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ARGUMENT AND CONVICTION

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Abstract:

Shouldn't we be convinced by good (valid) arguments and not by bad ones? But there are valid arguments with true premises that are not known to be true. What we minimally expect is that people follow the logic of the argument. How will they do this? Descartes advised us to perceive clearly and distinctly the steps in the argument. Aristotle looked toward the enthymeme so that the audience would draw the conclusion on their own. These 'thinking through' strategies are an aid to conviction but cannot guarantee it. Do we need the fallacies and other dirty tricks of rhetoric after all?

An argument in its central sense is a set of reasons, P, that is offered by an arguer to an audience as evidence for the truth of some other claim, Q. The canonical form of an argument is "P therefore Q". "P therefore Q" is a good argument just when P is itself true and its meaning unambiguous, when P does not simply assume the conclusion Q, and when P either logically entails Q or at least provides weighty evidence that Q is true. A bad argument either presents false or ambiguous premises, or premises that simply assume the conclusion, or premises which even if singular and clear in meaning and true, neither entail nor offer weighty evidence for their conclusion.

Good argument is regarded, at least in the circles I travel in, as not just the principal means of persuasion but the only legitimate means. At least in the arenas of public discussion (letters to the editor, city council meetings, and the like), of legal trial (judge or jury), of academic papers (such as this one), we expect the audience for our arguments to be convinced by them, when we offer a good argument. We also warn people against being convinced by bad arguments. No introductory textbook in logic would be complete without a catalog of logical fallacies, a form of argument which at least since Whately has been defined as arguments which appear good though are not. This seems more than a sociological curiosity. Someone should not accept a mere claim unsupported by good reasons—the exception being the rare claim that is self-evidently true—just as someone should not accept a claim supported by weak reasons. In practice, we make allowance for common ground. We don't expect *every* statement to be backed by argument. Discourse would virtually grind to a halt unless we and our audience can agree on some propositions as true, so that we can focus our attention and argument on the controversial claims: the claims that we might be persuaded are true but that our audience is not. It is especially with regard to controversial claims that we strongly insist that others be persuaded by good arguments, and it is when the controversial claim is being aired that we, as audience, most strongly become alert to weaknesses in arguments. Is there a work that tops Bishop Berkeley's *Dialogues* in sheer number of arguments-per-page? But that is just what you'd expect from someone arguing that matter doesn't exist.

I'll say that these are our maxims of argumentation: Be convinced by good arguments. Never be persuaded by bad arguments. Remain agnostic towards controversial claims until persuaded one way or the other by a good

argument. These maxims present themselves as "shoulds" and seem justifiable. Assuming that we want to believe truths and only truths, good arguments offer us the best method. The deductively good argument will logically entail its conclusion, which must be true since its premises are true. The nondeductively good argument will provide strong reasons for its conclusion, which will likely be true since the premises that support it are true. The bad argument will not reliably take us from truths to truths.

Yet as nearly everyone who has made what he takes to be a good argument has discovered, not all of his audience is convinced by it. Is there a work that has convinced fewer people than Berkeley's *Dialogues* despite its fusillades of argument? (But is that because its arguments are really weak or because their conclusion is improbable and thus, we think, *couldn't* follow from a good argument?) Every day juries are convinced either by plaintiff's arguments or by defendant's, but not by both, though plaintiff and defendant both think his arguments good. Of course, not all arguments *thought* good *are* good, but *some* are; and it is a plain truth that there are good arguments that fail to convince their audience as well as bad arguments that effect conviction. After all, a conclusion is a stage in an argument, while conviction is a state in a person. Having achieved the former, the latter does not automatically follow.

Certain idiosyncrasies of people account for some failures. Some people are tone deaf to argument in general. They are presented with the good argument "P therefore Q", but regard this not as the presentation of evidence for Q but as a kind of decorated claim that Q—or as a claim that Q with a preamble. Others might be resolutely committed to not-Q, and so nothing the arguer will say will move them towards Q. A person might be resolutely committed to not-Q because it satisfies certain emotional needs (maybe he needs to believe that spirit does not perish with bodily death) or because he has an allegiance to an ideology (maybe he is resolutely committed to believing that socialism is always in the best interests of the workers). Hence evidence to the contrary—that mental events seem to cease when brain activity ceases or that socialist Sweden has the highest unemployment rate in Europe—does not persuade.

An argument needs a receptive audience, which at the least means an audience who is not tone deaf to arguments—who knows that a claim is being advanced on the basis of reasons—and who is at least prepared to be convinced by the conclusion. But to be convinced by a good argument an audience must also believe the premises of that argument to be true, and must acknowledge the logical or evidentiary relations between premises and conclusion. An argument may still be a good one, though a certain audience may either be unconvinced of the truth of the premises or will fail to see that the premises entail or offer good evidence for their conclusion.

Premises cannot demonstrate their own truth. An arguer might demonstrate—provide another argument for—some of his premises, but of course this can get out of hand: "P therefore Q", but wait, we need "O therefore P"; well, first, "N therefore O" ... and so on either ad infinitum or until we reach self-evident "first truths" or the end of our audience's patience if not our own which is likely to come well before first truths. The maxim that we be convinced by good arguments cannot require that we know all truths or all truths that are likely to pop up as premises in arguments we will encounter, for this would require near-omniscience.

It can't be the case that we *should* do what we *can't* do. We can't be in a position to be able to distinguish truth from falsehood in any premise whatsoever that happens to be thrown our way; so we don't have to be. The maxim that we be convinced by good arguments therefore asks too much. A more reasonable maxim will say that we should be convinced by good arguments whose premises we already believe to be true. Put briefly this means that we should follow the logical or evidentiary implications of the premises of good arguments. We may

not know whether "All carcinomas are metastasizing cancers" is true, or whether it is the case that "All metastasizing cancers are life-threatening," but we should at the least be prepared to draw the conclusion that "All carcinomas are life-threatening"; and when we do know the premises to be true, we should be convinced that the conclusion is true also.

I'll limit my discussion today to following the logical (deductive) implications of premises.

Following out the logic of premises is something it seems we can require of anyone, but only if logic is *a priori*, universal, and equally distributed—if, that is, any member of an audience for any argument comes already outfitted with logic. Such a member may not know that argument's premises to be true, but he is supposed to know—or so certain doctrines run—that if those premises are true, then they do or do not entail their conclusion. Suppose that we have a receptive audience for a good deductive argument, and that this audience knows the premises of this argument to be true. This argument entails its conclusion. Its premises cannot be true and the conclusion false. Still, it is possible, perhaps likely, that some members of its audience will be unconvinced by the conclusion. Why, if logic is an *a priori* competence that is our birthright?

Descartes thinks such an audience hasn't been applying themselves. He wrote in his *Discourse on Method* that "Good sense is the most fairly distributed thing in the world ..." but also that "it is not enough to have a sound mind; the main thing is to apply it well."¹ In his early work, the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes introduces the term "intuition" to mean "an indubitable conception formed by an unclouded and attentive mind." (Rule III) The intuition of "simple" propositions is our primary mode of knowledge. Deduction is another mode of acquiring knowledge. Deduction draws a "necessary conclusion from other things known with certainty." Such conclusions might not themselves be intuitively obvious or "self-evident" but they are properly items of knowledge "so long as they are deduced from principles [premises] known to be true by a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought, with clear intuition of each point." (Rule III)

This seems sensible advice: the audience for argument should keep the premises in mind, and using a "movement of thought", clearly intuited, see whether the conclusion follows from these premises. A person, thinking clearly and carefully, should be able to see not only *that* but also *how* "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man" together imply that Socrates is mortal. Descartes even thought that deduction cannot go wrong if performed by "human beings, not brutes." (Rule II) But suppose that P logically entails Q and that P is true. What we can expect is that someone who believes that P and who (a) thinks the argument "P therefore Q" through, and (b) comes to understand that P entails Q, should (c) be convinced that Q. This is perhaps why Descartes thought deduction can't go wrong. But deduction may go wrong when someone who believes that P is true (a) thinks the argument "P therefore Q" through, (b*) fails to understand that P entails Q, and thus (c*) fails to be convinced that Q. For this Descartes has no remedy. Telling a person to intuit clearly the steps in the argument won't help someone who doesn't know the right answer if he stumbles on it.

Let's look at another optimist about reasoning, Socrates, who wanted to prove to Meno that "there is no teaching but recollection" and whose test case is to be one of Meno's slaves, a young boy, said to be uneducated in mathematics or geometry. The boy has no name in Plato's dialogue, but I'll find it convenient to call him "Nous".

Socrates: A square then is a figure in which all these four sides are equal?

Nous: Yes indeed.

Socrates: And it also has these lines through the middle equal?

Nous: Yes.

Socrates: And such a figure could be larger or smaller?

Nous: Yes.

Socrates: If then this side were two feet, and this other side two feet how many [square] feet would the whole be? Consider it this way: if it were two feet this way, and only one foot that way, the figure would be once two feet?

Nous: Yes.

Socrates: But if it is two feet also that way, it would surely be twice two feet?

Nous: Yes.

Socrates: How many [square] feet is twice two feet? Work it out and tell me.

Nous: Four, Socrates.[2](#)

This went very nicely for Socrates. Had Socrates tried his hand at inventing categorical syllogisms, he could have asked Nous what consequences we should draw when "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man" are given, and clever Nous would have answered, "Why, 'Socrates is mortal', Socrates." Lucky for Socrates that he didn't pick another slave boy, Moose, who happened to be home sick that day. We can imagine what *that* dialogue would have been like:

Socrates: A square then is a figure in which all these four sides are equal?

Moose: Yes indeed.

Socrates: And it also has these lines through the middle equal?

Moose: Maybe.

Socrates: What do you mean "maybe"? If you cut something in half, don't you get equal parts?

Moose: I guess so Socrates.

Socrates: If then this side were two feet, and this other side two feet how many [square] feet would the whole be? Consider it this way: if it were two feet this way, and only one foot that way, the figure would be once two feet?

Moose: I ... I don't know Socrates.

Socrates: Good grief, boy. What is one times two?

Moose: Two, Socrates?

Socrates: Now tell me, if a figure is two feet wide and one foot high, how many [square] feet is the whole?

Moose: I don't know, Socrates.

Socrates: Didn't you just tell me that one times two is two?

Moose: Yes, Socrates.

Socrates: Now if this figure is two feet by one foot, how big is such a figure?

Moose:(Hesitates) Three feet, Socrates?

Socrates: No! No! Two feet big!

Moose: Two feet, Socrates? Are you sure?

Socrates: Uh, Meno, can I talk to you privately.

Moose, Descartes might say, isn't applying himself; and maybe he isn't. But maybe he is doing his very best. Maybe not all members of an audience can think the argument through in the way that Descartes recommends. And remember that it is not enough to get the answer right; one must be *convinced* that the conclusion follows.

One of the devices described by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* for effecting persuasion is the enthymeme.[3](#) An enthymeme is syllogism with missing parts. Aristotle explicitly speaks of unstated premises though there is no

reason an enthymeme could not have an unstated conclusion. One reason why Aristotle recommends the enthymeme is that it is "tiresome" (2.22.1) to state what is obvious: "for example, [to show] that Dorieus has won a contest with a crown it is enough to have said that he has won the Olympic games, and there is no need to add that the Olympic games have a crown as the prize; for everybody knows that" (1.2.13). But I think that it isn't only obvious *premises* that get cropped in enthymemes. "Superficial enthymemes are not popular," Aristotle observes in Book 3. "By *superficial* I mean those that are altogether clear and which there is no need to ponder, ... but [the popular enthymemes are those] of which there is either immediate understanding when they are spoken, even if that was not previously existing, or the thought follows soon after; for [then] some kind of learning takes place ... " (3.10.4).

The "learning" that takes place is unlikely to have been unexpressed premises, for these go unstated when they are common knowledge and if the audience has common knowledge of a suppressed premise then this premise can't be learned (though it might be invoked by an enthymeme). Aristotle *might* have intended the enthymeme that suppresses its conclusion. The learning, then, will be in the drawing of the conclusion. Book 3 of the *Rhetoric* is on the *art* of persuasion. Its topics include good prose style, rhythm in prose, the use of simile and metaphor, and the "urbanities" of prose (such as elegance and wit). The remarks about enthymemes and learning, as it happens, interrupt Aristotle's discussion of metaphor. "Metaphor most brings about learning; for when he [Homer] calls old age 'stubble,' he creates understanding and knowledge ... since both old age and stubble are things that have lost their bloom" (3.10.2—"lost their bloom" is the translator's rendition, though it explains one metaphor in terms of another: neither old age nor stubble literally had "blooms" to lose). Now to understand metaphor we have to think it through—think out the comparison. How are old age and stubble alike? Perhaps, then, what is learned in hearing an enthymeme that suppresses its conclusion is that very conclusion. The audience has granted the premises, but does not yet know what they entail, and the speaker invites them to think it out (as the poet invites his audience to think out his metaphor). "All men are mortal, and each of you are men," and there the orator stops. This induces, I think, a kind of suspense, leading the audience to wonder what comes next. This drama achieves its intended denouement when the audience member thinks, "Oh my gosh, *I* am mortal too!" However, even if the orator motivates a member of the audience to think through the enthymeme to its (literal) conclusion, it won't necessarily mean that the audience reaches the *correct* conclusion. If Moose hears "All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man" he may be impelled to draw a conclusion to see how it all comes out, but he may well conclude, "Therefore all men are Socrates" (with apologies to Woody Allen).




One conclusion we can draw is that a good deductive argument won't persuade everyone that its conclusion is true—won't even persuade those who believe that its premises are true. This may be regarded as a sorry comment on the human condition, and there's an end to the matter. I wonder, though, if we—and here I principally mean we philosophers—aren't being too finicky about our means of persuasion.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a study in how to arouse conviction, but the only arguments mentioned are a species of induction, the use of examples or "paradigms", and a truncated deductive syllogism, the enthymeme. But besides argument, Aristotle tells the speaker how to show himself to be fair-minded and trustworthy ("for we believe the speaker through his being a certain kind of person, and this is the case if he seems to be good or well disposed to us or both" (1.8.6)), how to arouse emotion in his audience, how to speak to different audiences (the old or the young, for example), how to decorate one's speech with "urbanities," how to introduce a speech, how best to use narrative, and many other suggestions. Call these "ancillary devices," for they aid the process of persuasion though are not themselves arguments. Ancillary devices do not persuade by means of giving reasons to believe the conclusion. They make the speaker credible, or make the audience emotionally disposed towards accepting the conclusion, or decorate the argument with aesthetically pleasurable qualities.

Some of these ancillary devices have, over the centuries, acquired a bad reputation. They have been twisted into fallacies: "The speaker is likable, so what he says is true" or "His prose is so beautiful, it must be true." Students are taught to zero in on the main argument, and ignore the prologues, narratives, examples, and the rest. Aesthetic delight is thought negligible at best, and sometimes even belittled. I have heard Quine's writing disparaged precisely on the ground that it is so stylish (which some take to be a kind of obscurantism). But neither presenting oneself as fair-minded and trustworthy or writing stylishly is a giving of an argument, hence neither is a fallacious argument. If making oneself likable or one's argument urbane prepares the way for conviction, why not take advantage? And zeroing in on the argument, ignoring everything else, is a worthwhile exercise but only for those who know how to do it.

We tend to think that the best thing is to persuade someone that Q on the basis of true premises that entail Q, but it is unclear why this is the best thing. Is it so he can persuade others? Or so he can say why he believes Q when asked? But these considerations go beyond simply producing conviction in an audience. Maybe it is just as good—or at least not wrong—to persuade someone that Q in part at least through the use of the sorts of ancillary devices Aristotle mentions.

Notes

1. Quotations from Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (composed c. 1628) and *Discourse On Method* (1637) are from *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach (Nelson, 1969). 
2. Adapted from the translation by G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Meno* (Hackett Publishing Co., 1976), 82b-d, pp. 14–15. 
3. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, translated by George A. Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 1991). 

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