Chapter 1

Introduction

I. ARGUMENTS

This book presents a method for understanding and evaluating arguments. We encounter arguments frequently—when we read, when we talk, and when we are thinking to ourselves. Some topics are the focus of intense, often passionate argument. Sometimes a hotly debated topic is prominent for only a short time, and quickly followed by the next issue that grabs public attention. As I write this section, a tragic mass suicide by a group of people belonging to a religious group has generated widespread discussion. People are arguing about the factors that lead individuals to join such groups and to believe things that seem incredible to most of us. A few weeks earlier the first successful efforts to clone mammals were reported. This announcement was followed by widespread debate about the morality of such activity and about whether cloning of humans is possible and whether research into it should be permitted. Some subjects are the focus of public argument for much longer periods of time. There are ongoing debates, for example, about the morality of abortion and the effectiveness of capital punishment. And some more abstract issues, such as whether people really do have free will or whether morality is objective, are the subject matter of endless, and fascinating, argument among philosophers and others.

One place where we find arguments is on the editorial page of a newspaper, either in the editorials themselves or in the opinion columns and letters to the editor. Here is a fairly typical example:

Example 1.1

Where Were You Then?

I have a few questions for those who have raised their voices against the recent Supreme Court decision to preserve our constitutional right to engage in symbolic acts of protest, including the burning of the American flag:

Are you as outraged when our Constitution is assaulted?

Did you protest when the constitutional rights of black citizens were denied? Did you work for their rights to vote, to equal education, to fair housing?

Have you spoken out against the assault on our Constitution by the illegal maneuverings of the boys in the White House during the Iran-Contra affair?

. . . In short, can you honestly say that you love your flag when you have been silent in protecting all that it stands for?[1]

Example 1.1 is an excerpt from a letter to the editor about a 1989 Supreme Court decision on flag burning and the First Amendment to the Constitution. The First Amendment says that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging freedom of speech." Speech has long been taken to include symbolic actions in addition to ordinary speaking and writing. The issue in this case was whether flag burning is a kind of speech covered by this amendment. The Court ruled that it was. This evoked considerable protest from those who thought flag burning should be illegal. The author of Example 1.1 is responding to critics of the Supreme Court's decision.

On first reading it may seem that the author of the letter makes a good point against those who oppose the Supreme Court's decision. Clearly, she supports the Court's decision permitting flag burning as a protest, and she disapproves of those who have condemned the decision. This is made plain by her first sentence, stating that she has "a few questions" for opponents of the Court's decision. Before we decide whether this letter makes a good point, however, we should look more carefully at just what the letter says.

Instead of discussing the merits of the decision, the author attacks critics of the decision by suggesting that they have not done all they should to defend the Constitution in other cases. Notice that the author doesn't directly say that the critics haven't defended the Constitution in other cases. Rather, by asking whether they have, she suggests that they haven't. These critics may or may not have defended constitutional rights in these other cases. The author's point, however, does not address

1. Vicki Lewin, Letter to the editor, *Rochester Times-Union*, July 12, 1989, p. 7A.

the merits of the Court's decision in this case, nor does it address the arguments of the opponents of the decision. There is nothing in the letter that shows that the decision was a good one, either because it conforms to the provisions of the Constitution or because the country benefits from permitting flag burning. This letter is typical of many discussions of controversial issues in that it sheds more heat than light on the issues. It attacks people who take an opposing view, but it says nothing about the merits of the view itself.

Contrast Example 1.1 with the following excerpt from an editorial opposing the death penalty:

Example 1.2

No to the Death Penalty

It's unfair, it's costly and it's not as tough on crime as you think . . . .

Are death penalty laws fair? Is it in our interest to pass them?

The answer to both questions is no. Some criminals may not deserve to live, but that doesn't mean the death penalty is a good idea.

Let's start with fairness.

The bill before the Legislature is carefully drawn. It would kill only the worst killers—those who do it for hire, who torture, who have more than one victim, who kill while committing other crimes, who kill a police officer.

What's more, the bill lists many mitigating circumstances: emotional disturbance, the influence of alcohol or drugs, impaired mental capacity, no significant history of violent crime.

Yet other states have careful laws and good intentions too—and even so, studies show that the death penalty, as it is applied, discriminates by race.

"Those who kill whites are between three and four times more likely to be sentenced to death than those who kill blacks," University of Florida expert Michael Radelet told us.

Clearly, juries tend to be more outraged when a victim is white—which makes a mockery of fairness.

Now for self-interest.

You may think it's cheaper to kill a criminal than to keep him locked up for 40 years. Guess again.

There are at least 11 costly, time-consuming stages built into the process of legal review for death sentences.

Can't we cut through all that? Not if we care about fairness . . . .

Imagine what would be spent in New York so that "expert counsel" can file motion after motion, year after year, with exquisite regard for every conceivable right of their clients—while the families of victims wait bitterly for justice.

It's just not worth it.

Why waste millions of our tax dollars every year, clog the already crowded courts, fatten the wallets of lawyers, and still be no safer?

Why not spend the money instead on sure, swift law enforcement?

> Why not, in fact, put the worst criminals in prison for good?
> Life without parole—that's the governor's alternative to the death penalty, and it makes sense . . . .
> Better to say no to the death penalty. It's not fair; it's not worth the cost. Good riddance.[2]

In this editorial the writers argue that we should not adopt the death penalty because it is unfair and too costly. The reason that it is unfair, they say, is that juries are racially biased–they are more likely to sentence to death those who kill whites than whose who kill blacks. Their reason for thinking that the death penalty would be so costly is that to guarantee fairness convicted murderers must have the right to appeal their convictions and sentences. As a result, there would usually be many trials before an execution occurs. These are important points to consider in thinking about the death penalty. Of course, you might think that other points that favor the death penalty outweigh them. Or you might think that there are ways to avoid racial bias and excessive cost. Still, this editorial presents an argument worthy of serious consideration.

It is not our purpose now to decide whether this argument is a good one. We will return to arguments like this one in Chapter 11. Rather, the point of looking at it now is to contrast the reasoned argument it contains with the less focused outburst in Example 1.1. Example 1.2 is a relatively thoughtful discussion of an issue, far superior to Example 1.1. One of the goals of this text is to learn to distinguish serious arguments from other kinds of writing.

We also find arguments in advertisements.

Example 1.3

Let Inside Traders Work for You

> If you want to see your investment dollars grow, trust our investment advisors at Inside Traders, Inc. We can't guarantee that every investment you make with us will be a winner, but our record is exemplary. We work hard to get you the information you need to make wise decisions. Our customers stick with us and we have become one of the most successful investment advisory firms in the nation. So, if you want results, let Inside Traders work for you.

The point of this advertisement is to convince readers that Inside Traders is a good investment advisory service. A good investment advisor is one who gives clients advice that helps them select profitable investments. In general, a better advisor gives advice that leads to more profits and a poorer advisor gives advice that leads to fewer profits.[3]

The upbeat tone of Example 1.3 might lead you to think that it makes a strong case for the merits of Inside Traders. However, a closer look reveals that there isn't much of an argument here. The alleged facts presented on behalf of Inside Traders are that their people work hard, that customers stick with the company, and that it is a successful firm. Now, these facts may provide some reason to think that Inside Traders gives good advice, but they are far from conclusive.

2. *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, April 2, 1989, p. 12A.

3. Other factors might also be used in measuring the quality of an investment advisor. For example, some advisors might treat their clients more courteously than others. We will ignore such factors in this discussion.

What is particularly noteworthy for our purposes is the claim that the firm is "successful." It is not clear just what this means. To say that an investment advisory firm is successful might mean that it gives good advice, and this would be directly relevant to your concerns as a potential investor. However, to say that a firm is successful is typically to say that it makes a big profit itself. The fact that Inside Traders makes a lot of money itself, of course, has no direct connection with the quality of the advice they give to their clients. Indeed, they might make their profit by encouraging their clients to buy and sell stocks frequently, thereby increasing the amount of the commissions paid to Inside Traders.

In this example, figuring out whether a good argument is presented depends largely on understanding exactly what is meant by the words used. It is easy to let the positive style of the presentation lead us to think that it presents a good argument. One of our goals in this text is to learn to get beyond such superficial features and to identify and assess the merits of the basic argument itself. We'll see that we often have to pay careful attention to exactly what is meant by the claims made in an argument.

A third place in which we find arguments is in reports of scientific research, such as the following excerpt from a newspaper article reporting on a study of the drinking habits of college-age students:

Example 1.4

Drinking Age Law May Encourage Minors to Drink

> The 21-year-old drinking age might actually encourage minors to drink, according to a new study . . . [which] . . . showed that 81 percent of underage students admitted using alcohol while only 75 percent of students over 21 said they consumed alcohol. Also, 24 percent of underage students were heavy drinkers, compared to 15 percent of those of legal age considered heavy drinkers.[4]

In Example 1.4 the writer's claim is that setting the minimum drinking age at 21 may encourage minors (people under 21) to drink. This is an interesting and important point, since the main reason for raising the drinking age to 21 was to discourage drinking by people under 21. The author of the article claims that the law may have an effect exactly the opposite of what was intended. According to the article, this claim about the effect of the drinking age law is supported by statistical data showing that the percentage of students under 21 who drink alcohol is higher than the percentage of students 21 and over who drink. Additional support is supposed to come from the fact that a higher percentage of the younger students were heavy drinkers.

4. "Drinking Age Law May Encourage Minors to Drink," *Rochester Times-Union*, May 30, 1989, p. 5B.

To understand fully this sort of argument one must be familiar with statistical claims based on surveys and scientific studies. We will examine this topic in detail in Chapters 9 and 10, and only offer some preliminary comments now.

Notice that the passage doesn't say merely that minors drink more than those 21 and over. It also says that the higher drinking age law may *encourage* drinking by minors. To say that the law encourages drinking by minors is to say that the law brings about or causes an increase in drinking by minors. (Perhaps this would happen because minors tend to display their independence by breaking the law.) It is important to realize, however, that the information presented here says nothing about how much drinking minors do when there is a lower drinking age. For all we can tell from this report, people under 21 drink just as heavily when the drinking age is 18 rather than 21. So, the information given here provides no basis for thinking that the law encourages drinking by minors. This information does not show that the legal drinking age affects people's drinking habits. As a result, the argument presented here is weak.[5]

In each of the four passages we have examined the author is trying to prove or establish some point. To do this the author produces some reasons or evidence supporting that point. These reasons and the points they are intended to establish combine to form ***arguments***. The claim the argument is intended to establish is its ***conclusion***. The reasons that are supposed to support the conclusion are the ***premises*** of the argument. Part of what we've been doing in examining Examples 1.1–1.4 is identifying the premises and conclusions of the arguments they contain.

Identifying the premises and conclusions of the arguments presented in passages such as these is essential to understanding or interpreting the argument in the passage. It is part of determining exactly what the author means. What can make this task difficult is the fact that people do not always express their arguments clearly. Sometimes people leave some of their premises unstated, on the assumption that readers and listeners will know what they have in mind (or won't notice their reliance on faulty assumptions). In interpreting argumentative passages we often have to add premises to the arguments to make explicit their overall structure and content. Furthermore, because arguments typically occur as parts of longer essays, we have to distinguish the premises and conclusion from other parts of the passage. We call the process of interpreting and clarifying an argument ***reconstructing the argument***.

Once we have identified the argument in a passage, we can go on to decide whether the authors have given good reasons in support of their claims, that is, whether they have succeeded in establishing the point they set out to establish. When we do this we are ***evaluating the argument***. ***Argument analysis*** is the process that consists of these two elements, reconstruction and evaluation, as shown in the following chart. As we develop and refine this method, additional details will be added to the chart. By following the steps identified here, the process of argument analysis will become systematic and well-defined.

5. Note, however, that the claim actually made is only that the drinking age law *might* encourage drinking by minors. By hedging in this way, the author makes a very modest claim.

The Steps of Argument Analysis

1. Reconstruct the argument.
2. Evaluate the argument.

So far we have briefly illustrated the method of argument analysis as it applies to written material. However, this method is not limited to the interpretation and evaluation of the writings of others. You also deal with reasons and arguments when you think about something on your own. For example, suppose you wonder whether your favorite team will win the championship this season or you want to know whether going to college really helps people get better jobs. What you are likely to do in these cases is to think about all the information you have relevant to these topics and try to determine what conclusion that information supports. To do that is to consider the reasons, or the arguments, on both sides of a question and determine which is the stronger argument.

Thus, you can also evaluate reasons and arguments when you are simply thinking about things on your own. Arguments are not restricted to situations in which two or more people are debating some issue. In fact, as we will see, the best way to approach arguments is not to think of them as parts of contests in which one person tries to defeat another. Rather, it is best to think of them as factors you consider when you want to determine the most reasonable thing to believe about a topic. When other people present arguments, they simply provide you with new arguments to consider in deciding what you should believe.

There is no limitation on the sort of topic about which arguments can be constructed. Anything that you can think about or study is something you can formulate arguments about, whether it's the behavior of tiny particles, the causes of crime, or the history of sports. Arguments are made in all fields, including morality, religion, and art. We can argue about moral behavior, the merits of various religious views, and the quality of paintings and musical compositions. In Chapter 11 we will pay particular attention to some of the factors that get in the way of successful analysis of arguments about morality.

Once you start to look for arguments, you'll realize that you encounter them frequently. Newspapers and magazines contain essays, editorials, and letters to the editor that include arguments. Scientific articles and books present arguments for scientific theses, and these arguments are commonly summarized in newspapers and magazines. Advertisements may contain arguments about the effectiveness and value of a product. In discussions with friends and colleagues, one frequently hears reasons in support of some point of view. Arguments are all around us.

People regularly interpret and evaluate the arguments they encounter, though perhaps without realizing exactly what they are doing. They attempt to understand

these arguments and decide whether they are good ones. While in many cases people assess arguments accurately and easily, there are also cases in which they fail to do this. This is not surprising. Argument analysis is a skill that, like many others, can be done well only after study and practice.

The goal of this text is to improve your ability to analyze arguments. It presents a precise method for identifying, interpreting, and evaluating arguments. The goal is not to demonstrate which specific arguments are good ones and which are not, but to provide you with a method for evaluating the arguments you encounter or think of, no matter what the topic is.

Exercises and Study Questions[6]

***1.** What are the two main parts of arguments?

2. What are the two main elements of argument analysis?

***3.** We often say that people who yell at each other as part of a heated dispute are having an argument. What is the connection, if any, between this kind of argument and the arguments discussed in the text?

4. The text notes that Example 1.1 does not contain a good argument. Do you agree? Why or why not?

***5.** Reread Examples 1.1–1.4. State precisely and clearly the main conclusion of the argument in each example.

6. How good are the arguments in Example 1.2? Do you find them convincing? Why?

7. The passage that follows is an excerpt from a discussion of a Supreme Court decision in the Johnson Controls case. Johnson Controls makes batteries, and some of their workers are exposed to dangerous chemicals. Pregnant women exposed to these chemicals have a significantly higher than normal chance of giving birth to a child with birth defects. The company adopted a policy prohibiting all women of child-bearing age from working at these jobs. Some women employees sued, claiming that the policy amounted to sex discrimination. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of these women.

> **Protect the Unborn from Greed**
>
> The Supreme Court decision banning corporate fetal-protection regulations is a sham. Though hailed by some misguided souls as an end to "illegal sex discrimination," in fact the court has announced to the nation that the child in the womb is of absolutely no significance to the future of the family.
>
> It is indeed unfair for women who work to face situations that belittle their high level of professionalism by denying them equal remuneration. It is an insult to all working women when such deplorable circumstances arise.
>
> But it is even more unfair for an employer to disregard the special needs of female employees as they either plan to bear children or in fact bear children. Surely, the moral employer would not hesitate to protect a woman employee from a situation threatening her or her children.
>
> But nothing in the moral order is of any significance to this present court, as this decision makes perfectly clear. Not only does the court ignore corporate desires to protect female employees, but it denies that a pregnant woman is indeed present with a child as she works.
>
> The child in the womb does not exist! Thus saith the court. The woman who plans to have children one day is nobody special! Thus saith the court. The family unit which functions only because both parents must work is to be economically deprived if mom does not want to submit herself to certain chemical threats. Thus saith the court.[7]

Do you think that this is a carefully argued piece of writing, similar to Example 1.2, or is it more like Example 1.1? What are the main points made in the essay? What do they show about the merits of the Court's decision?

6. Answers to exercises marked with an asterisk may be found in Appendix C. Answers for most odd-numbered exercises and some even-numbered exercises are given.

II. REASON, RHETORIC, AND ARGUMENT ANALYSIS

The kind of argument analysis we will study in this book differs from some other familiar sorts of analyses of arguments. Popular discussions of arguments often focus on issues having to do with persuasiveness and verbal competition. Some analysts focus on the literary merit of the writer's prose, for example. In this section we will contrast rational argument analysis of the sort examined in this text with these other kinds of analysis.

Gerry Spence, an enormously successful trial lawyer, has written a best-selling book about arguments called *How to Argue and Win Every Time*.[8] Spence sees arguments as tools we use to get what we want from others. He writes, "Argument is a tool by which we can achieve an end, satisfy a want, fulfill a desire. Argument is the mechanism by which we reveal the truth—the truth for us."[9] As he sees it, winning an argument is succeeding in getting what we want out of it.

The way Spence thinks about arguments is similar to the way many commentators think about political debates. In these debates, candidates defend their records and criticize the records of their opponents. You might think that political debates contain a wealth of arguments, and that discussions of the debates offer analyses of

7. Judie Brown, "Protect the Unborn from Greed," *USA Today*, March 25, 1991, p. A6.

8. Gerry Spence, *How to Argue and Win Every Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

9. Ibid., p. 25.

these arguments. It will therefore be instructive to look at some typical analyses of campaign debates. We'll use as our examples accounts of the 1988 debate between presidential candidates George Bush and Michael Dukakis. Descriptions of more recent debates would be similar in character. Both excerpts are from analyses that appeared in the *Washington Post* in the days immediately following the debate.

Example 1.5

Bush on Points

It was a close match, but in watching Sunday night's bloodless affray between George Bush and Michael Dukakis, I scored it 12–8 for Bush. The vice president came across as a man who pays a decent respect to Rule Six, this being the maxim that goes as follows: Don't take yourself too damn seriously.

Dukakis may have a sense of humor, but it hasn't been visible thus far. The gentleman is Very Serious. He is also very composed and very articulate. He is very almost everything, but he is not very appealing. Dukakis has a way of smiling with his mouth but not with his eyes. Like a poorly thawed sweet roll, he is still frozen in the middle.

The value in these engagements lies in the opportunity they provide for judgments of character. Is the candidate an attractive person? Would you feel comfortable with him in the Oval Office? Never mind his views on subsidies for wheat and corn: The question is, do you like the guy? Do you trust him?

My impression was that Bush looked sure of himself, and Dukakis looked too sure of himself. Bush exhibited the mature confidence of a man who is not afraid to kid an institution: "Is it time for our one-liners?" Dukakis got off his prepared jabs with the ease of a Johnny Carson who has memorized his midnight monologue. Bush was better.[10]

Charles Krauthammer presents a rather different analysis of the debate.

Example 1.6

Cold Fish, Yes, But He Won

Maybe I'm a pointy-head, but in the debate I saw Sunday night, Michael Dukakis knocked George Bush around the ring for 90 minutes . . . .

The winner, going away, was Dukakis. Of course, I may not be the best judge of what plays . . . . [A] small focus group of undecided voters found that Dukakis had turned nearly all of them off. Dukakis lost one of these viewers at the opening handshake when he showed up six inches shorter than Bush.

The Bush I saw Sunday night was tall and terrible. He whined. He stumbled. He looked nervous and hyperactive. From the first question about drugs, he was on the defensive . . . his tongue betrayed him. He mangled his lines . . . .

10. Taken from the THE CONSERVATIVE'S VIEW column by James J. Kilpatrick. © UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

Dukakis' close was strong. Maybe too strong. If there is a backlash against his debate performance it will not be against the solid content but against the stolid persona. Not just cool and detached but smug and smirky.[11]

The main goal Kilpatrick and Krauthammer have in their analyses is to establish who "won" the debate. Winning, here, involves making the best impression on voters. Our goal in looking at these analyses is not to add to this discussion about who won the debate. Instead, our goal is to call attention to two very different ways of looking at arguments.

One striking feature of these analyses is their emphasis on competition. Both authors use boxing metaphors to express their overall evaluation of the debate, Kilpatrick claiming that he scored it "12–8 for Bush," while in Krauthammer's view "Michael Dukakis knocked George Bush around the ring for 90 minutes." Although it is perfectly appropriate to look for winners and losers in presidential debates, our goal in argument analysis is not to look for winners and losers in competitions. In analyzing an argument, our goal is to determine whether the argument succeeds in showing its conclusion to be true.

If two people give arguments on opposing sides of some issue and you conclude that one has given a better argument, it may be true that the one who gave that argument has "won," but that is of secondary importance. The important point, for our purposes, is that it is now reasonable for you to believe the conclusion of the stronger argument. Think about arguments with the goal of answering the question "What should I believe now?" rather than "Who won this intellectual contest?"

A second important feature to notice in Kilpatrick's and Krauthammer's analyses is that they emphasize demeanor, elocution, and style. Krauthammer says that Bush "whined," that he "looked nervous," and that he "mangled his lines." Dukakis, on the other hand, was "not just cool and detached but smug and smirky" and a "cold fish." Kilpatrick tells us that Dukakis is "very composed and very articulate . . . but he is not very appealing." Bush "looked sure of himself" and displayed "mature confidence." What is entirely missing from these analyses is a discussion of the merits of the arguments the candidates gave for the various claims they made.[12]

When applying the techniques of argument analysis to the Bush-Dukakis debate, we would look carefully at the content of the claims the two candidates made. Emphasis would be on how well they defended their points. Did either give any good reasons to think he would be a better president? Did either give any good reasons to prefer his proposals or style of leadership to those of the other? We would ignore their speaking styles and personalities entirely, or discuss them only when they bear on their arguments about the issues.[13]

11. Charles Krauthammer, "Cold Fish, But He Won," © 1988, Washington Post Writer's Group. Reprinted with permission.

12. Only portions of the entire essays have been reprinted here. However, almost no attention is given to the merits of the arguments in these essays.

13. Although not relevant to this analysis, speaking style and personality are still worthy of consideration as qualifications for the presidency.

There is nothing wrong with analyzing debates in the way Kilpatrick and Krauthammer do. They are addressing the ***rhetorical power*** of the debaters and their arguments. A person is rhetorically powerful when the person can convince people of what he or she says. A person might be rhetorically powerful as a result of the ability to present ideas in a very clear, logical, and convincing manner. But rhetorical power also can result from rather different factors. A person who speaks clearly, has a strong voice, a confident manner, and an honest appearance may be more rhetorically powerful than a person lacking these traits. The same arguments may be more persuasive when presented by a person having these traits than by a person lacking them.

Like people, arguments themselves can have rhetorical power. Some arguments tend to convince people of their conclusions. Sometimes, this effectiveness is a consequence of the fact that the argument really is a good one: its premises do provide strong reasons to accept its conclusion. But sometimes arguments are rhetorically powerful for other reasons. For example, arguments that appeal to particularly vivid and striking examples sometimes tend to convince people of general conclusions that they do not really support.

In their discussion of the presidential debates, analysts such as Kilpatrick and Krauthammer focus on the impact a speaker's performance might have on the audience. In this case, the relevant fact is whether the candidate is likely to attract voters by his performance. And it may be that the factors they look at are what influence voters. If that is the case, then it is appropriate for them to examine these factors, and it is equally appropriate for the candidates themselves to worry more about their appearance and their debating style than about whether they actually have any good reasons to believe the things they say.[14]

However, there is another important aspect of analyzing an argument. Besides examining its rhetorical power, we can assess its ***rational strength***. An argument has rational, or logical, strength when it provides a good reason to believe its conclusion, even if it does not always persuade people. Likewise, an argument lacks rational strength when it does not provide a good reason to believe its conclusion, even if it does persuade people. So, rational strength and rhetorical power are very different things.

To illustrate further the difference between assessments of the rational strength of an argument and assessments of other features, consider the following excerpt from a commentary by Annette T. Rottenberg on an article by Roger Sipher. Sipher had argued for the abolition of laws requiring attendance at school. Rottenberg comments as follows:

Example 1.7

> The strengths of Sipher's argument are clear, direct organization, readable language, and listing of the specific dividends that would follow

14. Of course, it is also possible that what voters pay attention to in debates is in part determined by what commentators such as Kilpatrick and Krauthammer choose to write about or talk about.

> implementation of his proposal. Equally important is the novelty of the proposal, which will outrage some readers and delight others. In either case the proposal will arouse attention and initiate discussion.
>
> However, the originality of the solution may also constitute a weakness. The more original the solution to a problem, the more likely it is to encounter initial resistance. Sipher's argument is too short to answer the many questions his readers might have about possible disadvantages. The argument, in other words, should be considered an introduction to any attempt to solve the problem, a limitation of which Sipher was probably aware.[15]

In the first sentence of this excerpt Rottenberg comments on the way in which Sipher presents his argument, saying that it is clear and direct. This is surely a good feature of an essay, but it has no direct bearing on the rational strength of the argument. If Sipher's argument is as clearly stated as Rottenberg suggests, then it should be easy for readers to understand just what his argument is. His clear style, however, tells us nothing about how good an argument it is; it might be a clearly stated argument that lacks rational strength since it offers no good reason for its conclusion. Rottenberg also comments on the novelty of Sipher's argument. That might make it interesting and provocative, but it also has nothing to do with its rational strength. Novel arguments can be good ones, and they can be very bad ones. These considerations have to do with the ***literary merit*** of Sipher's essay, or how original, interesting, and well-written it is. Finally, Rottenberg says that Sipher's argument will "encounter initial resistance." This comment addresses its rhetorical force, not its rational strength.

When you examine an argument for rational strength, you are attempting to determine whether the argument's premises provide you with good reason to believe that the argument's conclusion is true. Although people do concern themselves at times with rhetorical power and with literary merit, in many ordinary situations it is rational strength that is our primary, or even our only, concern. For example, suppose that you wonder whether going to college is worth the time, money, and effort it takes. To help you decide, you look into the question of whether college graduates typically earn higher incomes and lead more fulfilling lives than people who don't graduate from college. You read some articles about the topic, including some that take opposing views on the matter. Your goal in evaluating what you've read is not to find out which authors present their arguments most clearly, or which arguments are most likely to be persuasive to an average reader, or which author presents the most novel view. You want to know what the evidence is about the lives of college graduates. Your interest is in the truth of the matter, not in the rhetorical or literary

15. Annette T. Rottenberg, *Elements of Argument; A Text and Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 44. Roger Sipher's article "So That Nobody Has to Go to School If They Don't Want to" is reprinted in the same volume, pp. 41–42.

merit of the essays. In other words, your concern is with the rational strength of the arguments about the issue and the truth about the value of a college education.

There may be times when determining the truth is not your goal. For example, sometimes your main goal is to make yourself feel good. If you had this goal when you studied a topic, you'd want to end up believing whatever was most comforting, interesting, or exciting, whether it is true or not. Thus, for example, some people find it very exciting to believe that there is life on other planets. Such a belief might make them feel good. Other people might find such a belief frightening. They would prefer to believe that there is no life on other planets. When these people reason about life on other planets, they may have something other than determining the truth as their aim. Another reason you might study a topic is to find something interesting or original to say about it, perhaps in a paper you have to write. In this situation, the truth of what you say may be of secondary importance to you.

In this text, however, we are not concerned with these other factors. The fact that believing something would be comforting or exciting or original just has no connection with whether or not it is true, or with whether or not there is some argument that shows it to be true. In assessing an argument, we will not be concerned with its rhetorical power, its originality, or its provocativeness. To focus on rational strength will require some effort, because a large part of what we ordinarily read and hear focuses on rhetorical power or the other factors mentioned. As the example of determining the value a college degree illustrates, rational strength is what we do (or should) care about in most cases.

Exercises and Study Questions

*1. According to the text, you can evaluate an argumentative essay in terms of the rational strength of its argument, its rhetorical power, and its literary merit. State clearly the main things that go into each type of evaluation.

2. The text mentions several factors that make a person rhetorically powerful. What are they? Are there factors that add to rhetorical power other than those mentioned in the text?

*3. Could an argument be both rhetorically powerful and rationally strong, or are these exclusive features?

4. Suppose that an English professor analyzes a debater's performance by evaluating her grammar, her vocabulary, and the organization and structure of her answers. These considerations have mainly to do with literary merit. Do they have any bearing on rational strength or rhetorical power?

*5. Discuss the following claim: Arguments are best when they are presented clearly, when the sentences used are short and direct, and when jargon is avoided.

6. In Example 1.6, Krauthammer says that Dukakis lost one viewer "at the opening handshake when he showed up six inches shorter than Bush." This remark suggests that being tall contributes to one's rhetorical power. What other physical and personality traits do Krauthammer and Kilpatrick mention that they think contribute to, or detract from, one's rhetorical power? Do you think that these factors do affect how people react to an argument? How could you find out if it is true?

7. While Kilpatrick's and Krauthammer's essays deal only with the rhetorical power of Bush and Dukakis, we can look at their own arguments and assess their rational strength. Kilpatrick argues that Bush won the debate, while Krauthammer argues that Dukakis won. What are the main points each author presents in support of his conclusion? How good are their arguments (from a rational point of view)?

8. In the third paragraph of his essay, Kilpatrick writes, "Never mind his views on subsidies for wheat and corn: The question is, do you like the guy? Do you trust him?" What is Kilpatrick's point here? Do you agree with him?

III. WAYS PEOPLE DEAL WITH ARGUMENTS

People respond to arguments in a wide variety of ways. No doubt the way a particular person responds varies from one time to another, depending upon the topic of the argument, the person's mood, or any number of other factors. Nevertheless, we can identify a few general types of respondent. We'll build upon a classification drawn up by Issac Watts in 1775 in his book *Logick*. Watts identifies four types of respondents: the credulous person, the person of contradiction, the dogmatist, and the skeptic, which he describes as follows:

> *The credulous person:* "The credulous Man is ready to receive every Thing for Truth, that has but a shadow of Evidence; every new Book that he reads, and every ingenious Man with whom he converses, has Power enough to draw him into the Sentiments of the Speaker or Writer. He has so much Complaisance in him, or Weakness of Soul, that he is ready to resign his own Opinion to the first Objection which he hears, and to receive any Sentiments of another that are asserted with a positive Air and must Assurance."[16]
>
> *The person of contradiction:* "The Man of Contradiction is of a contrary Humour, for he stands ready to oppose every Thing that is said: He gives a slight Attention to the Reasons of other Men, from an inward scornful Presumption that they have no Strength in them. When he reads or hears a Discourse different from his own Sentiments, he does not give himself Leave to consider whether that Discourse may be true; but employs all his Powers immediately to confute it."[17]

16. Issac Watts, *Logick* (London: John Clark and Richard Hett, 1725), p. 208.
17. Ibid.

The dogmatist: "By what Means soever the Dogmatist came by his Opinions, whether by his Senses or by his Fancy, his Education or his own Reading, yet he believes them all with the same Assurance that he does a mathematical Truth; he has scarce any mere Probabilities that belong to him; every Thing with him is certain and infallible; every Punctilio in Religion is an Article of his Faith, and he answers all manner of Objections by sovereign Contempt."[18]

The skeptic: The skeptic "believes nothing" and "is afraid to give assent to anything."[19]

Although Watts wrote long ago, his classifications remain useful today. You probably know people who, like the credulous person, agree with virtually everything that is said to them; and you may know people who, at least in some moods, are like the person of contradiction who disagrees with everything. There are dogmatists among us, who hold their beliefs with the utmost conviction and pay no attention to new reasons or evidence. Equally, there are those, like Watts's skeptic, who withhold belief about almost everything out a fear of ever making a mistake.

Of course, Watts's categories are extremes. No one, or almost no one, is completely dogmatic, credulous, skeptical, or contrary. Still, it is useful to be aware of these general types. Another type worth noting, quite similar to the credulous person, is the person who insists that in controversial cases everyone is right. Such people are fond of saying that different things are true for different people or different groups, that some issues are matters of opinion, about which everyone (or no one) is right. We might characterize such people as "relativists."

People of all the types just described share a common trait: they fail to engage rationally with the arguments they encounter. They don't evaluate carefully the arguments they encounter and form their beliefs on the basis of the information they receive. People who do respond that way are ***rational thinkers***. They try their best to understand the information they receive and form conclusions based on that information. Sometimes they stick to their guns, and sometimes they are persuaded by new evidence. They see the issues as questions that have correct answers, even if they are hard to figure out. To a large extent, the purpose of this book is provide you with the tools needed to be a rational thinker.

Rational thinkers have a set of abilities and attitudes that enable them to deal effectively with arguments. Among the abilities are the following:

The ability to distinguish genuine arguments (reasons, evidence) from other things

The ability to understand and interpret arguments

The ability to evaluate arguments

18. Watts, *Logick*, p. 210.
19. Ibid.

The first two abilities depend on sympathetic and careful reading and thinking. The third is largely a matter of being a careful and fair-minded critic.

The attitudes of a rational thinkers include the following:

A willingness to examine arguments with an open mind

A willingness to change one's mind when the arguments call for it

A willingness to give up comfortable or popular beliefs when the arguments call for it

A willingness to go along with popular views when the arguments call for it

A willingness to form beliefs even when matters are uncertain

Having these attitudes amounts to avoiding all the traits that characterized the types of people Watts described. To be a rational thinker you must avoid being overly credulous, contrary, dogmatic, or skeptical.

Exercises and Study Questions

***1.** You might think that the skeptic and the person of contradiction are just about the same in their reactions to arguments. What, exactly, is the difference between them?

2. Watts classified people into four groups by means of the way in which they characteristically respond to arguments. A fifth type was added in the text. Can you think of any additional typical sorts of responses to arguments?

***3.** In what situation will a dogmatist and a person of contradiction respond in the same way to an argument? When will their responses differ?

4. As noted in the text, almost no one always exemplifies any one of the general types listed here. We all vary in our responses. Do you think that how we respond might depend on the subject matter of the argument? Are people more dogmatic on some topics and more credulous on others? What other factors might affect their responses?

IV. IMPEDIMENTS TO GOOD REASONING

Although people deal with arguments frequently and they naturally interpret and evaluate these arguments, they do not do as well at argument analysis as they could. There are several interrelated factors that get in the way of successful argument analysis. In this section we will describe some of these factors.

A. Lack of an Adequate Vocabulary

You may have had the experience of hearing an argument and suspecting that there was something wrong with it but found yourself unable to say exactly what the flaw

was. Part of the problem may have been that you didn't know the words to use to describe the strengths and weaknesses of arguments. As with nearly any complicated intellectual activity, argument analysis is easier and more successfully done by those who have a clear and precise set of terms to apply. So far we have spoken of arguments being "good" or "effective" or "successful," but we have given no precise definitions of these terms.

We distinguished rhetorical power and literary merit from rational strength, and this improved somewhat our ability to describe arguments clearly and concisely. However, several other distinctions are useful as well. A careful examination of arguments reveals that there are a variety of different ways in which they can go wrong and a corresponding set of strengths or virtues they can have. To analyze arguments effectively, we need a precise vocabulary for describing their characteristics. We will develop such a vocabulary in the next three chapters.

The point of developing a precise set of terms to describe arguments is not only to aid in communicating our thoughts about arguments to others. Using such terms also improves the clarity and precision of our thoughts themselves. Think about an activity that you know a lot about, such as sports or music or computers. Most likely there is an extensive vocabulary associated with that activity, and mastering that vocabulary enables you to think about it in a more organized and precise way. You can then express your thoughts to others in a way that enables them to understand you. But without this vocabulary you would probably have much vaguer and less precise ideas, and far less understanding of the activity. The same is true of argument analysis. Without learning the vocabulary of argument analysis, you won't be able to think about arguments clearly, much less communicate effectively about them.

B. The Desire to Be Tolerant and Open-Minded

To engage in argument analysis requires a willingness to say of others at times that they have made a mistake, that an argument they have given is defective. Yet many of us pride ourselves on our willingness to tolerate the views of others, and we value our freedom of opinion. There appears to be a conflict here, since a tolerant person who respects another's right to his or her opinions will not be judgmental about those opinions. The value we place on tolerance and freedom might seem to discourage careful argument analysis.

It is a mistake, however, to think that there really is a conflict between engaging in argument analysis on the one hand and being tolerant and respectful on the other. Tolerance and respect largely have to do with the manner in which you treat others. There is nothing intolerant or disrespectful about carefully explaining to others the errors you see in their arguments. To do this is not to deny them their right to their opinions. Rather, it shows you are giving their ideas careful thought and attention, which is a sign of respect.

Furthermore, the point of learning argument analysis is not to put down the arguments of others. Rather, it is to learn to come to your own conclusion about the

merits of the arguments. If someone else has presented an argument on a topic that you care about, then it is in your own interest to evaluate that argument to see if it provides reason to change your mind about the topic. Your interest is in the argument, not in the person who gave it. If you end up criticizing the argument, you are not being intolerant of the person who presented the argument or in any way dictating what that person should believe.

Finally, notice that even if people have a legal or moral right to hold any opinion they like, some opinions or beliefs are based on good reasons and others are not. So, the fact that people have a right to their opinion need not prevent you from thinking about whether their opinion is supported by good reasons or not.

C. Misunderstanding the Point of Argument Analysis

Some difficulties people have with rational interpretation and evaluation of arguments may result from a failure to recognize the distinction between the rational strength of an argument and its literary merit or rhetorical power. If one thinks of an argument as a part of contest or debate, then one is apt to neglect the features of the argument that are relevant to its rational strength and focus instead on its superficial persuasiveness. The inclination to do this may be strengthened by the fact that so much of what we hear and read concerns the rhetorical power of arguments.

D. Misconceptions about Truth and Rationality

Another thing that gets in the way of effective argument analysis is the fact that many people have ideas about truth and about reasoning that discourage them from thinking about arguments in a clear way. For example, people sometimes say that controversial issues are "a matter of opinion." They are especially likely to say this about moral issues. Those who hold this view imply that there are no truths about morality; there are just different beliefs. This attitude discourages clear thinking about morality. If there are just opinions, then it is hard to see how any opinion could possibly be better or more reasonable than any other. If that's the case, there is little point in thinking about whether an opinion, your own or someone else's, is supported by good reasons.

In Chapter 2 we will undertake a brief study of the concepts of truth, belief, and rationality. Chapter 11 will take up moral arguments in detail. One point that will emerge is that remarks such as "Moral issues are just matters of belief" are more misleading than they are accurate. While there may be some truth behind the remark, this idea gets in the way of effective argument analysis.

E. The Use of Argument Stoppers

There are a variety of quick responses to arguments that have the effect of cutting off discussion and preventing careful analysis. We call these responses ***argument stoppers***.

Some of them have been alluded to already, such as responding to an argument by saying, "Well, that's a matter of opinion." Other argument stoppers are remarks such as, "Who's to say what the truth is about that?" or "That's a subjective judgment." Comments such as these typically cut off discussion. They serve as a short way of saying, "I would prefer not to think about what you said. I would prefer to continue believing what I have believed up until now, so I'm going to ignore your argument." Of course, people rarely speak so bluntly, and their argument stoppers often are seemingly polite ways to avoid thinking about another's argument.

While there is some substance to the claim that a judgment is "subjective" or an "opinion," these are confusing and abused terms, to be used with considerable caution. We will discuss argument stoppers in various places throughout this text. As we attempt to understand what features of arguments people are noticing when they use argument stoppers, we will propose more effective and thoughtful responses to use instead.

Exercises and Study Questions

*1. The first impediment to good argument analysis described in the text is the lack of an adequate vocabulary. Is this really an impediment? One can play basketball well without having a set of terms to describe all the bodily motions one must go through in playing the game. Many people can sing well without having a vocabulary for describing how one goes about singing. Is there any reason to think that argument analysis is different?

2. Several argument stoppers were mentioned. List a few more simple remarks people make that tend to put an end to rational discussion of arguments. What do you think people mean when they make these remarks?

*3. It is often said that each person has a right to his or her own opinion. We also say that we are free to have our own beliefs. What do you think these claims mean? Is it true that we all have such a right? Does engaging in argument analysis in any way interfere with this right or freedom?

4. The text mentions five impediments to good reasoning. Can you think of any others?

V. SUMMARY

This book presents a method of argument analysis. Argument analysis is a process that involves two main elements: the interpretation of written (or spoken) passages that contain arguments and the evaluation of those arguments.

In this text, the focus is on the evaluation of the rational strength of arguments. Arguments, or the passages in which they are found, can also be evaluated for rhetorical power and literary merit. We will not be concerned with these factors here.

Although each person responds to arguments in different ways in different circumstances, there are a few general tendencies that people seem to have. Some people are unduly credulous; they tend to believe whatever they are told. In contrast, other people are excessively contrary; they tend to disagree with whatever they are told. Some are dogmatic, insisting on their prior opinions no matter what new information comes their way. And others are unduly skeptical, refusing to believe anything for fear of making a mistake. A rational thinker, in contrast to these other types, evaluates new information, revising beliefs when the information calls for it and retaining beliefs when the information supports them. Sometimes this analysis puts one in the position of conforming to popular attitudes and sometimes it requires going against them.

Several things can get in the way of successful argument analysis. These include the lack of an adequate vocabulary, the fear that being tolerant and open-minded rules out engaging in argument analysis, misunderstanding the point of argument analysis, misconceptions about truth and rationality, and reliance upon argument stoppers. The method of argument analysis presented in this book is designed to help eliminate these impediments to good reasoning.

Checklist of Key Terms

- argument
- conclusion
- premise
- reconstructing an argument
- evaluating an argument
- argument analysis
- rhetorical power
- rational strength
- literary merit
- rational thinker
- argument stopper

Chapter Exercises

At the end of most chapters of this book there will be an exercise set that includes some exercises requiring that you work on an argument notebook. We will use argument notebooks for two main purposes. First, you will collect and comment on editorials, essays, letters, and other written material in your argument notebooks. In most chapters you will be asked to find and discuss material relevant to the topics covered in that chapter and to comment on the material you collect. Second, in several chapters you will be asked to write in your argument notebooks about some of the issues