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0521827485 - The Uses of Argument, Updated Edition
Stephen E. Toulmin
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The Uses of Argument, Updated Edition

‘A central theme throughout the impressive series of philosophical books and articles Stephen Toulmin has published since 1948 is the way in which assertions and opinions concerning all sorts of topics, brought up in everyday life or in academic research, can be rationally justified. Is there one universal system of norms, by which all sorts of arguments in all sorts of fields must be judged, or must each sort of argument be judged according to its own norms?

‘In *The Uses of Argument* (1958) Toulmin sets out his views on these questions for the first time. Reacting severely against the “narrow” approach to ordinary arguments taken in syllogistic and modern logic, he advocates—analogous with existing practice in the field of law—a procedural rather than formal notion of validity. According to Toulmin, certain constant (“field-invariant”) elements can be discerned in the way in which argumentation develops, while in every case there will also be some variable (“field-dependent”) elements in the way in which it is to be judged. Toulmin’s “broader” approach aims at creating a more epistemological and empirical logic that takes both types of elements into account.

‘In spite of initial criticisms from logicians and fellow philosophers, *The Uses of Argument* has been an enduring source of inspiration and discussion to students of argumentation from all kinds of disciplinary backgrounds for more than forty years. Not only Toulmin’s views on the field-dependency of validity criteria but also his model of the “layout arguments”, with its description of the functional moves in the argumentation process, have made this book a modern classic in the study of argumentation.’

Frans van Eemeren, *University of Amsterdam*

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University of Southern California



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Preface to the Updated Edition

Books are like children. They leave home, make new friends, but rarely call home, even collect. You find out what they have been up to only by chance. A man at a party turns out to be one of those new friends. ‘So you are George’s father? – Imagine that!’

So has been the relation between *The Uses of Argument* and its author. When I wrote it, my aim was strictly philosophical: to criticize the assumption, made by most Anglo-American academic philosophers, that any significant argument can be put in formal terms: not just as a *syllogism*, since for Aristotle himself any inference can be called a ‘syllogism’ or ‘linking of statements’, but a rigidly demonstrative deduction of the kind to be found in Euclidean geometry. Thus was created the Platonic tradition that, some two millennia later, was revived by René Descartes. Readers of *Cosmopolis*, or my more recent *Return to Reason*, will be familiar with this general view of mine.

In no way had I set out to expound a theory of rhetoric or argumentation: my concern was with twentieth-century epistemology, not informal logic. Still less had I in mind an analytical model like that which, among scholars of Communication, came to be called ‘the Toulmin model’. Many readers in fact gave me an historical background that consigned me to a premature death. When my fiancée was reading Law, for instance, a fellow-student remarked on her unusual surname: his girlfriend [he explained] had come across it in one of her textbooks, but when he reported that Donna was marrying the author, she replied, ‘That’s impossible: He’s dead!’

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My reaction to being (so to say) ‘adopted’ by the Communication Community was, I confess, less inquisitive than it should have been. Even the fact that the late Gilbert Ryle gave the book to Otto Bird to review, and Dr Bird wrote of it as being a “revival of the *Topics*” made no impression on me. Only when I started working in Medical Ethics, and I reread Aristotle with greater understanding, did the point of this commentary sink in. (The book, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, the scholarly research for which was largely the work of my fellow-author, Albert R. Jonsen, was the first solid product of that change of mind.) Taking all things together, our collaboration, first on the National Commission for the Protection of Human Research Subjects, and subsequently on the book, left us with a picture of Aristotle as more of a pragmatist, and less of a formalist, than historians of thought have tended to assume since the High Middle Ages.

True, the earliest books of Aristotle’s *Organon* are still known as the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*; but this was, of course, intended to contrast them with the later books on Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics, and Rhetoric. (The opening of the *Rhetoric* in fact takes up arguments that Aristotle had included in the Nicomachean Ethics.) So, after all, Otto Bird had made an important point. If I were rewriting this book today, I would point to Aristotle’s contrast between ‘general’ and ‘special’ topics as a way of throwing clearer light on the varied kinds of ‘backing’ relied on in different fields of practice and argument.

It was, in the event, to my great advantage that *The Uses of Argument* found a way so quickly into the world of Speech Communication. The rightly named ‘analytical’ philosophers in the Britain and America of the late 1950s quickly smelled an enemy. The book was roundly damned by Peter Strawson in the B.B.C.’s weekly journal, *The Listener*; and for many years English professional philosophers ignored it. Peter Alexander, a colleague at Leeds, called it ‘Toulmin’s *anti-logic* book’; and my *Doktorvater* at Cambridge, Richard Braithwaite, was deeply pained to see one of his own students attacking his commitment to Inductive Logic. (I only found this out years later.)

Yet the book continued to sell abroad, and the reasons became clear to me only when I visited the United States in the early 1960s. As a result, it would be churlish of me to disown the notion of ‘the Toulmin model’, which was one of the unforeseen by-products of *The Uses of Argument*, has kept it in print since it first appeared in 1958, and justifies the new edition for which this Preface is written, more than 40 years on.

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Preface to the Updated Edition

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Some people will remember David Hume's description of his *Treatise of Human Nature*—stung by its similarly hostile early reception—as having 'fallen still-born from the press'. One could hardly ask for better company.

Stephen Toulmin
Los Angeles, *July 2002*

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

No alterations have been made in the text of the original edition for the purposes of the present printing; but I am glad of the opportunity to say that, five years after the original publication, I still feel that the questions raised in the present book are as relevant to the main themes of current British philosophy as they were when the book was first written. The reception which the argument of the book met with from the critics in fact served only to sharpen for me the point of my central thesis—namely, the contrast between the standards and values of practical reasoning (developed with an eye to what I called ‘substantial’ considerations) and the abstract and formal criteria relied on in mathematical logic and much of twentieth-century epistemology. The book has in fact been most warmly welcomed by those whose interest in reasoning and argumentation has had some specific practical starting-point: students of jurisprudence, the physical sciences, and psychology, among others. Whether the implications of my argument for logical theory and philosophical analysis will become any more acceptable with the passage of time remains to be seen.

S. T.
October 1963

Preface to the First Edition

The intentions of this book are radical, but the arguments in it are largely unoriginal. I have borrowed many lines of thought from colleagues and adapted them to my own purposes: just how many will be apparent from the references given at the end. Yet I think that hitherto the point on which these lines of argument converge has not been properly recognised or stated; for by following them out consistently one is led (if I am not mistaken) to reject as confused a conception of ‘deductive inference’ which many recent philosophers have accepted without hesitation as impeccable. The only originality in the book lies in my attempt to show how one is led to that conclusion. If the attack on ‘deductive inference’ fails, what remains is a miscellany of applications of other people’s ideas to logical topics and concepts.

Apart from the references to published work given in passing or listed at the end of the book, I am conscious of a general debt to Professor John Wisdom: his lectures at Cambridge in 1946–7 first drew my attention to the problem of ‘trans-type inference’, and the central thesis of my fifth essay was argued in far greater detail in his Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen, which were delivered some seven years ago but are still, to our loss, unpublished. I am aware also of particular help, derived mainly through conversations, from Mr P. Alexander, Professor K. E. M. Baier, Mr D. G. Brown, Dr W. D. Falk, Associate Professor D. A. T. Gasking, Mr P. Herbst, Professor Gilbert Ryle, and Professor D. Taylor. In some cases they have expostulated with me in vain, and I alone am answerable for the results, but they deserve the credit for any good ideas which I have here appropriated and used.

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Preface to the First Edition

Some of the material worked into these essays has been published already in other forms, in *Mind* and in the *Proceedings* and *Supplementary Volumes* of the Aristotelian Society. Much of Essay II has already been reprinted in A. G. N. Flew, *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* (London, 1956).

Stephen Toulmin
Leeds, *June 1957*