equally a solution to problem P.
4. Action A is easy to implement.
5. Action B is difficult to implement.
6. Easy implementation is preferable to difficult implementation.
7. Therefore implement action A.

In contrast, the simple form of the fallacious argument can be given as follows.

1. We want a solution to problem P.
2. Action A is easy to implement.
3. Therefore implement action A.

This last is a simple enough non-sequitur as to be obvious. Indeed, it is the nature of a Subjectivists fallacy to be vulnerable to objective critique. Without the application of objectivity, however, the appeal and persuasiveness of Subjectivism remains.

AN OBJECTION FROM PSYCHOLOGY

If the Fallacy of Availability is subjective, how could one tell if someone were committing it? How does one know what is going on inside someone else's head?
My presumption that a Critical Thinking test should be designed primarily to measure the skills of the students may not be shared by everyone. It is possible my colleague cares only how quickly the job is done, not how well.

Possibly an angry despot considers the killing of a messenger to be an effective response to his rage. “The news this messenger has brought me makes me feel bad. Killing the messenger will make me feel better. So I will kill the messenger”.

Perhaps the consideration of efficacy has taken place and remains a hidden premise. Perhaps the relevance of efficacy is assumed to be a given and it is actually the ease of implementation that is now under examination. In the argument

1. We want a solution to problem P.
2. Action A is a solution to problem P.
3. Action B is equally a solution to problem P.
4. Action A is easy to implement.
5. Action B is difficult to implement.
6. Easy implementation is preferable to difficult implementation.
7. Therefore implement action A

premises 2, 3, 5 and 6 may be unstated hidden premises, and the argument valid, though indistinguishable from

1. We want a solution to problem P.
2. Action A is easy to implement.
3. Therefore implement action A.

The first reply to this objection is that this problem exists with all subjectivist fallacies. The study of reasoning encompasses both formal principles and psychological processes. Sometimes one is not privy to the psychological processes of another. If the speaker has tacitly considered efficacy, then the internal psychological process is sound. If not, then it is fallacious. A dialogue may reveal which is the case.

The second reply has to do with the aforementioned goals of critical thinking. In contrast to merely pointing out others' errors, one seeks to develop one's own sound processes. In this project, it is productive to be aware of the dangers inherent in the Fallacy of Availability, and thus to avoid them.

AN OBJECTION CONCERNING THE PREDICTION OF EFFICACY

As previously stated, the Fallacy of Availability occurs when a course of action is recommended because it is easy to implement rather than because it is considered to be efficacious. Yet there appears to be no logical error in seeking easy solutions. On the contrary, this seems a sensible approach. The crux of the Fallacy lies in ease rather than efficacy. However, the prediction of results is always problematic. How does one know whether a course of action will have the desired results? One can only know for certain by trying it out. If one is going to try various solutions, one may as well start with the easiest and subsequently judge the efficacy with the benefit of hindsight.
In response to this objection, it should be pointed out that problems of prediction are not confined to the Fallacy of Availability, but to any recommended course of action. Of course prediction is difficult. An essential feature of the human condition is that life is uncertain. If this were not so, there would be no discussion about recommended courses of action. Nonetheless, uncertainty does not imply relativism. It is not the case that any recommended solution is as good as any other. Nor is it the case that any criterion for judging the worth of the recommendation is as good as any other. We need to make some attempt at predicting the outcomes, and unfortunately, ease of implementation has little bearing on accurate prediction.

CONCLUSION

Fallacy analysis is far from satisfactory. Yet it must be admitted that there are some errors in reasoning that occur frequently. Our awareness of these errors makes it easier for us to avoid them. Providing labels facilitates awareness and discussion. When considering alternative courses of action, it is possible for us to allow the attraction of easy implementation to over-shadow the likelihood of a desirable outcome. Being aware of this possible pitfall helps us avoid it. Dubbing it the Fallacy of Availability allows us to point out its dangers when collaborating with colleagues.

Notes

1. Not to be confused with Bias and Availability Error: This is very common in opinion polls, and boils down to the fact that how people will respond to a question often depends very much on how the question is phrased. Platonic Realms (1998). Fallacies. Mathematics Encyclopedia. Math Academy Online
3. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss whether or not Critical Thinking can be effectively assessed by a multiple-choice test. An example of such a discussion may be found in Ennis, R. (1996). Critical Thinking Dispositions: their Nature and Assessability. Informal Logic Vol 18 Nos 2&3
9. Black, p. 231
12. "We have no theory of fallacy at all, in the sense in which we have theories of correct reasoning or inference" Hamblin, C. I. (1970). Fallacies. UK: Methuen p. 11
14. For example, in Barry, V.E. & Rudinow, J. (1990). *Invitation to Critical Thinking* USA: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, the authors explain to the student "...you are assembling a set of tools for criticizing arguments .... explain what is wrong with the faulty arguments you encounter". p. 210
16. See Black p. 242