Argument Identification

The Problem of Non-Argumentative Phenomena

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**Abstract**

A major part of philosophical work is engagement with argumentative texts. Engaging with an argumentative text involves correctly identifying the arguments presented in this text. In the context of teaching philosophy in school, the difficulty of correctly identifying arguments in philosophical texts is often underestimated. In this paper, I focus on one specific problem with argument identification that has been neglected in philosophy didactics thus far: the problem that there are many non-argumentative phenomena in an argumentative text that are easily misidentified as expressing (part of) an argument. It is easy to fall for such phenomena if one is not aware of this problem, thereby misinterpreting the author’s intentions. This paper aims to present and discuss such phenomena, as well as to provide guidelines on how to help students recognize them.

**Keywords:** argument identification; text analysis; argumentation.

1. Introduction

Doing philosophy usually involves engagement with philosophical texts. When we pursue a philosophical question, we usually find it valuable or even indispensable to engage with the arguments that other philosophers put forward in support of their view on this question. However, engaging with the arguments of others is only possible if one has *correctly* *identified* these arguments in the first place. Unfortunately, in the context of teaching philosophy in school, the difficulty of correctly identifying arguments in philosophical texts is often underestimated. Many, if not most, philosophical texts are linguistically demanding, especially those of historical philosophers. It is therefore not surprising that even experienced philosophers regularly have to spend a considerable amount of time on exegetical problems. A key problem involved in any kind of text analysis is determining what authors are actually saying. Aside from this general problem, there are problems that specifically concern argument identification. For example, it can be challenging to determine how individual statements in an argumentative passage are supposed to be related, especially when dealing with long and complex arguments. Furthermore, it is notoriously difficult to determine implicit premises and conclusions, both their *presence* and their precise *content*. This paper focuses on a problem of argument identification that, to my knowledge, has been neglected in philosophy didactics thus far. It is indicated by Surovell & Poston (2023) in the following passage:

In the real world, people almost always surround or litter their arguments with non-argumentative content. Even genres of writing that are supposedly argumentative, like a newspaper editorial, are often mostly non-argumentative content. Having reasons, objections, and contentions mixed in with non-argumentative content adds another layer of complexity to understanding people’s arguments [...]. (Surovell & Poston 2023: 28-9)

In a similar vein, Vaughn (2018) points out:

[I]n the real world, arguments almost never appear neatly labeled […]. […] [T]hey usually come imbedded in a thicket of other sentences that serve many other functions besides articulating an argument. They may be long and hard to follow. **And sometimes a passage that sounds like an argument is not.** Your main challenge is to identify the conclusion and premises without getting lost in all the “background noise.” […] A good part of the text is background information and restatements of the premises or conclusion. Most of the rest consists of explanations, digressions, examples or illustrations, and descriptive passages. (Vaughn 2018: 16-7, my emphasis; cf. also Carey 1988: 100, Davis 2011: 12, Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder & Wasserman 2012: 63)

As Surovell & Poston and Vaughn observe, many passages in an argumentative text are not intended to express (part of) an argument, but have another, “non-argumentative” function. Some passages may *appear* to express (part of) an argument, when in fact they do not.

As far as my experience goes, students (and to some extent even experts) are prone to fall prey exactly to such passages, thereby misunderstanding the author’s intentions. Thus, I believe that for students to be able to correctly identify arguments in longer, more complex philosophical texts, we should familiarize them with this problem and provide them guidance on how to deal with it. Establishing the professional groundwork for achieving this goal demands a thorough engagement with many critical details of this issue, which cannot be accomplished in a single paper. The goal of this paper is to provide the basis for a deeper exploration of it.

After clarifying my usage of the term “argument” (section 2), I present and discuss phenomena that are easily misidentified as expressing (part of) an argument (section 3). Specifically, I present and discuss unmarked sequences of statements, conditionals, examples, clarifications, and explanations. Moreover, for each phenomenon, I provide guidelines on how to help students recognize it.

2. The Notion of “Argument”

Within academic research, there are several technical senses of “argument.” While differing in detail, most of these definitions have in common that they define “argument” as a set of statements, in which one or more statements (called “premises”) are related to another statement (called “conclusion”) in a certain way.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this paper, I follow this definitional custom and define “argument” as follows.

**Definition of “argument”**:

That A is an “argument” of subject S means that A is a set of statements in which one or more statements (the *premises*) are claimed by S to (jointly) provide a sufficient reason for believing another statement (the *conclusion*).[[2]](#footnote-2)

On their most natural readings, (1) and (2) represent arguments in this sense.

(1) Pete: *I don’t believe that God exists.* Mary: *But he does. After all, billions of people report that they have experienced the presence of God. This cannot be a coincidence.*

(2) Mary: *Is the weather going to be bad on Sunday?* Pete: *Probably. The weather report announces rain.*

In (1), Pete argues that God exists (= *conclusion*). His premises are “Billions of people report that they have experienced the presence of God” and “This cannot be a coincidence.” Taken together, they are claimed by Pete to provide a sufficient reason for believing that God exists. In (2), the statement that the weather report announces rain is the premise. It is claimed by Mary to provide a sufficient reason for believing that the weather is probably going to be bad on Sunday.

It is important to see that premises and conclusions are sometimes conveyed implicitly or indirectly. Consider (3) and (4).

(3) Pete: *You should not buy cheap meat. Cheap meat usually comes from factory farms*.

(4) Mary: *Why shouldn’t Jill complain to the board? Her chances of success, in this case, are outstanding.*

In (3), it is natural to understand Pete as implicitly conveying the premise that factory farms are bad (or that factory farms should not be supported). If this interpretation is correct, Pete’s argument consists of *two* rather than only one premise, even though only one of them is stated explicitly. In (4), it is natural to suppose that Mary advances an argument. But the conclusion of her argument – *Jill should complain to the board* (or *There are no good reasons that Jill should not complain to the board*) – is stated *indirectly* rather than directly.

**3. Phenomena Easily Misidentified as Expressing (Part of) Arguments**

Having clarified my use of “argument” in this paper, I now turn to the main part. I shall present and discuss several types of phenomena that are easily misidentified as expressing (part of) arguments. Moreover, for each phenomenon, I shall provide guidelines on how to help students recognize it.

Before starting, I would like to emphasize that the selection of non-argumentative phenomena in this section is not exhaustive. I focus on phenomena that appear frequently in philosophical texts and pose a high risk of confusion. Fortunately, in the context of teaching the problem of non-argumentative phenomena to students of philosophy, treating only a selection of such phenomena is perfectly appropriate. To start with, most teaching settings do not allow enough time for a serious exhaustive treatment of such a problem. Consider that the problem of non-argumentative phenomena is only *one* of many problems in the identification of arguments, all of which deserve serious treatment, and the identification of arguments is only one step in the process of engaging with a philosophical text. Moreover, introducing students to *all* relevant non-argumentative phenomena seems to be less effective than drawing their attention only to some of the most “dangerous” non-argumentative phenomena, thereby sensitizing them to the general problem. After all, an exhaustive treatment imposes a greater cognitive burden and may also decrease the students’ motivation to engage with this phenomenon.

**3.1 Unmarked Sequence of Statements**

Arguments can be marked with explicit linguistic argument indicators, such as “because,” “for,” “afterall,” “which is implied by the fact that ...” (*premise indicators*) or “therefore,” “so,” “thus”, “I conclude that ...” (*conclusion indicators*). Unfortunately, arguments often lack such indicators, either for stylistic reasons or due to carelessness (cf., e.g., Davis 2011: 4 and Eemeren & Henkemans 2016: 32). In such cases, we must interpret, making reasoned conjectures about whether a sequence of statements is intended to convey an argument or not. Consider (5).

(5) Mary: *Pete has a huge belly. He can’t be a soccer player.*

On the surface, it appears that Mary is merely making a sequence of two statements. In fact, it cannot be ruled out that this is the case. However, it is quite natural to understand Mary as arguing here, arguing that Pete cannot be a soccer player (*conclusion*), supporting this conclusion by pointing out that he has a huge belly (*premise*). Consider another example.

(6) [C]ourage […] is a kind of strength. It makes its possessor more likely to achieve whatever he sets out to do […]. (Mackie: 1990: 189)

Even though Mackie does not use any argument indicator in (6), the most natural interpretation is that these two sentences are intended to convey an argument, the first sentence being intended to express the conclusion, and the second the respective premise.

By contrast, consider (7).

(7) What God is in Himself, how He is to be conceived by philosophers, retreats continually from our knowledge. The elaborate world pictures which accompany religion and which look each so solid while they last, turn out to be only shadows. It is religion itself – prayer and sacrament and repentance and adoration – which is here, in the long run, our sole avenue to the real. Like mathematics, religion can grow from within, or decay. The Jew knows more than the Pagan, the Christian more than the Jew, the modern vaguely religious man less than any of the three. But, like mathematics, it remains simply itself, capable of being applied to any new theory of the material universe and outmoded by none. –C. S. Lewis, *The Grand Miracle*, p. 22*.* (Davis 2011: 16)

(7) is much less clear than (5) or (6). Inexperienced students may well be prone to “detect” some argument here, especially when they have been made aware of the fact that argument indicators are often missing from an argumentative text. But on closer inspection, it seems more plausible to assume that this passage is merely a series of unsupported statements.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Instructor Guidelines**. Unfortunately, cases like (7) are very common in real texts, including philosophical ones. To start with, students should be aware that the absence of explicit argument indicators is no conclusive evidence for the absence of arguments. To establish this point, instructors should use easy, uncontroversial examples such as the following:

(8) Pete: *Mary said that God does not exist. But he does. I have experienced his presence multiple times*.

Even though Pete does not use any explicit argument indicators, it is obvious even for inexperienced students that his last statement is intended to support the former. It is obvious for the following reason. With the statement that God exists, Pete contradicts Mary’s statement; and it is very common for an “unmarked” statement that follows such a contradictory statement to be intended as supporting that contradictory statement.

Before students are confronted with cases from real texts, which are often more difficult, they should be familiarized with certain aids that may help them deal with such cases.

**The “Logical Relation Check.”** Probably one of the most important aids is what I call the “Logical Relation Check.” When there are no explicit argument indicators in a sequence of statements, check whether the statements stand, or at least may be naturally taken to stand, in a relation of logical support. When I say that a statement S1 “logically supports” another statement S2, I mean that *if* S1 is true, it provides a reason to believe S2. Unless you are dealing with a very bad reasoner, statements that do not stand, and may not be naturally taken to stand, in a relation of logical support are typically not intended to express an argument.

When applying this aid to (8), we have to check whether the statement “God exists” and the statement “Pete has experienced God’s presence multiple times” stand, or at least appear to stand, in a relation of logical support. Indeed, they do. If Pete really had experienced the presence of God multiple times, this would indeed provide a reason to believe that God exists. Consider another, more complex example.

(9) To live a good life in the fullest sense a man must have a good education, friends, love, children (if he desires them), a sufficient income to keep him from want and grave anxiety, good health, and work which is not uninteresting. All these things, in varying degrees, depend upon the community and are helped or hindered by political events. The good life must be lived in a good society and is not fully possible otherwise. – Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, pp. 74-75. (Davis: 2011: 9)

In this passage, there are no explicit argument indicators. But when reading these statements with the Logical Relation Check in mind, it appears plausible that this passage conveys an argument. The statement expressed by the last sentence seems to be logically supported by the statements expressed by the former sentences: If a good life necessarily involves a “good education, friends,” and so on (*first statement*), and if these “things […] depend upon the community and are helped or hindered by political events” (*second statement*), then these two statements (jointly) provide a strong (if not conclusive) reason for believing that “[t]he good life must be lived in a good society and is not fully possible otherwise.”

In other cases, it is unclear whether statements really stand in the relation of logical support. However, in many such cases, it is reasonable to assume that the statements constitute an argument, in part because they can be easily imagined to be taken to stand in the relation of logical support. Consider a small passage from Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*.

(10) Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions* […]. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning […]. I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking. (Hume 2007: 7)

It seems that the last two sentences in this passage are used to express an argument. The conclusion seems to be that “it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining [the] distinction [between impressions and ideas].” However, it is not obvious that the statement expressed by the last sentence actually supports this statement. After all, even if everyone were able to “perceive” the difference between *feeling* and *thinking* without any problems, why should this provide a reason to believe that the difference between *impressions* [!] and *ideas* [!] does not need to be explained in detail? As Hume defines these terms, impressions and ideas do not seem to be the same as feeling and thinking. Yet, it is easy to imagine that Hume *takes* the statement expressed by the last sentence to support the putative conclusion, for it is easy to imagine that Hume simply holds that the distinction between feeling and thinking, though not identical, is *sufficiently* *similar* to that between impressions and ideas. The Logical Relation Check is formulated broadly enough to take such cases into account.

Finally, let us apply this aid to a (putatively) negative case. In his paper *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* (1972), Peter Singer formulates a moral principle that says: “[I]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” (Singer 1972: 231). The following passage elaborates on this principle.

(11) The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle takes, firstly, no account of proximity or distance. It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. (Ibid.: 231-2)

This passage contains one obvious argument, indicated by the premise indicator “for.” But what about the last two sentences? Could they be intended to convey an additional (sub-)argument? The Logical Relation Check does not seem to support this consideration. The statement “It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away” clearly does not, and may not be naturally taken to, provide a reason to believe that Singer’s principle takes no account of proximity or distance. Rather, it simply *illustrates* the idea that proximity or distance are morally irrelevant with an example.

**The “Argument Indicator Test.”** It is advisable to combine the Logical Relation Check with a test I call the “Argument Indicator Test.” It works as follows. Connect the statements in question with a relevant and reliable argument indicator, or merge them into one statement expressing the relevant logical support between those two statements. If, after careful reading, the result sounds natural and plausible in the given context, this indicates that the statements in question convey an argument.

When applied to (5) by inserting a conclusion indicator, we may get the following result: “Pete has a huge belly. So, he can’t be a soccer player.” Using a premise indicator instead, the result could be: “Pete can’t be a soccer player. After all, he has a huge belly.” Or when we merge them into one statement expressing the relevant logical support between them, we may get: “That Pete has a huge belly strongly suggests (or implies) that he can’t be a soccer player.” All of these outcomes appear natural and plausible. This supports the notion that these two statements are intended to constitute an argument. When applying this test to (11), we may get the following: “It is not very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. For every one of himself will readily perceive the difference between feeling and thinking.” Again, the result sounds fine. In (12) – our negative example – we get a negative result indeed: “That the principle takes no account of proximity or distance is implied (or strongly suggested) by the fact that it makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor’s child yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away.” Careful reading strongly suggests that this statement does not sound right. It seems that these two statements are not logically related in the way that the resulting statement suggests. This (in my view, correctly) indicates that these two statements are not intended to convey an argument.

**The “Doubtfulness Check.”** The “Doubtfulness Check” is based on the following fact: Usually, people *argue* that *p* only if they believe that the truth of *p* may be doubted, or that believing in it is not sufficiently justified. If someone believes that *p* is a self-evident, uncontroversial statement that will not be doubted by anyone, it would be unusual for such a person to feel the need to *argue* that *p* in addition to simply *stating* that *p*. When applying this aid to a particular statement, you have to ask yourself: “Is it reasonable to suppose in the given context that the author of this statement felt the need to *argue* that this statement is true?”

By the last sentence in (9), Russell seems to express a conclusion in an argument. This is confirmed by the Doubtfulness Check. The claim that “[t]he good life must be lived in a good society and is not fully possible otherwise” is clearly neither self-evident nor uncontroversial, and it seems reasonable to assume that Russell was aware of this fact. So, it is reasonable to assume that Russell felt the need to *argue* that it is true. Consider (12).

(12) Mary: *So, you know Mark very well.* *Does he have any siblings?* Pete: *Yes, he has two siblings*. *He has told me a lot about them. They seem to lead an adventurous life.*

The Logical Relation Check, as applied to (12), suggests that Pete’s first two statements are intended to constitute an argument. For the statement that Mark has told him [= *Pete*] a lot about his two siblings logically supports the statement that Mark has two siblings. Correspondingly, applications of the Argument Indicator Test do not lead to any obviously negative results. So, if we are purely focused on the application of these two aids, we might be led to the conclusion that these two statements are probably intended to constitute an argument. However, when we apply the Doubtfulness Check, it becomes obvious that this conclusion is unlikely to be correct. Before asking her question, Mary states that Pete knows Mark very well. This suggests that Mary will not see any reason to doubt the answer that Pete will provide. Moreover, it stands to reason that Pete is aware of this. So, in this context, it is not reasonable to suppose that Pete felt the need to *argue* that Mark has two siblings.

This case illustrates that this aid is an important supplement to the previous two. At the same time, it is important to note that we cannot rely on this aid alone. This is suggested by its application to (7). Most (if not all) of Lewis’ statements could be reasonably doubted. And it does not seem unreasonable to assume that Lewis was aware of this and, accordingly, felt the need to *argue* for one or other of these statements. And yet, closer inspection suggests that the statements in (7) are not supposed to stand in any argumentative relation. Thus, in this case, the application of the Doubtfulness Check could be misleading. Therefore, when in doubt, it is advisable to apply each of these aids rather than concentrating on just one.

These three aids are probably the most helpful ones for beginners when they are confronted with a passage in which statements are not explicitly connected.[[4]](#footnote-4) They are universally applicable and comparatively easy to grasp. Of course, they do not save you the hard work of reading passages very slowly and accurately, and you cannot expect them to provide unambiguous results in every case. But that is in the nature of things: text interpretation is a difficult matter, and all the more difficult the more difficult the texts are. Unfortunately, some texts are so opaque that there is no chance of arriving at the correct interpretation with any certainty. This is a major reason why certain texts in the history of philosophy – such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* or Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* – have undergone an unbroken chain of exegetical endeavors. Nevertheless, such aids can be generally useful. They help you to focus on relevant clues when trying to figure out whether or not a given passage conveys an argument.

Before we continue with the next section, I would like to briefly address what instructors should consider when implementing these aids in class. First, it should be clear that argument identification presupposes that students have a solid intuition as to when a statement (or the conjunction of several statements) logically supports another. If they do not have this intuition, then the first two aids presented will not help them much. Secondly, an instructor should be aware that argument identification is a special case of text interpretation, and that successfully interpreting demanding philosophical texts requires a certain habit: the habit of reading such texts slowly, carefully, and patiently. The topic of argument identification is a good opportunity to develop or cultivate this habit. To achieve this, instructors will have to think of suitable incentives for students to engage with text passages in this way, for this type of reading is much more strenuous than the usual way of reading texts. Thirdly, when these aids are introduced, students should first practice them on short constructed examples that dispense with certain difficulties of real texts (such as the use of highly complex sentence constructions, or excessively obscure language). For one thing, you have better control over the level of difficulty when using constructed examples; for another, at this initial stage of learning, the focus should be on getting used to these aids; certain difficulties of real texts do not contribute to achieving this goal, but rather tend to hinder it. Only when they are familiar with these aids should they be slowly introduced to real texts. When starting to introduce students to real texts, instructors should make sure that they start with simple examples. Since argument identification is such a demanding task, students can easily become overwhelmed and frustrated. Finally, when students are confronted with more demanding texts, it is important to emphasize to them that they may encounter cases where it is unclear whether a sequence of statements is intended to convey an argument or not, even after correctly applying the aids presented. It should be explained to them, and demonstrated with examples, that such unclarity is not necessarily due to a lack of interpretative competence; it may just as well be that an author has failed to make their intentions sufficiently clear. As Davis puts it, “[T]here will be many cases in which it is just not clear which analysis of a passage is correct […]. This will often be due to the passage’s vagueness or ambiguity rather than to your lack of logical acumen” (2011: 5).

**3.2 Conditionals**. Conditional statements can easily be, and indeed often are, mistaken for expressing arguments (cf. Davis 2011: 12-13, Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder & Wasserman 2012: 66-7, Govier 2013: 10, and Brun & Hadorn 2018: 211). Consider (13):

(13) Mary: *If human dignity is inviolable, then torture is inadmissible.*

At first glance, one might be tempted to interpret Mary as expressing an argument, with “Human dignity is inviolable” as a premise and “Torture is inadmissible” as the conclusion. This interpretation is false. An argument involves at least *two* statements. Given the form of what Mary says, it is clear that she states neither that torture is inadmissible, nor that human dignity is inviolable. Rather, she states that *if* human dignity is inviolable, *then* torture is inadmissible. In short, she merely makes *one* statement: a conditional statement. Mistaking conditionals for arguments is even more likely when they are expressed *indirectly*, as exemplified in (14).

(14) Mary: *Suppose that there is no such thing as free will. Then humans are not responsible for their deeds.*

In this case, too, Mary does not express an argument. She states neither that there is no such thing as free will, nor that humans are not responsible for their deeds.

**Instructor Guidelines**. Students should be aware that an argument involves at least *two* statements, and that therefore expressions of the form “If ... then ...” do not express arguments. To achieve this goal, instructors could use contrasts such as the following.

(15) Berlin is in France.

(16) Berlin is in France. Therefore, Berlin is in Europe.

(17) If Berlin is in France, then Berlin is in Europe.

Students will realize that (15) expresses a single statement (a false one), and that (16) expresses an argument (a nonstarter). By contrasting (17) with (16), it should be easy for them to realize that (17) does not express an argument, but a single statement (a true one).

For students to recognize that expressions of the form “Suppose ... . Then ...” do not express arguments, it should be sufficient to draw their attention to the fact that sentences of the form “Suppose ...” do not express statements, and to remind them that arguments are composed of statements, entities principally capable of being true or false. Instructors could ask their students whether (15) is true or false. Then they could present them (18), asking the very same question.

(18) Suppose that Berlin is in France.

Students should realize that there is something wrong with this question, thereby realizing that (18) is not a statement at all. Based on this, students should easily recognize that expressions of the form “Suppose ... . Then ...” do not express arguments.

**3.3 Examples**

Examples have different functions. One function of examples is to illustrate something. Consider (19).

(19) Here and there, the book has been updated to reflect recent events. For example, the concept of prejudice is now illustrated with a quotation from Donald Trump (5.4), and Mike Pence now represents opposition to gay rights (3.1). (Rachels 2018: xi)

The examples expressed in (19) serve to illustrate what kind of changes have been made in the updated version of the book. Consider another example.

(20) According to Bipolar theories, the differences in choice-worthiness among the most choiceworthy options, and among the least choiceworthy options, are zero or tiny compared to the differences in choiceworthiness between the most choiceworthy options and the least choiceworthy options. For example, a view according to which violating rights is impermissible, everything else is permissible, and where there is very little difference in the severity of wrongness between different wrong actions, would be a Bipolar theory. (MacAskill, Bykvist & Ord 2020: 87)

Here, the example serves to illustrate what a “Bipolar theory” could look like. Examples do not always have a (purely) illustrative function, though. They can also be part of arguments.

(21) Pete: *No believer portrays God as thoroughly evil*. Mary: *That’s not true. Some ancient Gnostics, for example, do*.

In (21) Mary provides an example of believers who (allegedly) portray God as thoroughly evil. The example she provides does not have an illustrative but an argumentative function. It serves to provide a sufficient reason for believing that Pete’s claim is false. Consider another example.

(22) [I]t is widely assumed in the literature that, if a moral justification for seeing a right to kill is sought, that justification must be on utilitarian grounds [...]. This seems to me prima facie a quite unwarranted assumption. […] For example, most are prepared to concede a right to kill in cases of self-defence; but it is here wildly implausible to suppose that a justification would be sought by appeal to utilitarian considerations. (Porter 1996: 165)

Porter gives an example of a case in which it is not plausible to assume that the assumption of a right to kill is justified by recourse to utilitarian considerations. This example does not have a (purely) illustrative function. It serves to *support* the statement “It is *prima* *facie* unwarranted to assume that the justification of a right to kill must be on utilitarian grounds.”

Sometimes, examples without an argumentative function are mistaken for being part of an argument (cf., e.g., Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder & Wasserman 2012: 64-5). Consider (23).

(23) Many scientists turn to music for rest and relaxation. Thus Einstein played the violin. (Davis 2011: 13)

Since the adverb “thus” is sometimes used to indicate conclusions, it is tempting to believe that the statement “Einstein played the violin” is here intended as a conclusion, and the statement “Many scientists turn to music for rest and relaxation” as the corresponding premise. This interpretation, however, appears doubtful, because it would amount to imputing a *patently* weak argument to the speaker. As Davis notes, “the fact that *many* scientists turn to music provides little support for the claim that *Einstein* did*,* and no support at all for the claim that Einstein specifically played the violin” (2011:13). A more plausible interpretation is that “Einstein played the violin” is *merely* intended to express an *example* of a scientist who turns to music for rest and relaxation. The danger of mistaking a non-argumentative example as part of an argument arises not only in cases where linguistic indicators are potentially misleading. Consider (24).

(24) [M]any popular religions are built around the idea that a divine judge will reward people for doing their duty. […] [I]n these religions, people are supposed to do their duty regard­less of whether they are rewarded. For example, the Christian is supposed to refrain from killing others because doing so is wrong. She must not make her choice to avoid killing conditional upon God enthroning her in Empyrean’s white rose. Even if there were no heaven or hell, and people simply vanished at death, Christians should still refrain from killing others. (Brennan & Jaworski 2022: 280)

Some may believe that the example given in (24) has an argumentative function, being intended to support the statement that in many religions, people are supposed to do their duty regardless of whether they are rewarded. This reading, however, is rather uncharitable, as the application of the Logical Relation Check in combination with the Argument Indicator Test suggests: “The fact that in many [!] religions, people are supposed to do their duty regardless of whether they are rewarded is supported by the fact that the Christian is supposed to refrain from killing others because doing so is wrong.” When rephrasing the relevant statements in (24) thus, it becomes apparent that the example does not logically support the putative conclusion at all. The example of *one* religion in which people are supposed to do their duty regardless of whether they are rewarded does not logically support the idea that this is the case in *many* religions. Thus, a more charitable, and probably more natural, interpretation is that the example in (24) has a merely illustrative function.

**Instructor Guidelines**. Since examples are often ascribed a merely illustrative function in argumentative texts, students should know that examples can also be *part* of an argument. Moreover, for students engaging with English texts, it is useful to know that the frequently used adverb “thus” is not a completely reliable argument indicator. Besides, there is one general aid that may prove helpful for inexperienced students when dealing with the question of whether an example is intended to support another statement.

**The “Modality and Quantification Check.”** This test requires you to check what modality the hypothetical conclusion preceding the given example has, and whether it is quantified (and if so, in what way). First, single examples are generally not capable of supporting statements expressing necessity or impossibility. Thus, we can expect there to be a tendency that people do not use single examples to support such statements. Consider (25).

(25) Mary: *Using a means to achieve an end, even though one knows that it is not suitable for achieving that end, is* ***necessarily*** *irrational. For example, using a nose trimmer to clean your teeth is irrational (assuming you know that this tool is not suitable for cleaning teeth).*

Even if we cannot rule out the possibility that Mary uses this example to support her first statement, it would at least be a very uncharitable interpretation. For even if it were true that using a nose trimmer to clean your teeth is irrational when you know that this tool is not suitable for cleaning teeth, this would clearly not logically support the idea that the deliberate use of unsuitable means to achieve certain ends is *necessarily* irrational. In general, that something is the case in one instance does not logically support the idea that it is necessarily the case in every instance. The same applies to impossibility. In general, that something is not the case in one instance does not logically support the idea that it cannot be the case.

Secondly, single examples are generally not capable of supporting statements that say, for example, that S is *always*, *often,* or *generally* the case, or that *all*, *most,* or *many* S have property P. Consider (26).

(26) [T]he Scriptures and church tradition are **often** ambiguous. Authorities disagree, leaving the believer in the awkward position of having to choose which part of the tradition to accept. For instance, the New Testament condemns being rich, and there is a long tradition of self-denial and charitable giving that affirms this teaching. But there is also an obscure Old Testament figure named Jabez who asked God to “enlarge my territories” (1 Chronicles 4:10), and God did. A recent book urging Christians to adopt Jabez as their model became a best seller. (Rachels 2018: 60; my emphasis)

The example given in (26) presents a plausible case of ambiguity. It would logically support the statement that the Scriptures and church tradition *can* be ambiguous. And if that had been Rachels’ statement, the Logical Relation Check would have provided some indication that Rachels’ example has an argumentative function. But Rachels’ statement is that Scriptures and church tradition are *often* ambiguous; and this statement is clearly not supported by Rachels’ example. Thus, on a charitable interpretation, the example is only supposed to *illustrate* how the Scriptures and church tradition can be ambiguous.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When implementing this aid in class, make sure to make its connection to the Logical Relation Check explicit. The Modality and Quantification Check is a *means* for correctly applying the Logical Relation Check in relevant cases of doubt. Finally, remind students that besides these two aids, the Argument Indicator Test and the Doubtfulness Check apply to examples as well.

**3.4 Clarification**

The issue of clarification is not (adequately) covered in standard textbooks I am familiar with. This is surprising, given that clarificatory statements are often erroneously represented as parts of arguments. That a statement is “clarificatory” means that it aims to make clearer (i.e. more intelligible) what you have in mind. Clarification differs from explanation. Explanations do not aim to make clearer what you have in mind, they aim to give an account of *why* what you have in mind is the case. Moreover, they differ from arguments. Arguments aim to provide a sufficient reason for believing a statement, clarifications do not. Typical means of clarification include providing definitions, restating statements in other words, expanding on statements previously made, making comparisons, or emphasizing what you *don*’*t* mean by a given statement. For reasons of space, I shall restrict myself to addressing the first three means mentioned.

Definitions. There are different kinds of definition. First, there is the so-called “analytic” (or “lexical” or “descriptive”) definition. This kind of definition aims to represent or clarify the meaning or reference an expression already has. “‘Vixen’ means *female* *fox* (in English)” is an example of an analytic definition. Moreover, there is the so-called “stipulative” (or “technical”) definition. This kind of definition stipulates the meaning or reference of an expression, for example, by *attaching* a (new) meaning or reference to this expression. “Let the term ‘MD-facts’ refer to *facts that are mind-dependent*” is an example of such a definition. Another type of definition, which goes back to Rudolf Carnap, is the “explication” (cf. ibid. 1947: 7-8; 1962: 3). An explication aims to precisify an existing meaning or reference of an expression. “In the following, the term ‘child’ will refer to any human being below the age of majority” is an example of such a definition. While analytic definitions can be true or false, stipulations and explications cannot (cf., e.g., Davis 2011: 440). They do not make statements about the world. Rather, they aim to regulate our use and interpretation of certain expressions. Thus, while analytic definitions can serve the function of a premise or a conclusion, explications and stipulations cannot. For premises and conclusions are *statements*, entities principally capable of being true or false.[[6]](#footnote-6) Consider (27).

(27) Mary: *By stipulation,* *“antinatalism” refers to the view that human beings should stop procreating. If antinatalism is true, then we should make the voluntary decision not to have children more attractive. Antinatalism is true. Therefore, we should make the voluntary decision not to have children more attractive.*

(27) represents an argument. However, Mary cannot rationally intend the first sentence to express a premise of that argument, as it is a stipulative definition with a purely clarificatory function. By contrast, (28) and (29) illustrate how (analytic) definitions can be genuine parts of an argument.

(28) Pete: *“Moral intentions” are, by definition, directed at the well-being of others. Therefore, purely self-regarding intentions are non-moral.*

(29) Mary: *On most people’s intuitions, intentions that are exclusively aimed at improving the agent’s own well-being cannot be consistently called “moral intentions.” Thus, the term “moral intention” in its ordinary sense refers to intentions that are not purely self-regarding.*

In (28), Pete deductively argues that purely self-regarding intentions are non-moral. His argument comprises only one premise, which is a (partial) analytic definition of “moral intention.” In (29), Mary deductively argues that the term “moral intention” in its ordinary sense refers to intentions that are not purely self-regarding. What she argues for is a (partial) analytic definition of “moral intention.”

Careful writers linguistically indicate whether a definition they provide is intended as analytic, explicative, or stipulative. Linguistic indicators of explicative and stipulative definitions include the subjunctive mood and phrases such as “Let us say that *e* means …” or “I shall call … *e*.” When such indicators are missing, it is much more difficult to recognize the intentions behind a definition, especially when terms of ordinary language are at stake. Consider (30), a passage from Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

(30) Every thing [*sic*] in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the faculty to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, i.e. in accordance with principles, or a *will*. Since for the derivation of actions from laws reason is required, the will is nothing other than practical reason. (Kant 2018: 26 [4: 412])

In (30), Kant (implicitly) defines the “will” as *the faculty to act in accordance with the representation of laws*. It is not clear, however, whether this definition is intended as analytic or non-analytic. Since this definition quite obviously does not correspond to any ordinary sense of “will,” it seems reasonable to assume that it is intended to be stipulative. On the other hand, there is no clear evidence that it is intended as such. Sometimes such difficult cases simply cannot be resolved. Sometimes one may arrive at a reasonable assumption by finding clues in the wider context of a passage.

**Instructor Guidelines**. For success with definitions in argument identification, students must first know and understand the distinction between analytic and non-analytic definitions. Since definitions are about expression meaning and expression reference, it would be ideal if they already had a basic grasp of the concepts of expression meaning and expression reference. But even if they do not, there are ways to teach students the difference between analytic and non-analytic definitions in an economical way, at least to the extent that they will be able to deal with many situations in which definitions occur.

Start by turning your students’ attention to the fact that some expressions have meaning (in English), and some do not. You could, for example, present students with a mixed sequence of expressions, some of which have meaning (in English) (e.g. “building,” “improve,” “sleepy”) and some of which do not (e.g. “blorp,” “lempf,” “zoddly”). The task for students is to identify the expressions with meaning (in English) and to paraphrase their meanings in other words.

After making students aware that some expressions have meaning and some do not, make them realize that the meanings of expressions of ordinary English are usually *conventional*. As Davis puts it,

[T]he meaning of individual words, as well as the non-compositional meaning of idioms, is given in terms of what ideas they are conventionally used to directly express. The meaning of compositional compounds is provided by a recursion clause, based on conventions to use certain expression structures to express certain idea structures. *Convention* here means “custom” or “practice established by general consent or common usage.” (Davis 2017: 39; see Davis 2003 and Davis 2005 for an in-depth exposition and defense of these views)

Thus, “actress” means *female actor* because it is conventional for people to directly express the idea of a female actor by using the expression “actress.” “Underrated actress” means *female* *actor* *who is underrated* roughly in virtue of conventions regarding the individual words “underrated” and “actress” and the convention to use the expression structure “Adj. + N” to directly express the idea structure *N who is Adj*.

This is useful background knowledge for instructors. In the context of argument identification, it should be sufficient to give students an even rougher idea of conventional expression meaning. Here is a sketch of an idea to achieve this goal. An instructor might tell their students that they are now redefining a few English expressions: “have” shall now mean *where*, “you” shall mean *is*, “gone” shall mean *the*, “completely” shall mean *train,* and “crazy” shall mean *station*. Then, the instructor asks one of their students (in a jocular manner), “Excuse me, have you gone completely crazy?” He then asks the students, “What would be an appropriate response to this question after some of the English terms have been redefined accordingly?” Students can be expected to say that giving directions to the station would be an appropriate response. Then the instructor asks what might happen if you leave the classroom and approach a stranger on the street with this question. Students will certainly recognize that the strangers will be quite irritated and probably feel provoked. The instructor then asks for an explanation of this behavior. Students could say that the strangers do not know our definitions, that they understand the terms as they are customarily used.

This provides the instructor with a basis for distinguishing conventional expression meaning from non-conventional expression meaning. The stranger on the street would take us to mean *Excuse me, have you gone completely crazy?* by our question, because this is the conventional meaning of the question. By contrast, the meaning the question has in virtue of the previous re-definitions is not conventional: it is not conventional for people to mean *Excuse me, where is the train station?* by “Excuse me, have you gone completely crazy?”

On this basis, the instructor can finally introduce the difference between analytic and non-analytic definitions. An “analytic” definition, the instructor could point out, aims at *representing* or *clarifying* a conventional meaning of this expression. The definition is true if it correctly represents or clarifies this meaning, it is false if it incorrectly represents or clarifies this meaning. Thus, for example, “‘Bachelor’ means *unmarried person*” is a false analytic definition, because it is too broad. For on this definition, an unmarried woman is a bachelor, and it is unconventional for people to apply the expression *bachelor* to women. A “non-analytic” definition, the instructor might continue, aims at *regulating* how an expression – either an existing expression or a new expression – is to be understood or to be used. When the definition attaches a new meaning to that expression, this meaning will be unconventional, as long as it has not caught on. Non-analytic definitions cannot be true or false, for they are not statements about the world. Thus, for example, the definition “Let us say that ‘antinatalism’ refers to any view that is critical of procreation” is not a statement; it merely regulates how the term “antinatalism” is to be understood or to be used. Since students are likely to be unfamiliar with non-analytic definitions, an instructor should conclude this teaching sequence by discussing when and why non-analytic definitions may be useful (cf., e.g., Davis 2011: 440-1 for a list of useful applications).

In addition to teaching students the difference between analytic and non-analytic definitions, instructors should point out that analytic definitions can be rationally used as parts of arguments, while non-analytic definitions cannot (they are not statements capable of being true or false), and that it is, therefore, to be expected that non-analytic definitions are usually not intended as parts of arguments. Moreover, students should know that there are linguistic indicators for analytic and non-analytic definitions, which is the basis of the “Definition Indicator Check.”

**The “Definition Indicator Check.”** When you come across a definition, pay attention to its linguistic form. (31)-(34) offer examples of analytic definitions, and (35)-(38) of non-analytic definitions, each having a different linguistic form.

(31) “Vixen” means *female fox*.

[“*e*” means *m*.]

(32) That a person is “lazy” means that this person is unwilling to work or to use any effort.

[That X is “*e*” means that X is *m*.]

(33) A bachelor is a man who has not yet married.

[An *e* is *m*.]

(34) An intention is a “moral” intention only if it is directed at the well-being of others.

[An X is “*e*” only if X is *m*.]

(35) Let us say that “moral realism” refers to the view that there is at least one moral fact.

[Let us say that “*e*” refers to *m*.]

(36) Take “abstract object” to mean any object without a spatiotemporal location.

[Take “*e*” to mean *m*.]

(37) We shall use the term “murder” to denote any intentional act of killing.

[We shall use “*e*” to mean *m*.]

(38) By “social facts” we understand facts that involve social interaction.

[By “*e*” we understand *m*.]

Students should be confronted with examples of analytic and non-analytic definitions with different linguistic forms. However, it would not be very effective to have them memorize such forms. There are just too many. Instead, studying such examples should help them develop a sense of when a linguistic form indicates an analytic and when it indicates a non-analytic definition. Another, very practical aid for deciding whether a definition is analytic or non-analytic is what I call the “Negation Test.” It is based on the fact that only analytic definitions are principally capable of being true or false.

**The “Negation Test.”** Test whether the definition can be negated using the form “It is not the case that *p*.” If it cannot, the definition is non-analytic. If it can, it may be analytic. When applying this test to (35), we get the correct result that this definition is non-analytic: “It is not the case that let us say that ‘moral realism’ refer to the view that there is at least one moral fact” is ungrammatical. When applying the test to (31), we get the correct result that this definition may be analytic. For it is perfectly fine to say: “It is not the case that ‘vixen’ means *female fox*.” The application of this test entails that this definition *may* be analytic. Why does it not entail that it *is* analytic? It is because sometimes, non-analytic definitions are expressed *indirectly* by directly expressing statements that are capable of being true or false, and that are therefore capable of being negated. (37) and (38) are examples of such cases. Taken literally, (37), for example, merely says something about the respective authors of this sentence. It says that they (the authors) shall use the term “murder” to denote any intentional act of killing. This may be true or false (false when they use the term differently in some place). Thus, what (37) literally expresses is not a definition; it is a statement about the authors. However, as anyone familiar with non-analytic definitions knows, it is conventional for people to use sentences with such forms to *indirectly* express non-analytic definitions. In fact, it is rarely the case that people use sentences with such forms merely in a literal sense.

Finally, students should know where both aids reach their limits. The example of Kant’s definition of “will” in (30) is such a case. It certainly *looks* like an analytic definition, but given its content, this interpretation may be doubted. Sometimes, such cases can be resolved by finding clues in the wider context. Sometimes, however, there are no such clues. In such cases, we have to be content with speculation.

Restatements and Expansions. Rather common means of clarification are the restatement of a previously made statement in other words or the expansion of such a statement. Unless restatements and expansions are introduced by clarification indicators (such as “that is,” “put differently,” “in other words”), they often render the structure of an argumentative passage less transparent and thereby complicate the identification of the argument.

Consider (39), which presents a passage from Richard Dawkins’ *God Delusion* (2007).

(39) Many people who concede that God probably doesn’t exist, and that he is not necessary for morality, still come back with what they often regard as a trump card: the alleged psychological or emotional *need* for a god.[…]The first thing to say in response to this is something that should need no saying. **[**Religion’s power to console doesn’t make it true.**]1 [**Even if we make a huge concession; even if it were conclusively demonstrated that belief in God’s existence is completely essential to human psychological and emotional well-being; even if all atheists were despairing neurotics driven to suicide by relentless cosmic angst – none of this would contribute the tiniest jot or tittle of evidence that religious belief is true.**]2** (Dawkins 2007: 352)

As [1] and the context indicate, Dawkins seems to argue against the idea that the power of religious belief to console is evidence for its truth. For inexperienced students, it might appear that [2] contains Dawkins’ argument *against* this view. On closer inspection, however, this is not a plausible interpretation. Rather, it seems that [2] is merely a clarificatory *expansion* of [1]. It aims to clarify Dawkins’ idea that the power of religious belief to console is no evidence for its truth by presenting it in more detail.

Let us consider another case. (40) presents a passage from Richard Swinburne’s book *Is There a God?* (2010). The passage is from a chapter in which Swinburne argues that if there is a God, then it is to be expected that there are certain evils (cf. ibid.: 84).

(40) **The free-will defence** claims that it is a great good that humans have a certain sort of freewill **[**which I shall call free and responsible choice**]1**, but that, if they do, then necessarily there will be the natural possibility of moral evil. **[**(By the ‘natural possibility’ I mean that it will not be determined in advance whether or not the evil will occur.)**]2** **[**A God who gives humans such free will necessarily bring[s] about the possibility, and puts outside his own control whether or not that evil occurs.**]3** **[**It is not logically possible—that is, it would be self-contradictory to suppose—that God could give us such free will and yet ensure that we always use it in the right way.**]4** (Swinburne 2010: 86; Swinburne’s emphasis)

This passage is more difficult. One wonders if it even contains an argument, and if so, what its content and structure are. What is clear, however, is that [1] and [2] are stipulative definitions that serve to clarify two essential terms in Swinburne’s argumentation. But what about [3] and [4]? They seem to be related to what Swinburne previously said. [3] seems to be related to Swinburne’s statement that if humans have free and responsible choice, then necessarily, there will be the natural possibility of moral evil. Given its content, [3] could be considered a clarificatory expansion, an explanation, or even an argument. I conjecture that it is intended as an expansion, but this is, in my view, one of the cases that cannot be resolved with full confidence. The function of [4] seems more obvious. Its content is so similar to [3] that it can be plausibly regarded as a clarificatory *restatement* of what Swinburne intends to communicate with [3]. If this analysis is correct, this passage contains no argument, despite appearances. Consider a final example.

(41) It is worth mentioning that, **[**according to the account which we have given of religious assertions, there is no logical ground for antagonism between religion and natural science.**]1** **[**As far as the question of truth or falsehood is concerned, there is no opposition between the natural scientist and the theist who believes in a transcendent god.**]2** **[**For since the religious utterances of the theist are not genuine propositions at all, they cannot stand in any logical relation to the propositions of science.**]3** (Ayer 1936: 122-3)

This passage consists of three statements. Upon first glance, it may appear that [1] and [2] jointly convey an argument, [1] being the conclusion and [2] the respective premise. But when reading this passage more carefully, this interpretation seems implausible. For it seems that [2] conveys more or less the same as [1]; it seems to be a mere clarificatory *restatement* (or, at best, a slight *expansion*) of [1]. And [3] – being introduced by the premise indicator “for” – is apparently intended to provide a sufficient reason for believing what these two statements convey.

**Instructor Guidelines**. When clarification indicators are missing, statements together with their restatements or expansions are a special case of unmarked sequences of statements dealt with in section 3.1. Thus, most of the advice formulated there applies here as well. To start with, students must be willing to engage in very slow, careful, and patient reading. Only with such a manner of reading do they have a chance to grasp the content of more difficult passages to an extent that they can reasonably judge whether or not a statement in a given passage says more or less the same as another statement in that passage (only in other words, or in more detail).

Students need to know, however, that the mere fact that a statement says more or less the same as another (only in other words, or in more detail) is only an *indication* that it is meant as a clarificatory restatement or expansion. Such a statement could just as well be intended as a premise in an (unintentionally question-begging) argument. We cannot rule out the possibility of such logical errors from the outset. Unfortunately, it is to be expected that in some cases it is impossible to decide with certainty which interpretation fits an author’s intentions. This, of course, should not stop us from trying our best and using all the interpretative aids available to us. In addition to the universally applicable aids previously introduced – particularly the Logical Relation Check and the Argument Indicator Test –, another aid may be helpful when dealing with statements that are possibly clarificatory restatements or expansions. It can be called the “Clarification Indicator Test.”

**The “Clarification Indicator Test.”** Introduce the statement that might be a clarificatory restatement or an expansion with a clarification indicator, such as “that is,” “put differently” or “in other words.” If, after careful reading, the result sounds natural and plausible in the given context, this indicates that the statement is indeed a clarificatory restatement or expansion. Let us apply this test to (39): “Religion’s power to console doesn’t make it true. That is, even if we make a huge concession; even if it were conclusively demonstrated that belief in God’s existence is completely essential to human psychological and emotional well-being; even if all atheists were despairing neurotics driven to suicide by relentless cosmic angst – none of this would contribute the tiniest jot or tittle of evidence that religious belief is true.” The result sounds natural and plausible indeed, which suggests that taking the last part of this passage as a clarificatory expansion is a plausible interpretation.

**3.5 Explanation**. A widespread, and widely recognized[[7]](#footnote-7), confusion is that between arguments and explanations. There are several types of explanation. When I speak of “explanations,” I mean causal and all other explanations that provide appropriate answers to questions of the form “Why *p*?”. Consider (42).

(42) Pete: *Why is Jack depressed?* Mary: *He is depressed because his girlfriend broke up with him.*

In (42), Mary does not *argue* *that* Pete is depressed. Rather, she *explains* *why* he is depressed. Notice that neither Mary nor Pete *states* that Jack is depressed; instead, they *presuppose* it. They seem to regard it as an established fact that Jack is depressed. Contrast (43).

(43) Pete: *Is Jack depressed?* Mary: *Yes, he is depressed. His girlfriend told me yesterday.*

In (43), Mary does not explain *why* Pete is depressed. Rather, she *argues that* he is depressed. In this case, Pete’s question does not *presuppose* that Jack is depressed; neither does Mary’s answer. By saying “yes,” she *states* that Pete is depressed.

One fact that fosters the confusion of argument and explanation is that both have to do with *reasons*: An argument involves the intention to provide a (sufficient) reason *to* *believe that* something is the case; an explanation involves the intention to provide a reason *why* something is the case. But as the contrast between (42) and (43) indicates, some observations enable us to keep arguments and explanations apart. If you argue that something is the case, you *necessarily* *state* that it is the case, and, correspondingly, you do not regard what you argue for as an established fact.[[8]](#footnote-8) By contrast, if you explain why something is the case, you do *not necessarily* state that it is the case, and correspondingly, you typically regard what you explain as an established fact.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Notwithstanding these differences, there are unfortunate cases in which we cannot judge with full confidence whether a passage in a text is intended as an argument or as an explanation. Consider (44), which is from Lavery, Hughes and Doran (2015: 76).

(44) *Jim’s health is good because he has a healthy diet and gets plenty of exercise.*

As the authors suggest,

We can imagine a context in which both the speaker and the audience know that Jim’s health is good, and the speaker wants to explain why this is so. But we can also imagine a context in which they know that Jim has a healthy diet and gets plenty of exercise, and the speaker wants to argue that Jim is in good health. (Ibid.)

In the absence of any further information, we cannot decide which is the correct interpretation.[[10]](#footnote-10) Fortunately, in most cases, there is sufficient evidence for a correct interpretation. But even in such cases, we must be very careful. The following example illustrates how easily explanations can be mistaken for arguments even by experts.

In his introduction to argument analysis, Löwenstein (2022) suggests that in the following passage, Thomas Nagel argues that philosophical problems come up again and again, even for people who have not read about them (cf. ibid.: 18-9).

Our analytical capacities are often highly developed before we have learned a great deal about the world, and around the age of fourteen many people start to think about philosophical problems on their own – about what really exists, whether we can know anything, whether anything is really right or wrong, whether life has any meaning, whether death is the end. These problems have been written about for thousands of years, but the philosophical raw material comes directly from the world and our relation to it, not from writings of the past. That is why they come up again and again, in the heads of people who haven’t read about them. (Nagel 1987: 2-3)

Löwenstein’s reconstruction of the putative argument in this passage is as follows.

**P1**.Philosophical problems come directly from the world and our relation to it.

**P2**. Things that come directly from the world and our relation to it, come up again and again, even for people who have not read about them. (**Implicit premise**)

**K**.Philosophical problems come up again and again, even for people who have not read about them.

(Ibid.: 192, my translation)

Considering this reconstruction, it seems that Löwenstein took the phrase “that is why”[[11]](#footnote-11) introducing the last sentence in the quoted passage to be an argument indicator. However, it is not. Rather, it indicates an *explanation*. In the passage quoted, Nagel intends to *explain* *why*, rather than *argue that*, philosophical problems “come up again and again, in the heads of people who haven’t read about them.” Nagel does not seem to think that this statement requires *support*, that any of his readers might *doubt* *the truth* of this statement. Rather, he seems to assume, for good reason, that this statement refers to an established fact. And he seems to think that this fact requires an *explanation*, that some of his readers might wonder *why* philosophical problems come up again and again, in the heads of people who have not read about them.

That Nagel offers an explanation rather than an argument is also supported by the fact that a restatement of the relevant text passage using a reliable explanation indicator, such as “due to this,” seems likelier to capture what Nagel intends to convey than a restatement using a reliable argumentation indicator, such as “this shows that.” Finally, Nagel’s passage, while plausible when taken as expressing an explanation, is implausible, and even odd, when taken as expressing an argument. This is reflected in Löwenstein’s reconstruction, in which **P2** is an implausible statement.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This example not only illustrates how careful we must be when analyzing a text. It also illustrates how important it is to be clear about which linguistic expressions are *actual* as well as *reliable* indicators of arguments or explanations respectively. Thus, for instance, while “because,” “therefore,” “so,” “thus” or “since” may be used to indicate arguments, they are not reliable (see, e.g., Henkemans 1997, Eemeren, Houtlosser & Henkemans 2007: ch. 5, Davis 2011: 13-4, Govier 2013: 14-5, Brun & Hadorn 2018: 213).

**Instructor Guidelines**. To start with, students should grasp the difference between arguments and explanations. Here is a rough idea of how this could be achieved. Confront your students with a random statement. Let us take (45) as an example.

(45) Pete was at home.

Now, ask the students to consider: Which of the following statements provides satisfactory information for his friend Mary who is wondering *why* Pete was at home, and which provides satisfactory information for an investigator who is not sure *whether* Pete was at home?

(46) He was tired.

(47) The neighbors said that they had seen him at home all the time.

Students will see that (46) provides satisfactory information for Mary, and that (47) provides satisfactory information for the investigator. To deepen their understanding, ask the students why (47) would *not* provide satisfactory information for Mary. They might, for example, say that (47) does not state a plausible *reason why* Pete stayed at home, or a plausible *cause* of his staying at home.

At this point, an instructor has a sufficient basis to establish the difference between explanations and arguments. For Mary, it is an established fact that Pete was at home. She is simply asking for an *explanation* as to *why* Pete was at home. For the investigator, however, it is *not* an established fact that Pete was at home. The investigator is asking for an *argument that* he was at home. Explanations provide a *reason* *why* something is the case; arguments provide a sufficient *reason to believe* *that* something is the case. Once this has been worked out, students should be confronted with exercises to consolidate this knowledge.

After they have mastered the difference between explanations and arguments, students should be made aware that explanations can easily be misinterpreted as arguments, even though they are frequently accompanied by linguistic indicators. The following two examples may serve as an illustration (cf. Davis 2011: 13).

(48) The missing plane crashed, because the wreckage was found.

(49) The missing plane crashed because an instrument malfunctioned.

Superficially, there is hardly any formal difference between (48) and (49). Both involve two statements that are connected by “because.” But as the students are already sensitized to the difference between explanation and argument, they will recognize that on the most natural interpretation, (48) expresses an argument for the statement *that* the missing plane crashed (where the wreckage found is offered as evidence for the crash), while (49) expresses an explanation *why* the missing plane crashed (referring to a malfunctioning instrument as the essential cause).

The contrast between (48) and (49) not only illustrates the danger of confusing explanations with arguments. It also illustrates that “because” is neither a reliable argument nor a reliable explanation indicator. In this context, it may be natural to give students some examples of (fairly) reliable explanation indicators (e.g., “this is why,” “due to,” “the reason why,” “as a result of,” “on grounds of”).

Knowing the difference between explanations and arguments and being aware that they can be easily confused is a good basis for dealing with explanations in argument identification. In addition to that, students should be reminded of general aids that may help them identify (non-)arguments. In this context, the Doubtfulness Check may be particularly helpful. Remember that explananda in explanations are typically regarded as established facts, while conclusions in arguments are not. Thus, when someone offers an explanation in a context that is not completely ambiguous or obscure, the result of the Doubtfulness Check should be negative. This is confirmed by the Nagel example. According to Löwenstein’s analysis, Nagel’s statement that philosophical problems come up again and again, in the heads of people who haven’t read about them is a conclusion. But is it reasonable to suppose that Nagel felt the need to argue that this statement is true? In my view, it is not, for it refers to an obvious fact, and Nagel was certainly aware of that. As a contrast, let us consider an example in which the result of the Doubtfulness Check seems to be positive.

(50) An opinion piece for a major newspaper or a syndicated column may be read by tens of thousands or even millions, and some of these readers will change their minds on an important issue, and may even change the way they live. **[**I know that happens**]1**, because **[**people have told me that my writing has led them to stop eating animal products, changed what they donate to charity, or, in at least one case, to donate a kidney to a stranger.**]2** (Singer 2023: xiii)

In this passage, [1] is either an explanandum or a conclusion. Applying the Doubtfulness Check, we have to ask ourselves: Is it reasonable to suppose that Singer felt the need to argue that he *knows* that such big changes happen as a result of reading opinion pieces? I think the answer is “yes.” Knowing *p* implies that *p* is the case; and given the numerous psychological biases human beings tend to have, it is not obvious that people do in fact change their minds or may even change the way they live as a result of reading opinion pieces. So, it seems reasonable for Singer to *argue* that he knows that such changes happen. This speaks in favor of assuming that [1] is a conclusion. Given that it is very natural to read [2] as being intended to offer evidence in support of [1], this seems like a very plausible assumption.

Another aid that may prove helpful when it comes to figuring out whether a text sequence is to be interpreted as an argument or an explanation is what I call the “Explanation Indicator Test.”

**The “Explanation Indicator Test.”** It works like the Argument Indicator Test, and it is advisable to use it in combination with it. Connect the statements in question with a relevant and reliable explanation indicator. If, after careful reading, the result sounds natural and plausible in the given context, this indicates that the statements convey an explanation. Consider the following example.

(51) Pete: *Mary stole the money, because three people reported seeing her do it.*

Using both tests at the same time, we may restate what Pete says in (51) in the following two ways: (a) “Mary stole the money. This is obvious from the fact that three people reported seeing her do it.” (b) “Mary stole the money, which is due to the fact that three people reported seeing her do it.” Obviously, (a) sounds more natural and more plausible in the given context. Indeed, (b) hardly makes sense. This suggests that (51) is more plausibly interpreted as expressing an argument.

Before concluding this section, I would like to give one final advice. In order to prevent possible confusion, make it clear to students that while explanations are not arguments, explanatory statements can be *part* of an argument, as (52) and (53) illustrate.

(52) Mary: **[***Pete stole the money because he needed it to buy food.***]**Premise *From this it follows that Pete’s intentions were not evil.*

(53) Mary: *Pete is known as a good-hearted man. This is sufficient evidence that* **[***the reason he stole the money was because he wanted to use it for a good cause.***]**Conclusion

**4. Conclusion**

After clarifying the sense of “argument” applied in this paper, I presented and discussed several types of phenomena that are easily misidentified as expressing (part of) arguments. Specifically, I addressed unmarked sequences of statements, conditionals, examples, clarifications (including definitions, restatements, and expansions), and explanations. For each of these phenomena, I provided guidelines on how to help students recognize it.[[13]](#footnote-13) It should have become clear that the problem of non-argumentative phenomena can be quite delicate, therefore meriting further exploration in philosophy didactics. Among other things, the guidelines on how to help students recognize these phenomena could be further developed. In this connection, it would be desirable to develop more concrete proposals on how to implement these guidelines methodically and didactically in class. In general, it would be desirable to have publicly accessible, well-thought-out worksheets on this topic, differentiated according to students’ age or level of skill.[[14]](#footnote-14)

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1. Cf., e.g., Johnson & Blair 1994: 10, Davis 2011: 6, Wright 2012: 405, Feldman 2013: 16, Govier 2013: 1, Copi, Cohen & McMahon 2014: 6, Kelley 2014: 69, Lavery, Hughes & Doran 2015: 4, Vaughn: 2018: 16, Dowden 2020: 25, Wilson 2020: 6. The current trend in philosophy didactics of argumentation, at least in German-speaking areas, is to adopt a definition of this kind for teaching. Cf., e.g., Pfister 2013: 20, Roeger 2015: 63, Althoff & Franzen 2018: 230-1, Althoff & Franzen 2019: 418, Pfister 2020: 31, Pfister, Zimmermann & Kuenzle: 2021: 27, Burkard 2021: 35, Burkard et al. 2021: 75, Franzen, Burkard & Löwenstein 2022: 12. I plan to explain in a future paper why adopting such a definition, at least in the school context, is problematic. The significance of my present paper is unaffected by that. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This definition is most similar to Davis’s (2011: 6). Some readers may know that there are many subtle variants of the standard technical definition. On some definitions, for example, the premises are “intended to provide,” “supposed to provide” or “offered as providing” a (sufficient) reason for believing the conclusion. On other definitions, the conclusion is claimed (or intended or supposed) to “follow” from the premises. Such details of formulation in the definition of “argument” are largely irrelevant in the present context. If you prefer a different variant of the standard technical definition of “argument,” most (if not everything) of what follows in this paper will still be relevant to you. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The phenomenon addressed in this subsection is also briefly discussed by Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder & Wasserman (2012: 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wilson (2020: 35-6) suggests another aid, which may be called the “Question Check.” It is based on the observation that in argumentative texts, conclusions of arguments are sometimes answers to certain questions raised somewhere in the context of the relevant passage. The test works as follows: “When there are no inference indicators, look in the wider context for the question being asked; the proposed answer to it is usually the conclusion” (Wilson 2020: 36). The main problem I see with this aid is its limited applicability. The questions to which conclusions could be answers are not always explicitly raised. It may therefore be difficult to find such a question in many particular cases. Moreover, in complex argumentations, it is (usually) at best the “main” conclusions that may be answers to such questions. Many of the sub-conclusions within such an argumentation are usually not answers to such questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For other illustrations of the Modality and Quantification Check, see the discussion of (23) and (24), in which it was tacitly applied. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Two things are worth noting. First, while explications and stipulations cannot serve the function of a premise or a conclusion, *references* to explications or stipulations can. *References* to definitions can be statements, irrespective of what kind of definition is at stake. Thus, the statement that Mill defines “happiness” as *pleasure and the absence of pain* can be a premise or a conclusion in an argument, while Mill’s definition of “happiness” *itself* (arguably) cannot, for it is (arguably) intended as a stipulation.

   Second, a reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper challenged the claim that stipulative definitions cannot be premises. He offered the following example as a counterexample: “Let’s say that Blarghs are all and only Franconian or Bavarian dogs. Hasso is a Franconian dog. Therefore, Hasso is a Blargh.” Admittedly, it *looks* like a counterexample, but it is not. Premises are statements. The first sentence does not express a statement. It is in the optative mood, marked by the “let’s say” phrase. So, the definition *cannot* serve the function of a premise.

   Contrast the following example: “Mary stipulatively defines *Blarghs* as *dogs that are either Franconian or Bavarian*. Hasso is a Franconian dog. Therefore, Hasso is a Blargh in Mary’s sense of the term.” Here, we have an example of a (valid) argument, consisting of two premises. But the premises do not include a stipulative definition. Rather, they include the *reference* to a stipulative definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Henkemans 1997, Davis: 2011: 13-4, Howard-Snyder, Howard-Snyder & Wasserman 2012: 65, Govier: 2013: 13-17, Kelley 2014: 70-1, Lavery, Hughes & Doran 2015: 74-5, Eemeren & Henkemans 2016: 37, Lack & Rousseau 2016: 56-7, Brun & Hadorn 2018: 210-1, Vaughn: 2018: 13, Wilson 2020: 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Otherwise, it would not make much sense to *argue* that it is the case. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sometimes people do *state* what they explain. Pete may say: “If you throw a stone into the air, it will eventually fall back to the ground. This is due to the force of gravity.” Here, Pete both states that and explains why a stone will fall back to the ground if you throw it into the air. Notice, however, that in such cases, too, what is explained is at least *typically* regarded as an established fact. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Another difficulty is presented by cases where authors can be plausibly interpreted as explaining and arguing at the same time. Assume that a recent murder case is being discussed. People guess about the identity of the murderer. Pete then says, “I think Susan is the murderer because she was a longtime enemy of the victim.” It is plausible to think that by saying this, Pete directly *explains* why he *thinks* that Susan is the murderer, and at the same time *indirectly* *argues* *that* she is. But while it is plausible to think so, it is often hard to find conclusive evidence for such an interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The German translation Löwenstein uses reads as follows: “das ist auch der Grund, warum” (ibid.: 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A reviewer of an earlier draft suggested that Nagel’s passage may be plausibly read as offering an *inference to the best explanation*. An inference to the best explanation is a kind of argument taking the following form: *There is the observation that p. Observation p is best explained by q*. *Therefore, q.* The suggestion was that Löwenstein’s K takes the place of *p*, and his P1 the place of *q*. This would indeed result in an argument which seems to be plausible. However, why should we believe that this reconstruction adequately captures what *Nagel* intends to convey in this passage? There is no textual evidence favouring the idea that Nagel intends to offer an inference to the best explanation. So, this suggestion is unfounded. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper suggested that my guidelines fail to mention an important well-established tool: “the standard way of restating an argument in order to find out whether one has gotten a plausible interpretation of what justifies what: argument reconstructions with numbered premises and conclusions.” This suggestion is confused. This paper is about the *identification* of arguments, not their reconstruction. Reconstruction *logically proceeds* identification. Thus, a tool for reconstruction cannot help with identification. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of this journal for helping me improve this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)