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14. Omniscience and omnipotence are mutually incompatible. If God is omniscient, he must already know how he is going to intervene to change the course of history using his omnipotence. But that means he can't change his mind about his intervention, which means he is not omnipotent.

—Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006)

15. Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more frequently than not struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God.

—Martin Luther, *Last Sermon in Wittenberg*, 17 January 1546

### 1.3 Recognizing Arguments

Before we can evaluate an argument, we must *recognize* it. We must be able to distinguish argumentative passages in writing or speech. Doing this assumes, of course, an understanding of the language of the passage. However, even with a thorough comprehension of the language, the identification of an argument can be problematic because of the peculiarities of its formulation. Even when we are confident that an argument is intended in some context, we may be unsure about which propositions are serving as its premises and which as its conclusion. As we have seen, that judgment cannot be made on the basis of the order in which the propositions appear. How then shall we proceed?

#### A. CONCLUSION INDICATORS AND PREMISE INDICATORS

One useful method depends on the appearance of certain common indicators, certain words or phrases that typically serve to signal the appearance of an argument's conclusion or of its premises. Here is a partial list of **conclusion indicators**:

therefore	for these reasons
hence	it follows that
so	I conclude that
accordingly	which shows that
in consequence	which means that
consequently	which entails that
proves that	which implies that
as a result	which allows us to infer that
for this reason	which points to the conclusion that
thus	we may infer

Other words or phrases typically serve to mark the premises of an argument and hence are called **premise indicators**. Usually, but not always, what follows

any one of these will be the premise of some argument. Here is a partial list of premise indicators:

since	as indicated by
because	the reason is that
for	for the reason that
as	may be inferred from
follows from	may be derived from
as shown by	may be deduced from
inasmuch as	in view of the fact that

## B. ARGUMENTS IN CONTEXT

The words and phrases we have listed may help to indicate the presence of an argument or identify its premises or conclusion, but such indicators do not necessarily appear. Sometimes it is just the meaning of the passage, or its setting, that indicates the presence of an argument. For example, during the intense controversy over the deployment of additional U.S. troops to Iraq in 2007, one critic of that deployment wrote:

As we send our young men and women abroad to bring order to Iraq, many of its so-called leaders have abandoned their posts. We have given the Iraqis an opportunity to iron out their differences and they throw it back in our faces. Iraq does not deserve our help.<sup>7</sup>

No premise indicators or conclusion indicators are used here, yet the argument is clear. Indicators are also absent in the following argument, recently offered by a notorious atheist, whose premises and conclusions are unmistakable:

Half the American population believes that the universe is 6,000 years old. They are wrong about this. Declaring them so is not “irreligious intolerance.” It is intellectual honesty.<sup>8</sup>

Often, however, the force of an argument can be appreciated only when one understands the *context* in which that argument is presented. For example, the undergraduate admission system of the University of Michigan that gave a fixed number of extra points to all members of certain minority groups was held unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Gratz v. Bollinger* in 2003. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor dissented, defending the Michigan system with the following argument:

Universities will seek to maintain their minority enrollment . . . whether or not they can do so in full candor. . . [They] may resort to camouflage. If honesty is the best policy, surely Michigan’s accurately described, fully disclosed College affirmative action program is preferable to achieving similar numbers through winks, nods, and disguises.<sup>9</sup>

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This argument derives its force from the realization that universities had in fact long disguised their preferential admission programs to avoid attacks based on the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Chief Justice William Rehnquist's response to Justice O'Connor's argument is also intelligible only in the context of her defense of the preferential admission system. Rehnquist wrote:

These observations are remarkable for two reasons. First, they suggest that universities—to whose academic judgment we are told we should defer—will pursue their affirmative action programs whether or not they violate the United States Constitution. Second, they recommend that these violations should be dealt with, not by requiring the Universities to obey the Constitution, but by changing the Constitution so that it conforms to the conduct of the universities.<sup>10</sup>

Rehnquist's reference to "changing the Constitution" must be understood in the light of the fact that the Michigan undergraduate admission system had been held unconstitutional. His reference to the pursuit of affirmative action programs "whether or not they violate the United States Constitution" can best be understood in the light of O'Connor's earlier reference to the possible use of "winks, nods, and disguises."

The full force of argument and counterargument can be grasped, in most circumstances, only with an understanding of the *context* in which those arguments are presented. In real life, context is critical.<sup>11</sup>

### C. PREMISES NOT IN DECLARATIVE FORM

It is not uncommon for the premises of an argument to be presented in the form of questions. But if questions assert nothing, and do not express propositions, how is this possible? On the surface they make no assertions; beneath the surface an interrogative sentence can serve as a premise when its question is **rhetorical**—that is, when it suggests or assumes an answer that is made to serve as the premise of an argument. The sentence may be interrogative even though its meaning is declarative.

This use of questions is sometimes obvious, as in a recent letter to *The New York Times* objecting to a new series of U.S. coins that will honor former presidential wives. The critic writes:

I am irked by the new set of coins being issued. While some first ladies have influenced our country, should we bestow this honor on people who are unelected, whose only credential is having a prominent spouse?<sup>12</sup>

Plainly, the critic means to affirm the proposition that we should not bestow this honor on such people. He continues:

Wouldn't honoring women who have served as governors, Supreme Court justices or legislators be a more fitting tribute to this nation's women than coins featuring "First Spouses"?<sup>13</sup>

This critic obviously believes that honoring such achievements would be a more fitting tribute, but he again expresses that proposition with a question. His letter also provides an illustration of the need to rely on context to interpret declarative statements that are actually made. The writer's report that he is "irked" by the new set of coins is no doubt true, but this statement is more than a mere description of his state of mind; he means to express the judgment that such a set of coins *ought not* be issued.

Using questions to express a premise is sometimes counterproductive, however, because it may invite answers (by the listener, or silently by the reader) that threaten the conclusion at which the argument aims. For example, the archbishop of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, who is an ardent opponent of homosexuality and views it as deeply sinful, argues thus:

Why didn't God make a lion to be a man's companion? Why didn't He make a tree to be a man's companion? Or better still, why didn't He make another man to be a man's companion? So even from the creation story you can see that the mind of God, God's intention, is for man and woman to be together.<sup>14</sup>

Conclusions drawn about God's intentions, using as premises questions that invite a myriad of different responses, may be undermined by the answers they elicit.

Questions can serve most effectively as premises when the answers assumed really do seem to be clear and inescapable. In such cases the readers (or hearers) are led to provide the apparently evident answers for themselves, thus augmenting the persuasiveness of the argument. Here is an example: Some who find euthanasia morally unacceptable reject the defense of that practice as grounded in the right to self-determination possessed by the terminally ill patient. They argue as follows:

If a right to euthanasia is grounded in self-determination, it cannot reasonably be limited to the terminally ill. If people have a right to die, why must they wait until they are actually dying before they are permitted to exercise that right?<sup>15</sup>

The question is forceful because its answer appears to be undeniable. It seems obvious that there is no good reason why, if people have a right to die grounded in self-determination, they must wait until they are dying to exercise that right. Hence (this critique concludes) the right to euthanasia, if there is one, cannot be limited to the terminally ill.\*

\*The argument has much merit, but from the perspective of its religious advocates, it may prove to be a two-edged sword.

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Arguments that depend on rhetorical questions are always suspect. Because the question is neither true nor false, it may be serving as a device to suggest the truth of some proposition while avoiding responsibility for asserting it. That proposition is likely to be dubious, and it may in fact be false. To illustrate, in 2007 Arab leaders in Jerusalem expressed great anxiety about the safety of the Al-Aqsa mosque when the Israeli government began construction of a ramp leading to the platform (also sacred to the Jews) on which that very holy mosque is situated. In reviewing the situation an Israeli partisan asked, “Is it possible that Arab leaders are more interested in attacking Israel than protecting religious and cultural monuments?”<sup>16</sup> Well, yes, that is possible, of course—but it may not be true, and the question framed in this way is plainly intended to cause the reader to believe that Arab leaders were being duplicitous in voicing their concerns. Did the author *assert* that such duplicity lay behind the Arab objections? No, he didn’t *say* that!

Gossip columnists thrive on suggestive questions. Celebrity tidbits commonly appear in the form, “Isn’t it true that Jackie [Kennedy] stole Aristotle [Onassis] from her kid sister?”<sup>17</sup> and “Does Paris Hilton have any talent as an actress?” Accusers who protect themselves by framing their accusations in interrogative sentences may shield themselves from the indignant complaints of their target. “No,” they may insist, “that is not what I said!”

It is wise policy to refrain from arguing with questions.

In some arguments the conclusion appears in the form of an imperative. The reason, or reasons, we ought to perform a given act are set forth as premises, and we are then directed to act in that way. Thus in Proverbs 4:7 we read:

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom.

Here the second clause is a command, and a command, like a question, is neither true nor false and cannot express a proposition. Therefore, strictly speaking, it cannot be the conclusion of an argument. But it surely is meant to be the conclusion of an argument in this passage from Proverbs. How can we explain this apparent inconsistency? It is useful in many contexts to regard a command as no different from a proposition in which hearers (or readers) are told that they would be wise to act, or ought to act, in the manner specified in the command. Thus the conclusion of the argument in Proverbs may be rephrased as “Getting wisdom is what you should do.” Assertions of this kind may be true or false, as most will agree. What difference there is between a command to do something and a statement that it should be done is an issue that need not be explored here. By ignoring that difference (if there really is one), we are able to deal uniformly with arguments whose conclusions are expressed in this form.

Reformulations of this kind can clarify the roles of an argument’s constituent propositions. We seek to grasp the *substance* of what is being asserted,

to understand what claims are serving to support what inferences, whatever their external forms. Some needed reformulations are merely grammatical. A proposition that functions as a premise may take the form of a phrase rather than a declarative sentence. This is well illustrated in the following argumentative passage, whose conclusion is a very sharp criticism of the United States.

What is a failed state? It is one that fails to provide security for the population, to guarantee rights at home or abroad, or to maintain functioning democratic institutions. On this definition the United States is the world's biggest failed state.<sup>18</sup>

The second and third premises of this argument are compressed into phrases, but the propositions for which these phrases are shorthand are clear enough, and their critical role in the author's reasoning is evident.

#### D. UNSTATED PROPOSITIONS

Arguments are sometimes obscure because one (or more) of their constituent propositions is not stated but is assumed to be understood. An illustration will be helpful here. The chairman of the Department of Sociology at City College, CUNY, presents two strong but controversial arguments, in parallel, regarding the justifiability of the death penalty. The first premise of each argument is the hypothesis that the factual belief (of the proponent, or of the opponent, of the penalty) about what does in fact deter homicide is mistaken. The second premise of each argument, although entirely plausible, is not stated, leaving the reader the task of reconstructing it.

The first argument goes like this:

If the proponent of the death penalty is incorrect in his belief that the [death] penalty deters homicide, then he is responsible for the execution of murderers who should not be executed.<sup>19</sup>

This argument relies on the unstated second premise that "No one should be executed to advance an objective that is not promoted by execution." Hence one who *mistakenly* believes that the objective (deterring murders) is achieved by executing those convicted is responsible for the execution of murderers who should not be executed.

The second argument goes like this:

If the opponent of the death penalty is incorrect in his belief that the death penalty doesn't deter, he is responsible for the murder of innocent individuals who would not have been murdered if the death penalty had been invoked.<sup>20</sup>

This argument relies on the unstated second premise that "Protecting the lives of innocent individuals from murder justifies the execution of murderers if other murderers are then deterred by the fear of execution." Hence one who

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*mistakenly* believes that the death penalty does not deter murderers is responsible for the lives of innocents who are subsequently murdered.

In each of these arguments the assumed but unstated second premise is plausible. One might find both arguments persuasive—leaving open for empirical investigation the question of whether, in fact, the death penalty does deter murder. However, the force of each of the arguments depends on the truth of the unstated premise on which it relies.

A premise may be left unstated because the arguer supposes that it is unquestioned common knowledge. In the controversy over the cloning of human beings, one angry critic wrote:

Human cloning—like abortion, contraception, pornography and euthanasia—is intrinsically evil and thus should never be allowed.<sup>21</sup>

This is plainly an argument, but part of it is missing. The argument relies on the very plausible but unstated premise that “what is intrinsically evil should never be allowed.” Arguments in everyday discourse very often rely on some proposition that is understood but not stated. Such arguments are called **enthymemes**. We will examine them more closely later in this book.

The unstated premise on which an enthymeme relies may not be universally accepted; it may be uncertain or controversial. An arguer may deliberately refrain from formulating that critical premise, believing that by allowing it to remain tacit, the premise is shielded from attack. For example, medical research using embryonic stem cells (cells found in the human embryo that can develop into other types of cells and into most types of tissue) is highly controversial. One U.S. senator used the following enthymeme in attacking legislation that would permit government financing of such research:

This research [involving the use of embryonic stem cells] is illegal, for this reason: The deliberate killing of a human embryo is an essential component of the contemplated research.<sup>22</sup>

The stated premise is true: Research of this kind is not possible without destroying the embryo. However, the conclusion that such research is illegal depends on the unstated premise that the killing of a human embryo is illegal—and *that* claim is very much in dispute.

The effectiveness of an enthymeme may depend on the hearer’s knowledge that some proposition is false. To emphasize the falsity of some *other* proposition, a speaker may construct an argument in which the first premise is a hypothetical proposition of which the target is the antecedent (the “if” component), and the consequent (the “then” component) is a proposition known by everyone to be false. The unstated falsehood of this second component is the second



premise of the enthymematic argument. The unstated falsehood of the first component is the conclusion of the argument. To illustrate, the distinguished political philosopher John Rawls admired Abraham Lincoln as the president who most appreciated the moral equality of human beings. Rawls frequently quoted Lincoln's enthymematic argument, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." It is of course wildly false to say that nothing is wrong—from which it follows that it is equally false to say that slavery is not wrong.\*

## 1.4 Arguments and Explanations

Passages that appear to be arguments are sometimes not arguments but *explanations*. The appearance of words that are common indicators—such as "because," "for," and "therefore"—cannot settle the matter, because those words are used in both explanations and arguments.<sup>†</sup> We need to know the intention of the author. Compare the following two passages:

1. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.  
—*Matt. 7:19*
2. Therefore is the name of it [the tower] called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth.  
—*Gen. 11:19*

The first passage is clearly an argument. Its conclusion, that one ought to lay up treasures in heaven, is supported by the premise (here marked by the word "for") that one's heart will be where one's treasure is laid up. The second passage, which uses the word "therefore" quite appropriately, is not an argument. It *explains* why the tower (whose construction is recounted in Genesis) is called Babel. The tower was given this name, we are told, because it is was the place where humankind, formerly speaking one language, became confounded by many languages.<sup>‡</sup> The passage assumes that

\*Samuel Freeman, "John Rawls, Friend and Teacher," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 December 2002. And Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of the Nazi death camps at Dachau and Buchenwald (and a distinguished psychiatrist), wrote: "If all men are good, then there never was an Auschwitz."

<sup>†</sup>The premise indicator "since" often has a temporal sense as well. Thus, in the lyric of the famous old song, "Stormy Weather," the line "Since my man and I ain't together, keeps rainin' all the time," is deliberately ambiguous, and richly suggestive. (Music by Harold Arlen, words by Ted Roehler, 1933.)

<sup>‡</sup>The name "Babel" is derived from the Hebrew word meaning "to confound"—that is, to confuse by mixing up or lumping together in an indiscriminate manner.