

A Practical  
Study of  
Argument



Trudy Govier

4th Edition



FOURTH EDITION

# A Practical Study of Argument

Trudy Govier



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## P R E F A C E

This book is intended for all those who are interested in arguments and in arguing, and especially for university and college students taking courses designed to improve their ability to understand, construct, and criticize arguments. My goal has been to present enough theory to explain why certain kinds of arguments are good or bad and enough illustrations and examples to show how that theory can be used in practice. I present an integrated treatment of cogent argument and fallacies, of formal and informal techniques of analysis, of theory and practice. Many illustrations and exercises are included; some are answered in a section of the text, and the remainder in the Instructor's Manual.

My interest in the theory and practice of natural argumentation stems from an occasion in 1976 when someone asked me to review a text on informal fallacies. At the time, I was teaching an elementary course on formal logic to a large group of students for whom it was compulsory and, it appeared, irrelevant. The greater practicality of the informal logic fascinated me. I began to study other texts in the field, explore some of the philosophical questions at issue, and develop my own course on practical logic. From that point my interest grew.

The first edition of this text was written between 1982 and 1984, the second in 1986, the third in 1990, and the fourth in 1995. The book combines a detailed treatment of argument in natural language with a solid treatment of two central areas of formal logic: categorical logic and propositional logic. The first edition was novel in its combination of informal and formal topics and in its sustained effort to present a general theory of argument within which various types of arguments could be subsumed. This emphasis has continued in subsequent editions—though because other authors subsequently moved in the same direction, the combination of topics is now less unusual than it originally was.

Three problems commonly experienced by students of argument and critical thinking are taken very seriously in this text:

*Finding and interpreting arguments.* In order to critically evaluate an argument it is necessary to have a clear sense of what that argument is. In practice, for

written arguments, this means finding the conclusion and premises in a text. Students often find this matter very difficult. I spend a great deal of time on it in Chapter 2, which teaches a standardizing technique in some detail, and includes a treatment of indicator words, implicit (or missing) conclusions and premises, sub-arguments, and other related topics. In the fourth edition some simple diagrams have been added to illustrate central distinctions.

*Having confidence in argumentative procedures.* For many students, if an issue is not one of straightforward fact, it is a matter of “mere” opinion, and in the area of opinion, no distinction can be made between correct and incorrect, or well supported and poorly supported. The topic of opinion is raised in the first chapter, and students are advised that opinions or beliefs about controversial topics can be supported by evidence and reasons. They can be supported well or badly, and people can learn to distinguish which is which. The book offers hundreds of examples, most on topics of serious concern, that illustrate this point. Because of the increasing use of the book outside North America, a special effort has been made in the fourth edition to select examples which will be interesting to a wide audience, without requiring a detailed knowledge of the political and social circumstances of any one particular country. When appropriate, points of background knowledge have been included.

In the many exercises, students work on disciplined critiques of a variety of arguments and have to supplement material in the book by constructing arguments of their own. The types of arguments considered are related to work in law, science, administration, ethics, and various humanities disciplines. The importance of cogent argumentation is a persistent theme in the book. My hope is that work in a critical thinking or informal logic course and an encounter with a book such as this will give students a solid and enduring appreciation for the ubiquity and importance of argument and the distinction between good arguments and poor ones.

*Using argument skills after the course is over.* Textbooks have to use fairly short examples, and one problem faced by many students and instructors is that of *transfer*. How can concepts and skills developed for short textbook examples be applied in a further work where we are looking at not just a paragraph or two, but at a whole essay or even a whole book? New to the third edition was a chapter directly confronting this transfer problem. Preserved in the fourth edition, and supplemented by six new essays for analysis, this chapter offers detailed practical advice to help students write a critical analysis of an essay-length work. A sample essay, included in the chapter, is analyzed and evaluated according to the methods suggested.

## Features New to the Fourth Edition

- All essays for analysis have been changed.
- Examples have been updated throughout.
- Simple diagrams have been added in Chapters 2 through 6 to better explain the structure of examples described in the text.
- In the treatment of experts in Chapter 5, a problem of overly *distrusting* experts has been added to the discussion on trusting experts too much.
- Chapter 5 includes a more thorough discussion of counter-examples and an amended account of the fallacy of begging the question.
- A number of incidental errors have been corrected.
- Several disputable points of theory, most notably the so-called “Massey Problem,” concerning the fact that one argument can be formalized in several different ways, have been addressed in the chapter endnotes.
- In the latter third of the book, chapters have been reordered for more convenient use, and the topic of induction has been separated from the topic of conduction. Chapter 9 now discusses induction; Chapter 10 treats analogies; and Chapter 11 offers an account of conduction.
- The chapter on induction has been completely rewritten.
- In the chapter on analogies, there has been some reordering of topics, with a view to putting easier topics first.
- The treatment of conduction has been extended to be more theoretically complete.

The new Instructor’s Manual has been prepared by myself and Michael Reed of Eastern Michigan University. It offers overview summaries of each chapter, along with answers to questions not answered in the text, and suggestions concerning quiz and examination questions.

## Acknowledgments

I have benefited from studying other texts in informal logic, from my participation in many conferences on argumentation, from writing and reading papers in the journal *Informal Logic*, and from discussions with many students over the years.

The treatment of analogies in this book derives originally from John Wisdom’s “Explanation and Proof,” (commonly known as the Virginia Lectures); I am grateful to Professor Wisdom for kindly allowing me to study the manuscript for these lectures at a time when they were not yet available in print. Carl Wellman’s *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* has also influenced my ideas. The term *conductive argument* is taken from his work.

Students in Philosophy 105 at Trent University, in a graduate seminar on theory of argument at the University of Amsterdam, and in adult education courses in

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As before, my greatest debt is to my husband, Anton Colijn, who, in addition to coping with domestic stress resulting from the extra burden of a large manuscript, has been involved in the planning and writing of all four editions at more stages than he might have wished. Without his patient listening, continued enthusiasm for the subject, contribution of examples, and considerable assistance with computer matters, this book could not exist.





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# What Is an Argument? (And What Is Not?)

**T**HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT ARGUMENTS. It is about the nature of arguments—what arguments are and the different structures they have—and about the standards for judging arguments to be good or bad. It is about understanding the arguments other people give, evaluating those arguments, and constructing good arguments of your own. *Arguments* are found where there is some controversy or disagreement about a subject and people try to resolve that disagreement rationally. When they put forward arguments, they offer reasons and evidence to try to persuade others of their beliefs. Consider the following short argument:

Eating more than one egg a day is dangerous because eggs contain cholesterol and cholesterol can cause strokes and heart attacks.

Reasons are given for the claim that it is dangerous to eat more than one egg a day.

---

## ARGUMENT AND OPINION

A natural question to ask is how argument is related to opinion. Many people think that if an issue is controversial, what somebody thinks about it is just a matter of opinion and that there is no point in trying to give reasons for or against opinions. They think of opinions as being a matter of individual choice and not subject to any sort of critical evaluation. Such slogans as “Everyone has a right to his opinion” and “Well, that’s your opinion,” may suggest that, on controversial topics, people think in whatever way they wish, and rational argument has nothing to do with the matter.

However, these ideas about opinions are oversimplified. To look at the matter carefully, we must first ask what an opinion is. An opinion is a belief, typically not fully supported by evidence, on a matter open to some dispute. For example, people have different opinions on the causes of juvenile delinquency. Some think it is due to poverty; others blame poor parenting, inadequate religious education, or lack of discipline in schools; others see drug use as a major factor; still others cred-

it genetic theories. Evidence, though relevant to the subject, does not prove which view is right, a fact that many people understand. Often, when we hold opinions, we are aware that they are opinions and do not hold them with the full conviction we may have for secure beliefs or knowledge.

Opinions can be formed with or without evidence, for good reasons or poor ones. We should seek well-founded and sensible opinions, not arbitrary ones. Even concerning controversial issues there is evidence supporting various views. The evidence may be reliable or unreliable, and it may give better or worse reasons to back up our opinions. The point of arguing and evaluating arguments is to reach opinions based on reasoned reflection and good judgment.

Although we all hold opinions, this does not mean that all issues are merely a matter of opinion. The fact that we have different ideas on some subjects does not show that there is no truth to an issue nor evidence for it. Sometimes people say, "It's all a matter of opinion," even in contexts where there is reliable information and it clearly makes a difference what we think. In practical terms, however, people recognize that there is a distinction between truth and falsity, or between better and worse grounds for decisions and beliefs. When choosing a college or university, or buying a car, they look for information, evidence, reasons, and arguments and try to make the best-informed and most sensible decision possible.

Politically and legally, people are free to hold any opinion at all. From the point of view of logic and evidence, however, we cannot say that all opinions are equal. Some opinions are mere opinions, reactions based on little more than a gut response. Others are based on evidence and reasons and on careful weighing of pros and cons. Using and evaluating arguments to arrive at opinions does not turn opinion into fact, but it can help us have more reasonably based opinions. Like our beliefs and our claims to knowledge, our opinions affect our actions. It matters what we think, and we should not be content to think hastily, whether the topic is one that is a matter of opinion or not.

In this book, we hope to convince you that opinions on important controversial matters can and should be defended by rational arguments, and that rational arguments can be constructed and analyzed in a careful, logical way. You can do better than say, "That's just your opinion" when someone disagrees with you; you can learn to critically assess the reasons for the view and defend your positions with solid arguments. You can use rational arguments to try to discover which opinions are reasonable.

## WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

---

An argument is a set of claims that a person puts forward in an attempt to show that some further claim is rationally acceptable. Typically, people present arguments to try to persuade others to accept claims. The evidence or reasons put forward in defense of a claim are called the premises of an argument. An argument

may have several premises, or it may have only one. The claim being defended in the argument is called its *conclusion*. An argument, then, is composed of one or more premises and a conclusion.

Think back to the argument about eggs and cholesterol. Imagine that someone says, “You should not eat more than one egg a day, because eggs contain cholesterol and cholesterol can cause strokes and heart attacks.” In saying this, he is giving you reasons why you should not eat more than one egg a day. That is, he is stating an argument. The premises of the argument are that eggs contain cholesterol and cholesterol can cause strokes and heart attacks. Its conclusion is that you should not eat more than one egg a day. In this argument, as in others, the arguer does not merely say what he thinks or offer his opinion. He gives you a reason for this opinion or belief.

Sometimes the word *argument* is used to mean dispute or fight as in the sentence “The parents got into so many arguments over the child’s problems that finally they stopped living together.” In ordinary speech, this use of the word *argument* is quite common. In this book, however, an argument is a reasoned attempt to justify a conclusion.

Both kinds of argument—rational arguments and fights—have a connection with disagreements between people. When they use arguments, people respond to disputes by trying to reasonably justify their opinions or beliefs. When they fight, people do not restrict themselves to rational persuasion. They descend to other tactics—even, sometimes, to the use of force and physical violence. It’s important to keep the two senses of the word *argument* distinguished from each other. This is not a book about fights. Here our concern is with argument as attempted or successful rational persuasion.

In the first few chapters, we concentrate on understanding what arguments are and how they are stated. We then move on to the task of evaluating arguments—offering and explaining standards that you can use to determine how good or bad an argument is.

Here is another example of an argument.

There are no international police. It takes police to thoroughly enforce the law.  
Therefore, international law cannot be thoroughly enforced.

This argument has two premises (the first two statements) and a conclusion (the third statement). We can make the structure of premises and conclusions clearer by setting the argument out as follows:

1. There are no international police.
2. It takes police to thoroughly enforce the law.
- Therefore,
3. International law cannot be thoroughly enforced.

Statements (1) and (2) support statement (3), which is the conclusion of the argument. The word therefore serves to introduce the conclusion.

Let us look at a somewhat more complex example. It is taken from a letter to the editor of a newspaper. The letter deals with the issue of deficit reduction as a

main goal of government. The author is arguing that cutting back on government expenditure is by itself not enough to be a worthy national goal.

I am getting sick and tired of what seems to have become the Miserly Society, in which cutbacks and deficit reduction are present as our most worthwhile national goals. Think of it—the Magna Carta does not include a balanced-budget clause. In the Gettysburg Address there is not one mention of the deficit. The motto of the French Revolution was not ‘Liberté, égalité, responsabilité financière.’

If we really want to make Canada a better place for all of us, we will have to realize that there is more to having a country than balancing the books, and being able to make more stuff cheaper than anyone else.<sup>1</sup>

At the end, the author states his conclusion, which is that there should be more to national goals for Canada (and presumably any other country) than balancing the books economically. Before that, he states his premises. He seeks to support his view of deficit reduction by alluding to three famous national accomplishments: the Magna Carta, an English charter establishing protections for individuals under the law; the Gettysburg Address, an inspiring speech by the American president Abraham Lincoln; and the values of the French Revolution—which were liberty, equality, and fraternity, not liberty, equality, and financial responsibility. These landmark historical achievements of nation-states dealt with fundamental human values, and had nothing to do with debt, deficit, or accounting procedures. The author is arguing that because these achievements had everything to do with ideals and nothing to do with deficit reduction, deficit reduction is an inadequate and uninspiring goal for a nation-state. (We will not say at this point whether his argument is good or poor; the point is simply that this passage does contain an argument.)

A person who tries to persuade you by rational means offers an argument in which he or she claims that because the premises are true or acceptable, the conclusion should be accepted. The arguer is saying, in effect,

Premise 1  
 Premise 2  
 Premise 3...  
 Premise N  
 Therefore,  
 Conclusion

The N and the dots here appear to indicate that arguments may have any number of premises—from a single premise to a large number.

In the model here, the word *therefore* indicates that the conclusion is being inferred from the premises supporting it. This word is one of a large number of words that logicians call *indicator words*. Indicator words suggest the presence of an argument. Some indicator words come before the premise or premises of an argument; others come before its conclusion. Indicator words are not part of the content either of the premises or of the conclusion. Rather, they serve to indicate which



statements are premises and which are conclusions. In doing so, they indicate the direction of the reasoning in the argument. We reason *from* the premises *to* the conclusion.

Here are some of the many indicator words and phrases that come before the premises in arguments:

#### PREMISE INDICATORS

since	on the grounds that
because	for the reason that
for	as indicated by
follows from	may be inferred from
as shown by	may be derived from
given that	may be deduced from

For instance, if we say “Universities need to have faculty who will do research, *because* there are few other institutions that support research,” the word *because* is an indicator word that precedes the premise, which is intended to support the conclusion that universities need to have faculty who will do research.

In the following example, *since* is an indicator word that comes before the premise and helps us follow the direction of the argument. In this case, the conclusion comes before the indicator word and the premise comes after it.

It is a pity that career counselling and psychotherapy are viewed as separate disciplines, *since* both are often needed to help people realize their vocational ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

Here are some of the words and phrases that come before conclusions in arguments:

#### CONCLUSION INDICATORS

therefore  
thus  
so  
hence  
then  
it follows that  
it can be inferred that  
in conclusion  
accordingly  
for this reason (or for all these reasons) we can see that  
on these grounds it is clear that  
consequently  
proves that  
shows that  
indicates that  
we can conclude that  
we can infer that  
demonstrates that