Logical Self-Defense

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Preface to the IDEBATE Press reissue of Logical Self-Defense

When we wrote the first edition of *Logical Self-Defense* in 1977, it was designed for an eight-month course that had the objective of enabling successful students to interpret and assess the appeals to their beliefs about how to behave as citizens in an industrial capitalist democratic society such as the United States or, the country we live in, Canada. Such societies are premised on the participation of citizens in public life, at the very least as voters. Their economies also rely heavily on consumption promoted by advertising. Thus, their citizens are confronted with attempts to persuade them to support actions, policies, and choices that can affect their lives in a variety of ways. In the process, they also face attempts to shape the beliefs and attitudes pertinent to the support of those policies and choices. In large part the factual, evaluative, and prescriptive claims that citizens face are backed up by considerations that purport to show that they are true, acceptable, reasonable, or right. That is, citizens in such societies are invited to accept arguments offered in support of beliefs, attitudes, actions, and policies.

In the light of these considerations, most of the book was directed at improving our students' abilities to interpret and assess the sorts of arguments found in the public realm. In addition, since most of the information on which these arguments are based comes to citizens from the news media, we considered it imperative to include some advice about how to use the media as a critical consumer of information. And since a good deal of the persuasion addressed to the populations of such societies was addressed to them as consumers, and since much of this persuasion is deceptive, we deemed it important also to include some advice about how one might arm oneself against the various strategies that have been developed and refined for such purposes, especially by advertising.

Although the Internet has added an important new dimension to the information currently available to citizens and consumers that was not

present even in 1993 and 1994, when the third Canadian and first U.S. editions of the book were published, little else has changed in any fundamental way. We might note that politicians and political parties seem nowadays to market themselves—even more than they used to—the way consumer products are marketed, on the basis of unreflective attitudes, rather than on the basis of arguments for public policies. So we continue to believe that citizens in such societies can profit from improving their abilities to react critically to the arguments, the media information, and the advertising that they encounter constantly. We believe that to protect its liberties a democratic society requires an educated, thoughtful, and appropriately critical citizenry, and in any case we believe in the value of an examined life. Thus, we think the aims of this book continue to be relevant.

We have both spent the past thirty years as active scholars in the study of informal logic and argumentation, so it would be surprising if our views about the theory and the details of the textbook had not evolved since we first published it. The subsequent editions of the textbook have incorporated many of those changes, but not all. They were mostly modified by updating the examples that we used for instructional purposes. Nonetheless, we think the book has stood up rather well over time. If we were to write a brand new textbook today with a similar objective, its reader would readily recognize not just the spirit of its ancestor, but a strong family resemblance in its approach and theoretical assumptions.

We might note that the theoretical perspective introduced in *Logical Self-Defense* has proved quite influential among textbook authors. It is to be found in modified form in *A Practical Study of Argument* by Trudy Govier, in *Attacking Faulty Reasoning* by T. Edward Damer, in *Logic in Everyday Life* and *Open Minds and Everyday Reasoning* by Zachary Seech, in *Thinking Logically* by James B. Freeman, and in *Good Reasoning Matters* by Leo Groarke and Christopher W. Tindale.

In the remainder of this new Preface we will note the theoretical assumptions that underlie the book that have not substantially changed. And we will outline the modifications that we would now recommend to some central theoretical points. These changes can be read into the text at the appropriate places without altering the structure or most of the details of the book. We should add that although Johnson and Blair are not one person, and we have developed our theoretical views someone differently over time, we continue to share many basic views, and we are writing here as a single, collective author.

One formative theoretical assumption of the book that remains unchanged is that formal or deductive logic does not provide an adequate theory for the analysis and evaluation of the arguments that occur in the public arena. The point is by no means a criticism of formal deductive logic, but it is a criticism of the approach to teaching the analysis and evaluation of arguments by means of teaching formal deductive logic alone. Such logic's proper subject matter is systems of necessary relations among propositions or sentences, not arguments understood as claims and the reasons offered as support for them. The argument against the adequacy of deductive logic for interpreting and assessing arguments in the latter sense is, briefly, that its norms are neither necessary (there are plenty of strong inductive and presumptive arguments that fail to meet them) nor sufficient (there can be arguments, such as those that beg the question, that meet its norms but are bad arguments). Moreover, reconstructing arguments from ordinary language discourse as if they were, or were intended to be, deductively valid frequently results in a distortion of the arguer's intended meaning.

We replaced the criteria of deductive logic (true premises coupled with valid inference to the conclusion) with more general criteria (acceptable premises that are relevant to the conclusion and supply sufficient evidence to justify accepting it). The latter are now widely known as the Acceptability, Relevance, and Sufficiency (ARS) criteria for a logically good argument. These criteria have the advantage of including deductive validity and inductive strength as special cases, while at the same time they leave open the possibility that there are other legitimate kinds of inference in arguments besides valid deductions and strong inductions.

Over the years, our thinking about the ARS criteria has undergone some modifications, and we would like to add a comment about each criterion in turn.

Acceptability. Keep in mind that all along, for us, "acceptable premises" has meant premises that are "worthy of acceptance by the arguer and the audience." We now want to emphasize that acceptability should not be understood as incompatible with truth as a criterion of premise adequacy in a good argument. One way to express this point is to say that in some contexts an argument's premises are worthy of acceptance only if they are known or reasonably believed to be true by the arguer, and can be shown to the audience to be true or reasonable to believe. One way to show that an argument's premise is unacceptable is to show that it is false. We are

not skeptics about truth. We think it is important that while acknowledging that in some contexts truth might be unavailable (was Lenin poisoned?) or inapplicable (what is the true interpretation of Plato's mature theory of Forms?), we should not mistakenly infer that nothing can be known to be true. For example, we think it is uncontroversial that it is true that this sentence contains three occurrences of the word *true*—count them—and that it's true that we are both males and over sixty years old.

At the same time, there are contexts in which a premise ought to be accepted even though its truth cannot be established, for instance, if it is a reasonable presumption or it has sufficient probability in the circumstances. As well, one might even reasonably accept premises he or she thinks are false in some cases, for instance to follow arguments being used to work out the implications of those premises.

A different way to put this point is to say that arguments can play epistemic roles (show claims to be true or reasonable to believe) as well as dialectical roles (respond satisfactorily to an interlocutor's questions) and rhetorical roles (persuade an audience to accept a claim).

Relevance. We have come to recognize that the relevance of offered support for a claim can be understood in two ways. If the concept of relevance designates the *weight* of the support, then it comes in degrees. For example, a contemporary, very clear video image, with sound, of a species of bird long considered extinct (for example, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the southern United States) would be more relevant as evidence that at least one member of the species has survived than a second-hand report of a sighting of the bird. On the other hand, if the concept of relevance designates the idea of having *bearing* on the truth of the claim at issue, then relevance is an "on/off" concept, for a premise either is relevant in this sense or it isn't. We were thinking only of the latter concept of relevance when we wrote this textbook. We would now say that a premise in an argument (always in combination with the other premises) either has probative relevance to (i.e., bearing on) the conclusion or it does not. If it does have probative relevance, then the weight of that relevance will belong somewhere in the range between very weak relevance at one extreme and decisive relevance at the other.

Sufficiency. Our focus in *Logical Self-Defense* was on each individual argument, a focus we have come to recognize as limited, even though important and not to be overlooked. Sufficiency, as we analyze it (for the

most part), consists of the property of an argument's premises of supplying all the grounds that are needed to make it reasonable to believe its conclusion. What this treatment of sufficiency leaves out of consideration, however, is the fact that such individual arguments or lines of argument are usually presented in dialectical exchanges—that is, in actual or anticipated interchanges between two or more parties. Thus arguers will often seek not only to provide what seems to them to be an adequate case, but also to try to anticipate and respond to possible objections from the audience. Moreover, in many situations, we have now come to appreciate, there is actually in some sense a failure of argumentative responsibility—a failure of "manifest rationality," to use a term Johnson introduced recently (*Manifest Rationality*, 2000)—if the arguer does not respond to objections that have been voiced, or even to objections that might reasonably be anticipated, given the expressed alternative views on the issue in question. To be sure, quite apart from the extent to which an arguer ought to expand his or her case out of respect for the views of the interlocutor and out of respect for the norms of reasonable belief, an argument that fails to address and resolve the doubts of the audience will fail in its persuasive objectives. As a result of these considerations, we now think that the criterion of sufficiency has three dimensions, a logical or epistemic one, a dialectical one, and a rhetorical one. A good argument's premises must provide enough of the right kinds of evidence to make it reasonable to believe the conclusion, but in addition, the case for the conclusion must contain arguments that are each sufficient in this respect and that also address the questions, doubts, and objections that it would be reasonable for an interlocutor to raise, plus those that the audience is known to harbor, whether reasonable or not.

This textbook uses the informal fallacies as the device for introducing students to the analysis and evaluation of arguments. Fallacy theory has undergone extensive development over the lifetime of *Logical Self-Defense* so far, and it would require extensive revision to bring the fine-grained details of our analyses of fallacies completely up to date. However, we think our conceptions of the fallacies are largely correct. There are three points that we would emphasize were we to rewrite the text today. The first is that it is now widely accepted that, with few exceptions, the patterns of argument that are liable to be fallacious need not always be so. This is a point acknowledged in the text, but it needs to be emphasized. There is often an ambiguity in a term like *ad hominem* that can be used both to describe a pattern of argument that is not intrinsically

fallacious and also to label an instance of that pattern that is fallacious. Related to this point is the second one, namely that the boxed fallacy conditions in the text in many cases can serve as descriptions of such argument patterns, often called "argument schemes," setting aside the last condition in the box that specifies what makes an instance of the scheme fallacious. In a rewrite, we would emphasize the connection between fallacies and argument-scheme theory.

The third point is that dialectical theories of argumentation have shown that some of the traditional fallacies, or some versions of them, are really violations of norms of productive dialogue rather than violations of canons of good reasoning. A prime example is the straw-person fallacy, which consists of distorting the opponent's position and criticizing the opponent as if that distorted version were actually the position he or she held. The argument critical of the falsely attributed position can be fallacy-free, but the false attribution violates norms of fair discussion. So we would draw attention to these dialectical fallacies were we to rewrite the textbook.

Were we to rewrite this book today, we would have to include a chapter on the Internet as a source of information. It will have to be an exercise for students and teachers alike who use this book as a textbook to generate guidelines for assessing information gleaned from the Web, separating the very considerable and valuable amount of plausible or reliable information from the vast amounts of misinformation, lies, fantasy, superstitions, and nonsense. And we would also have to update our chapter on the news media, which today are even more concentrated in the control of a very few large corporations than they were in 1994, and which, in the United States and Canada at least, tend to be uncritical of the political, social, and economic status quo, or even serve as deliberate apologists for mainline political interests. These two chapters would have to be related, since to some extent the information available via the Internet can make up for the omission of alternative or dissident views in the mainstream news media, although it requires a dedicated, aggressive, and imaginative Internet user to fill the gap.

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and express our gratitude for the influence of many colleagues in Canada and around the world, too numerous to mention, over the years. We are particularly indebted to Robert C. Pinto, Kate Parr, and Hans Vilh. Hansen at the University of Windsor and to Frans H. van Eemeren and the late Rob Grootendorst and their colleagues at the University of Amsterdam. Our

students have been a continuing source of inspiration and challenge. We owe special gratitude to Robert Trapp for suggesting that we reissue this book and recommending it to IDEA Press, and to Noel Selegzi at IDEA Press for his unfailing cooperation. Finally, we would like to rededicate this book to our wives, Maggie Johnson and June Blair, without whose support our work over the past thirty years would have been impossible.

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