

CHAPTER I

The Argumentative Perspective

When students tell their parents or friends that they are about to take a course in argumentation, the response very likely may be amazement. “We have too much argumentation as it is,” the parent or friend might reply. “Why would anyone want to study that?”

Such a response reflects the fact that in popular usage in the English language, the word *argument* and its variants *arguing* and *argumentation* often are perceived negatively. If a worker argues repeatedly with his or her supervisor, that is seen as undesirable. A person whose reputation is one of being highly argumentative generally will not be sought after as a friend. And a parent who says to a child, “Don’t argue with me about that,” is trying to put a stop to unacceptable behavior. These examples associate argumentation with bickering, quarrelsomeness, or petulance – all undesirable personality traits. We usually think that they ought not to be encouraged, much less studied in an academic course such as the one in which you may be enrolled. Rest assured, they are not the focus of this book.

On the other hand, when we need a lawyer to represent us in court, and he or she makes a strong argument in our behalf, we regard that as a good thing. The instructor who assigns students the task of coming up with the strongest arguments for or against the country’s foreign policy, for example, anticipates that this will be a serious intellectual exercise. And the parent who, having been asked by a teenager for the use of the family car over the weekend, says, “Let’s hear your argument for that,” will be favorably impressed by a cogent and persuasive response. Clearly, this set of examples is quite different from the first. It is not about bickering or disputatiousness but about reasoning – supporting claims by giving reasons for them, and convincing others who accept the reasons that they ought therefore to accept the claim. The first set of examples describes undesirable circumstances, but the second refers to outcomes eagerly to be sought.

Argumentation as Reasoning

In several languages, there are distinct words to identify these different kinds of behavior.¹ Unfortunately, in English the same family of terms – arguing, argument, and argumentation – covers them both. And in ordinary usage and popular culture, the first usage tends to predominate. The result is that argumentation is widely seen as something to be avoided, not as a set of theories, habits, and skills in which one seeks to become more proficient.

But the second usage, treating argumentation as a species of reasoning, is the one guiding this book. And fortunately, it has a much older and richer lineage. Its heritage goes back at least 2,500 years, to the establishment of democracy in ancient Greece. Citizens whose property had been seized by the prior tyrannical regime wanted it back. They needed to convince newly established courts that the property in question really belonged to them. This required that they assemble and present strong arguments. Then, if not before, the study of argumentation as we will pursue it here was born. Under various headings – including critical thinking, effective reasoning, logos, analysis, rhetoric, and the most general term, argumentation – it has been studied and taught from then until now as a valuable component of a liberal arts education, offering people essential mental equipment for their professional and civic life. This is the study on which you are embarking now.

Although the terms *arguing*, *arguments*, and *argumentation* sometimes are used interchangeably, we can identify differences among them. *Arguing* is a process, an activity in which people engage when they produce, exchange, and test reasons for or against claims. The units of discourse produced through arguing are *arguments*. Arguments are products, texts containing – at minimum – claims and the reasons offered to support them. And *argumentation* is a point of view, a perspective from which to examine the human activity taking place. The same actions often can be identified from multiple perspectives, one of which is to examine interaction as the invention and exchange of reasons. Argumentation sometimes is also regarded as a genre of discourse, alongside description, narration, and exposition. This view still prevails among some composition teachers, but it is less prevalent than it used to be because in

¹ See, for example, Frans H. van Eemeren, “The Language of Argumentation in Dutch,” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 44 (2009), 155–158.

practice the genres are not so sharply defined and the boundaries among them are fuzzy.

A Definition of Argumentation

Argumentation is the practice of justifying claims under conditions of uncertainty. Four of the key terms in this definition require unpacking.

To say that argumentation is a *practice* is to say that it is an activity in which people engage, something that people do. It takes place in specific contexts or situations in which people find themselves, and its meaning and value are determined in relation to those particular settings.

To say that argumentation is about *justifying* claims means that it is about giving reasons for them. We say that a belief or action is justified if we think we have good reason for it. A good reason does not meet the mathematical standard of certainty, but it warrants your belief. It increases your confidence in the truth of the claim. You cannot *know*, for example, that Candidate X will win the next election, but that belief might be justified if someone points out to you that X is ahead in the leading polls by 15 percent and that the opponent is unpopular even among voters in her own party.

To ask whether a claim is justified naturally raises the question, *justified to whom?* This tells you that argumentation is addressed to somebody. The person to whom it is addressed may be the person who decides whether it is justified. If I give reasons that you should invest money in a particular stock, and you subsequently buy that stock, you probably would say that I had justified the claim that you should buy the stock. But sometimes it is a third party who determines whether the claim is justified, as when labor and management present their claims and then submit to an arbitrator the question of whose claim should prevail.

Justifying a claim, then, is different from proving it – in the mathematical or geometric sense of “prove.” It is also not exactly the same as persuading another person to agree with the claim. One is persuaded to accept a claim if, by whatever means, he or she is induced to believe it. Justifying a claim involves a specific means of persuasion, namely reasoning. It involves persuading a person to accept a claim by offering what that person will regard as good reasons for believing it. If accepting the reasons increases the likelihood that one will accept the claim, then that person has found the claim to be justified.

We have been speaking about justifying *claims* without having yet defined that term. Simply put, a claim is an assertion to which another

person's assent is sought. If you and I are engaged in argumentation and I assert, for example, "The opposition party should be returned to office," I am not only asserting that I believe that statement to be true but that I urge you to do so as well. The term "standpoint" is sometimes used for such assertions to indicate that they are statements that a person is prepared to defend through argumentation. But the term "claim" makes clear that an arguer who utters such statements is making a claim on the belief and action of another person, asking him or her to find the statement justified and therefore to accept it as well.

Finally, argumentation takes place under conditions of *uncertainty*. We do not argue about matters that are certain; there is no reason to. If the question is whether Casper or Cheyenne is the capital of Wyoming, we needn't marshal reasons and engage in argumentation; we can just look at a map or use an Internet search engine that we know is reliable. Likewise, matters that can be settled by observation need not call forth argumentation. Empirical means are more efficient and often more reliable methods to settle a disagreement.

Uncertain matters cannot be made certain through argumentation. No matter how confident we are, for instance, that "wage and price controls are bad for the economy," no matter how carefully we have evaluated the reasons offered for and against that claim, subjecting them to tests of evidence and reasoning to be considered in this book, still we might be wrong. There might be some unknown flaw in our reasoning, or new evidence might change our judgment. Argumentation is always a risky method of justifying claims, so if more certain means are available, we use them.

But this is hardly much of an exclusion, since so much of our lives and our world involves matters that are uncertain. Every question of comparative value, such as whether it is better in a particular situation to promote economic growth or environmental protection, involves uncertainty. So does every question of ultimate value, such as whether affirmative action is a good thing or a bad thing. So too does every question of policy, in which we have to decide whether or not to do something, such as whether to accept and act on the statement, "We should resume the manned space program at the earliest opportunity." And so also are predictions about the future, such as "The Chicago Cubs will win the World Series again this year." On each of these categories of claims, we cannot *know* the conclusion absolutely; we cannot be certain. Yet we often cannot sit on the sidelines or wait to see what the future will disclose; we have to decide now what to believe or to do. This is clearly illustrated by the topic of climate

change. Advocates of government action to combat climate change maintain that while the process of change may seem slow, it is irreversible if we pass a point of no return, and we may already be close to that point, so action is urgent. Climate change skeptics may be tempted to respond that the evidence is not clear whether we are witnessing minor short-term variations in climate or the beginning of long-term changes, so we should wait awhile in search of more definite evidence. But the advocates of action warn that by the time we feel more certain about what to do, it may be too late. The question comes down to what we should do in the face of uncertainty – should we act now or should we wait, and if we should act now, what action should we take? Many cases of argumentation are like that, requiring decisions now even in the face of uncertainty. While we should employ more certain methods when we can, we should not hesitate to engage in argumentation in the many areas of our lives in which decisions about what to believe or do must be made in the face of uncertainty.

We have seen, then, how the key terms *practice*, *justifying*, *claims*, and *uncertainty* help to shape our understanding of what argumentation is. The goal we seek through argumentation is stated in the subtitle of this book: effective reasoning in communication.

When we speak of *effective* reasoning, we mean reasoning that accomplishes its purpose. In the largest sense, that is the making of sound decisions. But in day-to-day practice, it means justifying to others the claims that we advance. Naturally, we do not make assertions we think are false (except as a rhetorical or literary device, such as irony), and we would like it if others accept our view. This does not mean that *ineffective* reasoning is not argumentation; it just means that such reasoning falls short of our short-term goal. In some cases, it may even promote the larger goal, if it demonstrates to us that some other claim, advanced by someone else, is actually sounder than the one we put forward or leads to a better decision.

When we spoke of justification, we explained that it involves *reasoning*, offering what are thought to be good reasons and linking them to claims that we are asking others to accept. Reason-giving is the fundamental process in argumentation.

And our concern for audience, for justifying claims to others, makes clear that we are focused on reasoning that occurs in *communication*, in the interaction between people. This includes dialogues between people; discourse such as speeches, pamphlets, or editorials that are addressed to a listening or reading audience; visual displays or presentations that imply a

message; social practices that function as texts; or even one's private thoughts if they simulate an interpersonal dialogue. The point is that argumentation involves reasoning with an audience in mind.

Logic, Dialectic, and Rhetoric: Three Roots of Argumentation

Argumentation derives from three ancient disciplines, each of which – like argumentation itself – sometimes is misunderstood. *Logic* is concerned with the relationships among the statements in an argument. Sometimes it is equated only with formal or mathematical reasoning, of the sort, “All As are Bs; all Bs are Cs; therefore, all As are Cs.” This conclusion is sound no matter what the As, Bs, and Cs are; it is correct purely as a matter of form. If the first two statements (the premises) are true, then the third statement (the conclusion) *must* be true; otherwise the argument would contradict itself. We will learn later that this type of reasoning is called *deduction* and that it characterizes mathematical and purely formal reasoning. But it is not the only approach to logic. In recent years, there has been growing interest in reasoning that *does* depend on what the As, Bs, and Cs are, that is, grounded in specific contexts, and in which the relationships between premises and conclusions are not guaranteed but exist in the world of probability. An entire branch of study known as *informal logic* has developed, especially in Canada, in an attempt to understand and advance such ordinary-language reasoning.² For now, we can say that argumentation's concern for form – for the structure of statements and the inferences that link them together – is a reflection of the discipline of logic.

Dialectic, the second disciplinary root of argumentation, is also sometimes misunderstood. It is equated with the broad sweep of historical forces that was imagined by Karl Marx – capitalism vs. communism, liberalism vs. communitarianism, naturalism vs. spiritualism, and so on. This view sees history as the advancing of a position (thesis), its being countered by a contrary position (antithesis), and the clash between them resulting in a new position (synthesis), which over time becomes a thesis itself, beginning the process all over again. Actually, though, the term *dialectic* has an older and simpler meaning. It is the process of discovering and testing knowledge through questions and answers. The model of dialectic is the dialogues of Plato. Plato encounters various characters

² The “informal logic” movement dates to the 1970s. An early example of its scholarship is J. Anthony Blair and Ralph H. Johnson, eds., *Informal Logic: The First International Symposium* (Inverness, CA: Edgepress, 1980).

who assert claims, and through adroitly asking questions of them, Plato undermines their claims and convinces them that his own are superior. Plato's questioners enter into argumentation thinking that their views are correct, but invariably they come to abandon their prior beliefs and to accept his instead. If logic emphasizes form, dialectic emphasizes the interaction between people. It is the give-and-take between them that propels the argument to its conclusion. In recent decades, the study of dialectic has been invigorated by a number of approaches, particularly that of pragma-dialectics, which is centered in the Netherlands.³ We will encounter this approach later.

No less misunderstood than logic and dialectic is the third disciplinary root, *rhetoric*. This term has largely unfavorable connotations in everyday use. It is sometimes seen as opposed to reality, when people make charges such as "That's not really true; it is just rhetoric." Sometimes it is equated with ornamentation, figures of speech or stylistic devices that somehow are "added on" to the substance of a discourse. And perhaps worst of all, it is associated sometimes with the usually unpopular course in freshman composition – Rhetoric 101. Each of these views is misguided. Rhetoric is not separate from reality; rhetoric is what creates our understanding of reality. It is not ornamentation; those figures of speech and stylistic devices are part of the substance of discourse. And it is not just the mechanical rules of Rhetoric 101 but a set of theories, practical skills, and orientations to analysis and criticism of discourse.

But enough about what rhetoric is not. A useful contemporary definition is that rhetoric is the study of how symbols influence people. A symbol is anything that stands for something else. Words are symbols, standing for the things or the ideas they designate. Rhetoric regards the desired goal as obtaining the adherence of the audience to a claim, and inquires into how the selection and arrangement of reasons can lead to that end.

Another, equally useful definition of rhetoric was offered centuries ago by Aristotle, who regarded rhetoric as the faculty for discovering, in the given case, the available means of persuasion.⁴ Whereas the contemporary definition focuses on the *study* of rhetoric, Aristotle's definition focuses on the *creation* of rhetoric. He emphasizes that it is a faculty – a skill that can be learned. It is grounded in specific cases and contexts, rather than being

³ One of the earliest publications in English reflecting this approach is Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984).

⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b.

based on lawlike generalizations. It is a matter of discovery – of finding out what approaches to influencing another are available. And it recognizes that the facts of the situation constrain what those approaches might be. For example, in an era dominated by the belief that strong government is at odds with the protection of liberty, in most circumstances it is not an available means of persuasion to assert boldly that “big government is your friend.”

Whether we focus on the contemporary or the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric, what this field contributes to argumentation is its concern for audience. It regards the approval by an audience – especially by an audience of critical thinkers, as we shall see – as the ultimate test of an argument’s soundness and as the goal an arguer wishes to achieve. Aristotle explained this goal by saying that “persuasive” means “persuasive to a person.”⁵

Today there are several different approaches to studying argumentation. All the approaches recognize these different disciplinary roots, but they differ in the emphasis among them. This book gives special attention to rhetorical approaches and explanations, but it is hardly insensitive to the crucial roles played by logic and dialectic. Indeed, argumentation might be imagined as the intellectual space in which logic, dialectic, and rhetoric all meet.

Preconditions for Argumentation

Not every decision-making moment rises to the level for which argumentation is appropriate. Indeed, it is unlikely that either individuals or societies have the resources or the energy to subject every decision to argumentation. As we shall see, there are often easier means of deciding whether or not to accept a claim. But when certain preconditions are met, argumentation will be the decision-making method of choice. Five of these preconditions are particularly worthy of note.

First, the arguers must perceive that there is a genuine controversy between them. Their difference in views is not just a misunderstanding, or a case of different uses of the same term or different terms meaning the same thing, or a case of dispute for dispute’s sake. Rather, the arguers must maintain what they believe to be incompatible claims. They seek to resolve this incompatibility either by having one of their claims prevail over the other or by coming to agree on a third claim.

⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356b.

Second, the controversy between the arguers must be real and non-trivial. Several years ago, a popular beer commercial featured two people supposedly arguing about the merits of a certain beer. “Tastes great!” insisted one; “less filling!” replied the other. This is obviously not a real controversy because the two claims are not incompatible; the beer could have *both* qualities. All that need be done in such a case is for a third party to explain that the parties really are not in disagreement. For another example, there is the oft-told story of the woman who gave her boyfriend two ties for his birthday – one red and the other blue. The next day, seeing her boyfriend wearing the blue tie, the woman bawled, “You don’t like the red one!” Of course, had the boyfriend worn the red tie instead, we could have expected the same scene with the allegation being, “You don’t like the blue one!” In the absence of reason to believe otherwise, we must assume that the boyfriend’s preference for one color over the other is either a matter of random choice or a matter of personal taste. Either way, the “controversy” between the red tie and the blue tie is probably trivial, not worth arguing about.

Third, agreement of the other party (whether a single individual or a group) is sought. This means that the arguers cannot just avoid controversy by “agreeing to disagree.” We often do this when confronted by a position with which we disagree. We decide that resolving the dispute is not worth the hassle and the possible risk of losing a friendship, so we go our separate ways. This makes sense on some matters of taste or of artistic judgment, or on matters on which one arguer is much more strongly invested in the outcome than in the other. If I have a very strong opinion on an issue and the same issue does not matter very much to you, you may be inclined to yield to my point of view. But there are many situations quite unlike this. Suppose I believe firmly that climate change is a hoax. It may be very important to me that I convince you of this statement’s truth because I care about you, because it will validate my position to have you agree with it, or because our agreement will signal to both of us that the issue is settled. In this situation I will not be inclined to shrug my shoulders or say, “Whatever,” because I cannot just walk away from a claim about which I feel strongly. Because I care about what you think, argumentation is likely to ensue, in which I will try to convince you that my proposal is a better idea than whatever you have in mind.

Fourth, agreement of the other party is desired, but only on the condition that it is freely given. Much as I might want you to agree with my claim, I do not want you to agree in response to a threat, to the use of force, to the exercise of power, or to trickery. These means of assent lead us to question

the very value of assent in such a case. I can hardly have great confidence in your coming to agree with me that Social Security benefits should be enhanced if I know that you are saying that in response to force or intimidation, such as my threatening the loss of friendship, not because you genuinely believe it. Besides, if I were content to manipulate your emotions rather than engage in argumentation, I would not show a very high opinion of you as a human being capable of exercising your own critical thinking and good judgment. In contrast, if I know that you have come to agree with my point of view as a result of thinking through my argument, accepting its starting points, and recognizing how they lead to its conclusion, I will have more confidence in the correctness of my position and more regard for you as a person.

To be sure, there are circumstances in which we desire the assent of another person and do not much care how that assent is obtained. Some fundraisers think it important that their audiences donate money to their charitable cause but do not really care why. They may not be likely to have any further contact with the donor and, in any case, they think what really matters is that the fund-raising goal be reached. Or in an emergency, a building manager may need to persuade everyone to evacuate the building, and will not have either time or interest to engage in argumentation with reasons about why. Or a parent needing compliance from a young child who is not yet capable of critical thinking will be more inclined to use whatever approach will work fastest, rather than to engage in argumentation. But in those circumstances in which we do argue, our doing so indicates that we value the other person's agreement only when it is freely given and not the result of coercion.

Finally, we engage in argumentation when there is no simpler means for resolving the disagreement. Sometimes easier means are available. We might follow precedent; we might defer to the judgment of an expert; we might accept the opinion of an authority figure; we might take turns; we might try to split the difference. These are decision-making guides called *heuristics*. Their purpose is to tell us how to resolve the controversy easily. We use them in situations in which we need a “good enough” answer without necessarily settling all points of disagreement to everyone's satisfaction. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that it is necessary for us, in many aspects of our lives, to make decisions in just this way.⁶ Otherwise we would get so bogged down in the time and energy required for argumentation that we would be unable to make any good decisions.

⁶ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011).