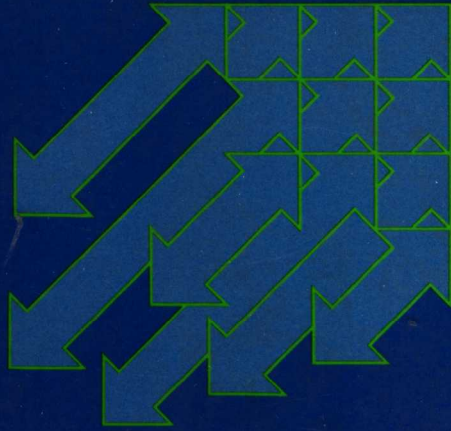


THIRD EDITION

UNDERSTANDING ARGUMENTS

AN INTRODUCTION
TO INFORMAL LOGIC



ROBERT J. FOGELIN

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TO INFORMAL LOGIC

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Preface

This book is about arguments. It considers arguments not in the narrow sense of quarrels or squabbles, but in the broader, logician's, sense of giving reasons in behalf of some claim. Viewing arguments in this way, we see that they are a common feature of daily life, for we are often involved in giving reasons or evaluating reasons given by others. These are not only common but important activities. Deciding what to believe, how to act, how to judge others, and the like are all, in the end, questions to be settled by weighing reasons. Traditionally, logic has been considered the most general science dealing with arguments.

For certain purposes, arguments are best studied as abstract patterns. Logic is not concerned with particular arguments—for example, your attempt to prove that the bank, not you, has made a mistake. The task of logic is to discover the fundamental principles for distinguishing good arguments from bad ones. The study of those general principles that make certain patterns of argument reasonable (or valid) and other patterns of argument unreasonable (or invalid) is called formal logic.

A different, but complementary, way of viewing an argument is to treat it as a *particular use of language*: arguing is one of the things that we do with words. This approach places stress upon arguing as a linguistic activity. Instead of studying arguments as abstract patterns, it takes them “in the rough,” as they occur in actual argumentation. It raises questions of the following kind: What is the place of argument within language as a whole? In a given language (say, our own), what words or phrases are characteristic of arguments? What task or tasks are arguments supposed to perform? When an approach to arguments has this form, the study is called informal logic. As its subtitle indicates, *Understanding Arguments* is primarily a text in informal logic.

The Third Edition of this book has been influenced by my own teaching experience with the first two editions and by the generous and helpful suggestions I have received from other instructors. As the result of that classroom experience and those suggestions, this edition involves a number of fundamental changes from the previous two. Since many instructors found the discussion of speech-act theory in the opening chapters too abstruse for some of their students, I have eliminated it. I now try to convey the same ideas about the diversity and richness of the uses of language without introducing technical apparatus. A second important change is that I have added two new chapters, one on inductive reasoning, the other on probability and decision making. This should mitigate the deductive chauvinism that some instructors found in the earlier editions.

Throughout I have tried to update material. Specifically, in Part Two, the discussion of legal reasoning (Chapter 11) has been completely rewritten and now contains, with running explanation, substantial portions of the *Bakke* decision. The discussion of abortion (Chapter 12) contains two new essays, more or less from opposite ends of the spectrum, by Ronald Reagan and Barbara Ehrenreich. The discussion of scientific arguments (Chapter 13) now includes an exchange on the scientific status of creation science. Finally, the chapter on philosophical arguments (Chapter 14) uses a lively exchange, between Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett on one hand and John R. Searle on the other, on the subject of machine intelligence.

Throughout Part One, new exercises have been added. The more difficult exercises are now marked with a ♦. Part One also includes a feature new to this edition: discussion questions at the end of each chapter which are intended to encourage students to reflect on the significance of the techniques they are learning. Finally, Chapter 10 contains a number of puzzles concerning probability that deeply perplex most students, and, for that matter, most instructors as well.

Beyond these structural changes, much of the text has been rewritten to avoid obscurity and inelegance. Here my colleagues have been more than generous, indeed, sometimes gleeful in their comments and

criticisms. In this regard, I wish to thank Mark Bedau and Susan Brison, Dartmouth College; David J. Luban, University of Maryland; Susan Russinoff, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Carl Wolf. Special thanks go to Walter P. Sinnott-Armstrong, also of Dartmouth, who has taught from the text and then made a great many detailed suggestions for its improvement. I am indebted as well to the following reviewers: Sharon Bishop, California State University, Los Angeles; Josiah B. Gould, State University of New York at Albany; and James Edward Magruder, Stephen F. Austin State University. I have also received splendid help from Bill Teague of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Florence Fogelin of Plain English at every stage in the preparation of this Third Edition.

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Part
ONE

*The Analysis
of Argument*

1

The Web of Language

As an introduction to our study of informal logic, this chapter will survey the general nature of language. In doing so, it will stress three main ideas. First, language is *conventional*. Words acquire meaning within a rich system of linguistic rules. An understanding of language demands an understanding of these rules. Second, language is *diverse*. We sometimes use it to communicate information, but we also use it to ask questions, issue orders, write poetry, keep score, formulate arguments, and perform an almost endless number of other tasks. Third, meaning is often conveyed *indirectly*. In order to understand the significance of many utterances, we must go beyond what is literally said to examine what is conversationally implied.

LANGUAGE AND ARGUMENT

This book is about arguments. The word “argument” may suggest quarrels or squabbles, but here it is used in the broader, logician’s sense of giving reasons for or against some claim. Viewing arguments this way, we see that they are a common feature of daily life, for we are often involved in giving reasons for things we believe or in evaluating reasons given by others for things they want us to believe. Trying to decide which way to vote in an election, what play to use on third down and long, where to go to college, whether to support or oppose capital punishment—all involve weighing and evaluating reasons. Logic bears on all of these issues because it is the general science of argument; its goal is to lay down principles for distinguishing good arguments from bad arguments.

Arguing is also an activity, in particular, a *linguistic* activity. Arguing is one of the many things that we can do with words. In fact, unlike fighting, it is something that we can *only* do with words. Thus, in order to understand how arguments work, it is important to understand how language works. Unfortunately, our understanding of human languages is incomplete, and linguistics remains a young science where disagreement abounds. Still, there are certain facts about language that are beyond dispute, and recognizing them will help us understand how arguments work.

Language and Convention

As everyone who has bothered to think about it knows, language is conventional. There seems to be no reason why we, as English speakers, use the word “dog” to refer to dogs rather than to cats, trees, or anything at all. Any word might have been used to stand for anything. Beyond this, there seems to be no reason why we put words together in the way that we do. In English we put adjectives before the nouns they modify. We thus speak of a *green salad*. In French adjectives usually follow the noun, and so instead of saying *verte salade* the French say *salade verte*. The conventions of our own language are so much with us that it strikes us as odd when we discover that other languages have different conventions. A French diplomat once praised his own language because, as he said, it followed the natural order of thought. This strikes us English speakers as silly, but in seeing what is silly about it, we see that the word order in our own language is conventional as well.

It is important to realize that our language is conventional, but it is also important not to misunderstand this fact. From the idea that language is conventional, it is easy to conclude that language is *arbitrary*, so that it really doesn’t matter which words we use. It takes only a little

thought to see that this is not true. If I wish to communicate with others I must follow the system of conventions that others use. To put matters simply, conventions do not destroy meaning by making it arbitrary; conventions bring meaning into existence.

A misunderstanding of the conventions of language can lead to pointless disputes. Sometimes, in the middle of a discussion, someone will declare that "the whole thing is just a matter of definition." Now there are times when definitions are important and arguments turn upon them, but in general this is not true. Suppose someone has fallen off a cliff and is heading toward certain death on the rocks below. Of course, it is a matter of definition (of convention) that we use the word "death" to describe the result of the sudden stop at the end of the fall. We might have used some other word—perhaps "birth"—instead. But it certainly will not help the person who is falling to change the meaning of the word "death" in the middle of his plunge. It will do no good for him to yell out, "By birth I mean death." It will not help even if *everyone* agrees to change the meaning of the words in this way. If we all decided to adopt this new convention, we would then say, "He fell from the cliff to his birth" instead of "He fell from the cliff to his death." But speaking in this way will not change the facts. It will not, for example, make those who care for him feel better.

The upshot of this simple example is that the truth of what we say is rarely just a matter of definition. The words we use are governed by conventions, and in the process of learning our language we learn to follow these conventions in speaking. (Only later do we develop some understanding of these conventions.) We then go on to make certain claims about the world. Others can understand what we say because we follow the ordinary conventions that give meaning to our words. Whether what I have said is true or not will depend, for the most part, on how things stand in the world. For example, if a German wishes to say that snow is black, then he will use the words "Schnee ist schwarz." Other Germans will *understand* his words, but unless snow is different in Germany than every place else, they will also think that he has said something false, and may wonder how he could make such a mistake. In general, then, the truth of what we say is not merely a matter of definition or convention, and when someone uses this ploy in the middle of an argument we can usually assume that he or she is in desperate shape.

In the last sentence I have used two qualifying phrases: "in general" and "usually." To say that something holds *in general*, or *usually*, is to admit that there may be exceptions. Such a qualification is needed in this case because *sometimes* the truth of what we say is simply a matter of definition. Take a simple example. The claim that a triangle has three sides is true by definition, because a triangle is defined as "a three-sided

closed plane figure.” Again, if someone says that sin is wrong, he has said something that is true by definition, for a sin is defined as, among other things, “something that is wrong.”

Consider a more complicated case. Suppose someone argues that the only true democracies exist in communist states. He admits that in such states there are no general elections where a large portion of the population is allowed to choose between competing parties, but he goes on to say that a genuine democracy exists only when the party in power reflects the interests of the masses. Here we might challenge the definition of a democracy that he is using and then be met by the following reply: Why should everyone in the world be bound by the capitalist definition of a democracy? Alternatively, we can accept his definition and argue that communist parties do not reflect the interests of the masses. We might then be told that no democracy is perfect, especially those in newly emerging nations. Here the only way to stop our heads from swimming is to return to common sense and reject both the definition and the facts. Historically, in a democracy the people *choose* the policies that govern them, or at least the representatives who formulate these policies. When this choice is absent, democracy does not exist. A despotism, however benevolent, is not a democracy. We should advise our opponent to be candid enough to admit that he is against a democracy and if he is in favor of another form of government, to give it another name and defend it on its own terms. If he is misrepresenting the facts, we can say that too. In short, we need not be driven to silence by a person who distorts the meaning of words and tampers with the facts. We can simply point out that he is distorting and tampering.

Sometimes, then, it is important to ask a person to define his terms. We should do this whenever we think that someone is distorting the meaning of words to win an argumentative point. We can also ask for a definition in order to clarify, if we think that someone is speaking in a vague and loose way. But it makes no sense to ask that every word be defined. This would prove an endless task and we would never get around to saying anything in particular. Beyond this, asking for definitions is often just silly. If someone says “Pass the butter,” it does not usually cross our minds to ask him to define “butter.”

In sum, people are able to communicate with each other because they share certain linguistic conventions. These conventions could have been very different and in this sense they are arbitrary. But it does not follow from this that the truth of what we say is also merely arbitrary. In general, the truth of what we say is settled not by an appeal to definition, but by a look at the facts. Sometimes, however, the conventions of our language are misused or even abused. Here it makes sense to call for a definition in order to restore mutual understanding. It would be absurd to ask that every word be defined.