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A HANDBOOK FOR CRITICAL
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Preface

The purpose of this handbook is to furnish the reader with the basic methods of critical analysis of arguments as they occur in natural language in the real marketplace of persuasion on controversial issues in politics, law, science, and all aspects of daily life. This is very much a practical (applied) subject, because each argument is, to some extent, unique. The technique of applying the general guidelines of criticism for each type of argumentation scheme to each case requires practical skills of good judgment and judicious interpretation in identifying the argument and sorting out the main thread of the argument from the discourse it is contained in. These are pragmatic skills requiring prior identification of the type of dialogue in which an argument occurs.

Logical semantics is an important subject in its own right. It is the construction of consistent and complete theories based on semantical constants and the use of variables. Chapter 5 is about semantics. But the eight other chapters are mainly about the pragmatics of argumentation. For the most part, applying critical rules of good argument to argumentative discourse on controversial issues in natural language is an essentially pragmatic endeavor. It is a job requiring many of the traditional skills associated with the humanities – empathy, a critical perspective, careful attention to language, the ability to deal with vagueness and ambiguity, balanced recognition of the stronger and weaker points of an argument that is less than perfectly good or perfectly bad, a careful look at the evidence behind a claim, the skill of identifying conclusions, sorting out the main line of argument from a mass of verbiage, and the critical acumen needed to question claims based on expert knowledge in specialized claims or arguments. Thus the terms ‘informal logic’ and ‘critical argumentation’ are well suited to the subject matter and methods of this handbook.

A basic requirement of critical argumentation is that any argument that a critic attempts to evaluate must be set out and sympathetically

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appreciated in the context of dialogue in which the argument occurs. This means that we must sometimes contend with lengthy and complex arguments, and we must sometimes probe in depth the unstated parts of argument, the arguer's position and commitments as indicated by the evidence of the text, and the question that the argument was supposed to answer. This requirement means that if a criticism is to be made of an argument, or if the argument is to be called weak, erroneous, or even fallacious, substantial justification for the reasonableness of the criticism must be given in the form of documented evidence from the actual wording and context of the given argument. This dialectical type of approach to the study of arguments means that it is crucial to bring out the question-answer context of an argument in all reasoned criticism and analysis of arguments. Thus every argument is conceived along the lines of a challenge-response model of interactive dialogue, in which two people "reason together." Some of the most important types of contexts of argumentation are profiles of sequences of question-answer dialogue on disputed subjects. Thus generally the theory of informal logic must be based on the concept of question-reply dialogue as a form of interaction between two participants, each representing one side of an argument, on a disputed question.

As Erik Krabbe (1985) has indicated, the concept of critical argument analysis as a dialogue logic deserves to be the cornerstone of the emerging theories of argumentation, now the subject of so much interest. In recent times, the attention to the classical logic of propositions and its extensions has begun to shift, through the need for a practical approach to the study of arguments, toward a pragmatic conception of reasonable dialogue as a normative structure for argument. This shift has been signaled by the appearance of many new practically oriented textbooks but also by scholarly work in this emerging field. Two new important journals have recently come out – *Informal Logic* and *Argumentation*. And the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking, as well as the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, have been founded. As well, in June 1986 the First International Conference on Argumentation was held in Amsterdam. These trends point toward a welcome shift to the practical in logic and a resurgence of interest in the study of argumentation generally.

Whatever happens in the next few years in the theory of argumentation study, it is clear that a new approach to logic and ar-

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gument has already begun to be taught in logic classes around the world. Although that new logic is, or should be, based on new theoretical foundations including abstract structures of formal dialogues and pragmatic structures of discourse analysis, it is a subject that has moved much closer to many of the traditional aims of the humanities through a more practical approach to the study of particular arguments in natural language.

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