notes

Arguings and Arguments

Fred Johnson
Colorado State University

In [1] Spangler characterizes Fogelin's definition of "argument" in [2] as being non-teleological and claims that such a definition will not work for a course in informal logic. Spangler says: "The idea of an argument as a series of statements 'connected' in various ways leaves out of the story of argumentation its most important character, viz., the arguer and his purposes." (p. 29) What bothers me about Fogelin's discussion is that he does not leave the arguer out of his understanding of arguments. Indeed, he treats arguments and parts of arguments as if they were arguers. Fogelin says: "Sometimes the primary intention of an argument is not to establish some truth, but rather to criticize or refute an argument presented by another." (p. 103) And he says: "...they [the warranting connectives, such as 'since' and 'so'] present one or more statements as the warrant or backing for some other statement." (p. 39) Fogelin gives conflicting accounts of what an argument is. For him, arguments are both passive entities—series of statements connected in various ways—and active entitites that intend and have parts that **present.**

The natural response that Fogelin might make to the above charge of inconsistency is that his talk about arguments as having intentions is not to be taken literally. How boring it would be if we could not jazz up our talk and speak as if the lifeless had life! But this response seems weak to me. Granted, people who know cars may, with benefit, whimsically describe their cars as feeling ill and as wanting to go to the doctor. But would it be wise to talk in this way to someone who needs to know, but does not know, what a car is? No. And our students need to recognize arguments, but too few of them can do so.

My view is that arguments are passive, and I construe talk about arguments in this way. So, when I read the following passage I do not think that the author is saying that arguments have misconceptions, but that Holzman does. "...Professor Holzman suggests that all Soviet military forces allocated to the Far East should be excluded from comparisons of NATO-Warsaw Pact military expenditures, since these forces are "irrelevant to the superpower confrontation.' There are three misconceptions in this argument: ..." (**Atlantic** (Nov. '83), p. 7) The argument is that "all Soviet military ... expenditures, since these forces ... confrontation." And it is by this ostensive method of definition that I think we can have the most success in helping our students recognize arguments. It may be tempting to define "argument" as an ordered pair whose first member is a set of propositions and whose second member is a proposition, but the temptation should be resisted. The basic skills that we would like our students to acquire can be acquired without entering into a discussion of realist definitions and their nominalist competitors.

Suppose we adopt this metaphysically neutral means of defining "argument". There is an objection that I think Spangler has in mind: "If that A since B is an argument then it could be the case that that A since B is also an explanation. Suppose, for example, that Holzman thinks that his audience believes that all Soviet military ... expenditures. Then Holzman's explanation is that A since B. But arguments cannot be explanations. So we are wrong in identifying Holzman's argument." My response to this objection is that arguments can be explanations. It is arguing that cannot be explaining. We say that A is arguing for B if A is trying to persuade C to believe that B by asserting that D, where A thinks that C does not believe that B. And we say that A is explaining that B if A asserts that D in order to help C see that B fits (or makes sense), where A thinks that C believes that B. Argumentation consists of activities of arguing and arguments. So Spangler is right in saying that we cannot exclude the arguer and his purposes from the study of argumentation. But he is wrong in saying that we cannot exclude the arguer and his purposes from the study of argument.

But is it not odd to say that arguing is different from explaining and to say that an argument may be an explanation? I do not think so. We say that the lawyer's activity of pleading for the defendant's life is different from the victim's activity of cursing the defendant. Yet the lawyer's plea might be the victim's curse: that he is mentally deficient.

When we try to avoid complicating our discussion of argumentation by restricting our attention to arguments, it is inevitable that we will be forced into the inconsistent position of making arguments both passive and active. The troubles with the deductive-inductive distinction are also due to making arguments bear too much weight, as I noted in [3]. The activity of arguing is where the deductive-inductive distinction belongs. So, let us attend both to active **arguings** and passive **arguments.**

References

[1] Spangler, G. A. "Fogelin's Understanding Arguments," **ILN,** v.2 (1983), 27-30.
[2] Fogelin, Robert J. **Understanding Arguments.** 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1982.)
[3] Johnson, Fred. "Deductively-Inductively," **ILN** iii.1 (1980), 4-5. ●

Fred Johnson, Department of Philosophy, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523.

Teaching Informal Logic in High School

Pamela Courtenay Hall

I'm a high school teacher with a background in philosophy, so it didn't take much to convince me of the usefulness of getting informal logic into the high school curriculum. But a recent experience has brought me from thinking "useful" to thinking "essential to the goals of education", and I'm in earnest now about wanting to see the development take place **soon.** Here's what happened.

I was asked to fill in for a history teacher—a grade 9 lesson on "The advent of Communism in Europe". Points to be covered were "Russia at the end of WWI; the Brest-Litovsk Treaty; Kerensky; Marx and his philosophy; the Revolution". A hefty task! But there were complications on top of it: the outline promised by my instructions was nowhere to be found; **all** of the textbooks were being used by another class; I had 15 minutes' notice, and the period was 75 minutes long.

Informal Logic to the rescue! Here's how: (1) I involved the students in an **attempt to define** "communism", "totalitarianism", "socialism", "capitalism", "democracy", etc. (no dictionary in the room!), pointing out the differences between the concepts, and the difficulties involved, including those which a dictionary would not solve, in trying to give adequate definitions. (2) I read from a 1963 textbook (the only thing available) on the topic "Russia today"—the American

perspective circa 1956—and asked the students to identify any **distortion** or **selection** that they noticed. (Much initial explanation required.) (3) We discussed how one might **argue for** communism and how one might **argue against** it, both from the perspective of a well-off Canadian student and from the possible perspective of a young person living in poverty. (4) We considered **key terms** in Marx's idea that human beings are conditioned by the economic situation they are born into, and we discussed whether these key terms were **clear** or **vague** in some troublesome way. We also discussed whether the idea operated on a **full** or **partial consideration** of what is important in a person's life.

It was fun for me, and the **learning** was evident in their comments and in their faces. The students found **reasoning** a real break from just copying notes off the board. (Yes, in spite of awareness of other methods and the many resources available, the old (easy) rote ways are still used exclusively by some teachers.) Of course, what they learned that day was not "history": by the end of class, the students had learned only a few of the details of "The Advent of Communism in Russia". But given the unusual absence of textbooks and teaching materials, they learned more than could be expected, both of the historical details and, more importantly, of how one might connect with them.