Arguments and Critical Thinking

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Introduction

This chapter discusses two different conceptions of argument, and then discusses the role of arguments in critical thinking. It is followed by a chapter in which David Hitchcock carefully analyses one common concept of an argument.

1. Two meanings of ‘argument’

The word ‘argument’ is used in a great many ways. Any thorough understanding of arguments requires understanding ‘argument’ in each of its senses or uses. These may be divided into two large groupings: arguments made or used, and arguments had or engaged in. This distinction has been described in two influential papers by Daniel J. O’Keefe (1977, 1982), who labelled them ‘argument1’ and ‘argument2’. I begin with the latter.

1.1 An ‘argument’ as something two parties have with each other, something they get into, the kind of ‘argument’ one has in mind in describing two people as “arguing all the time”

For many people outside academia or the practice of law, an argument is a quarrel. It is usually a verbal quarrel, but it doesn’t have to use words. If dishes are flying or people are glaring at each other in angry silence, it can still be an argument. What makes a quarrel an argument is that it involves a communication between two or more parties (however dysfunctional the communication may be) in which the parties disagree and in which that disagreement and reasons, actual or alleged, motivating it are expressed—usually in words or other communicative gestures.

Quarrels are emotional. The participants experience and express emotions, although that feature is not exclusive to arguments that are quarrels. People
can and do argue emotionally, and (or) when inspired by strong emotions, when they are not quarrelling. Heated arguments are not necessarily quarrels; but quarrels tend to be heated.

What makes quarrels emotional in some cases is that at least one party experiences the disagreement as representing some sort of personal attack, and so experiences his or her ego or sense of self-worth as being threatened. Fear is a reaction to a perceived threat, and anger is a way of coping with fear and also with embarrassment and shame. In other cases, the argument about the ostensible disagreement is a reminder of or a pretext for airing another, deeper grievance. Jealousy and resentment fuel quarrels. Traces of ego-involvement often surface even in what are supposed to be more civilized argumentative exchanges, such as scholarly disputes. Quarrels tend not to be efficient ways of resolving the disagreements that gives rise to them because the subject of a disagreement changes as the emotional attacks escalate or because the quarrel was often not really about that ostensible disagreement in the first place.

In teaching that ‘argument’ has different senses, it is misleading to leave the impression (as many textbooks do) that quarrels are the only species of argument of this genus. In fact they are just one instance of a large class of arguments in this sense of extended, expressed, disagreements between or among two or more parties.

A dispute is an argument in this sense that need not be a quarrel. It is a disagreement between usually two parties about the legality, or morality, or the propriety or correctness or advisability on some other basis, of a particular claim, act or policy. It can be engaged in a civil way by the disputants or their proxies (e.g., their spokespersons or their lawyers). Sometimes the disputing parties can settle their difference. In disputes over policies or entitlements, sometimes a third party such as a mediator, arbitrator or judge has to be called in to impose a settlement. Disputes over claims (e.g., “I was here first.” vs. “No, I was.”; “You can find that idea in Marx.” vs. “No, it comes from Hegel.”) can sometimes be settled by evidence; others involve conflicting value judgements (see Chapter 21).

A debate is another argument of this general kind. Debates are more or less formalized or regimented verbal exchanges between parties who might disagree, but in any case who take up opposing sides on an issue. Procedural rules that govern turn-taking, time available for each turn, and topics that may be addressed are agreed to when political opponents debate one another. In parliamentary or congressional debates in political decision-making bodies, or in formal intercollegiate competitive debates, strict and precise rules of order govern who may speak, who must be addressed, sometimes time limits for interventions. Usually the “opponent” directly addressed in the
debate is not the party that each speaker is trying to influence, so although the expressed goal is to “win” the debate, winning does not entail getting the opponent to concede. Instead, it calls for convincing an on-looking party or audience—the judge of the debate or the jury in a courtroom or the television audience or the press or the electorate as a whole—of the superior merits of one’s case for the opinion being argued for in the debate.

To be distinguished from a debate and a dispute by such factors as scale is a controversy. Think of such issues as the abortion controversy, the climate change controversy, the same-sex marriage controversy, the LGBT rights controversy, the animal rights controversy. The participants are many—often millions. The issues are complex and there are many disputes about details involved, including sometimes even formal debates between representatives of different sides. Typically there is a range of positions, and there might be several different sides each with positions that vary one from another. A controversy typically occurs over an extended period of time, often years and sometime decades long. But an entire controversy can be called an argument, as in, “the argument over climate change.” Controversies tend to be unregulated, unlike debates but like quarrels, although they need not be particularly angry even when they are emotional. Like quarrels, and unlike debates, the conditions under which controversies occur, including any constraints on them, are shaped by the participants.

Somewhere among quarrels, debates and controversies lie the theoretical arguments that theorists in academic disciplines engage in, in academic journals and scholarly monographs. In such arguments theorists take positions, sometimes siding with others and sometimes standing alone, and they argue back and forth about which theoretical position is the correct one. In a related type of argument, just two people argue back and forth about what is the correct position on some issue (including meta-level arguments about what is the correct way to frame the issue in the first place).

The stakes don’t have to be theories and the participants don’t have to be academics. Friends argue about which team will win the championship, where the best fishing spot is located, or what titles to select for the book club. Family members argue about how to spend their income, what school to send the children to, or whether a child is old enough to go on a date without a chaperone. Co-workers argue about the best way to do a job, whether to change service providers, whether to introduce a new product line, and so on. These arguments are usually amicable, whether or not they settle the question in dispute.

All of these kinds of “argument” in this sense of the term—quarrels, friendly disputes, arguments at work, professional arguments about theo-
retical positions, formal or informal debates, and various kinds of controversy—share several features.

(1) They involve communications between or among two or more people. Something initiates the communication, and either something ends it or there are ways for participants to join and to exit the conversation. They entail turn-taking (less or more regimented), each side addressing the other side and in turn construing and assessing what the other has to say in reply and formulating and communicating a response to the replies of the other side. And, obviously, they involve the expression, usually verbal, of theses and of reasons for them or against alternatives and criticisms.

(2) They have a *telos* or aim, although there seems to be no single end in mind for all of them or even for each of them. In a quarrel the goal might be to have one’s point of view prevail, to get one’s way, but it might instead (or in addition) be to humiliate the other person or to save one’s own self-respect. Some quarrels—think of the ongoing bickering between some long-married spouses—seem to be a way for two people to communicate, merely to acknowledge one another. In a debate, each side seeks to “win,” which can mean different things in different contexts (cf. a collegiate debate vs. a debate between candidates in an election vs. a parliamentary debate). Some arguments seemed designed to convince the other to give up his or her position or accept the interlocutor’s position, or to get the other to act in some way or to adopt some policy. Some have the more modest goal of getting a new issue recognized for future deliberation and debate. Still others are clearly aimed not at changing anyone’s mind but at reinforcing or entrenching a point of view already held (as is usually the case with religious sermons or with political speeches to the party faithful). Some are intended to establish or to demonstrate the truth or reasonableness of some position or recommendation and (perhaps) also to get others to “see” that the truth has been established. Some seem designed to maintain disagreement, as when representatives of competing political parties argue with one another.

(3) All these various kinds of argument are more or less extended, both in the sense that they occur over time, sometimes long stretches of time, and also in the sense that they typically involved many steps: extensive and complex support for a point of view and critique of its alternatives.

(4) In nearly every case, the participants give reasons for the claims they make and they expect the other participants in the argument to give reasons for their claims. This is even a feature of quarrels, at least at the outset, although such arguments can deteriorate into name-calling and worse. (Notice that even the “yes you did; no I didn’t;…; did; didn’t” sequence of the Monty Python “Having an argument” skit breaks down and a reason is sought.)
There are extensive literatures on each of these species of arguing. The kinds of argument listed so far are all versions of the communicative events of arguing or having an argument (see Daniel J. O’Keefe, 1977, 1982). Some might think that this is not the sense of ‘argument’ that is pertinent to critical thinking instruction, but such arguments are the habitat of the kinds of argument that critical thinkers need to be able to identify, analyze and evaluate. The second sense of ‘argument’ might be roughly characterized as follows:

1.2 An argument as something a person makes (or constructs, invents, borrows) consisting of purported reasons alleged to suggest, or support or prove a point and that is used for some purpose such as to persuade someone of some claim, to justify someone in maintaining the position claimed, or to test a claim.

When people have arguments—when they engage in one or another of the activities of arguing described above—one of the things they routinely do is present or allege or offer reasons in support of the claims that they advance, defend, challenge, dispute, question, or consider. That is, in having “arguments,” we typically make and use “arguments.” The latter obviously have to be arguments in different sense from the former. They are often called “reason-claim” complexes. If arguments that someone has had constitute a type of communication or communicative activity or event, arguments that someone has made or used are actual or potential contributions to such activities. Reason-claim complexes are typically made and used when engaged in an argument in the first sense, trying to convince someone of your point of view during a disagreement or dispute with them. Here is a list of some of the many definitions found in textbooks of ‘argument’ in this second sense.

- “… here [the word ‘argument’] … is used in the … logical sense of giving reasons for or against some claim.” Understanding Arguments, Robert Fogelin and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 6th ed., p. 1.
- “Thus an argument is a discourse that contains at least two statements, one of which is asserted to be a reason for the other.” Monroe Beardsley, Practical Logic, p. 9.
- “An argument is a set of claims a person puts forward in an attempt to show that some further claim is rationally acceptable.” Trudy Govier. A Practical Study of Arguments, 5th ed., p. 3.
- An argument is “a set of clams some of which are presented as reasons for accepting some further claim.” Alec Fisher, Critical Thinking, An Introduction, p. 235.
• Argument: “A conclusion about an issue that is supported by reasons.” Sherry Diestler, Becoming a Critical Thinker, 4th ed., p. 403.
• “Argument: An attempt to support a conclusion by giving reasons for it.” Robert Ennis, Critical Thinking, p. 396.
• “Argument – A form of thinking in which certain statements (reasons) are offered in support of another statement (conclusion).” John Chaffee, Thinking Critically, p. 415
• “When we use the word argument in this book we mean a message which attempts to establish a statement as true or worthy of belief on the basis of other statements.” James B. Freeman, Thinking Logically, p. 20
• “Argument. A sequence of propositions intended to establish the truth of one of the propositions.” Richard Feldman, Reason and Argument, p. 447.
• “Arguments consist of conclusions and reasons for them, called ‘premises’.” Wayne Grennan, Argument Evaluation, p. 5.
• Argument: “A set of claims, one of which, the conclusion is supported by [i.e., is supposed to provide a reason for] one or more of the other claims. Reason in the Balance, Sharon Bailin & Mark Battersby, p. 41.

These are not all compatible, and most of them define ‘argument’ using other terms—‘reasons’, ‘claims’, ‘propositions’, ‘statements’, ‘premises’ and ‘conclusions’—that are in no less need of definition than it is. In Chapter 9, David Hitchcock offers a careful analysis of this concept of an argument.

Some define argument in this second sense as a kind of communication; others conceive it as a kind of set of propositions that can serve communicative functions, but others as well (such as inquiry). Either way, the communicative character, or function, of arguments has been the subject of much of the research in the past several decades. Most recently what some have called “multi-modal” argument has attracted attention, focusing on the various ways arguments can be communicated, especially visually or in a mix of verbal and visual modes of communication. Some have contended that smells and sounds can play roles in argument communication as well. This area of research interest would seem to have relevance for the analysis of arguments on the web.

1.3 Argumentation

‘Argumentation’ is another slippery term. It is used in several different senses.

Sometimes it is used to mean the communicative activity in which arguments are exchanged: “During their argumentation they took turns advancing
their own arguments and criticizing one another’s arguments.” Sometimes ‘argumentation’ denotes the body of arguments used in an argumentative exchange: “The evening’s argumentation was of high quality.” And occasionally you will find it used to refer to the reasons or premises supporting a conclusion, as in: “The argumentation provided weak support for the thesis.” ‘Argumentation theory’ is the term often used to denote theory about the nature of arguments and their uses, including their uses in communications involving exchanges of arguments.

2 The relation between critical thinking and argument

2.1 Arguments are both tools of critical thinking and objects of critical thinking

In one what must be one of the earliest handbooks on critical thinking, John Dewey wrote:

In … [one] sense, thought denotes belief resting upon some basis, that is, real or supposed knowledge going beyond what is directly present. … Some beliefs are accepted when their grounds have not themselves been considered … such thoughts may mean a supposition accepted without reference to its real grounds. … Such thoughts grow up unconsciously and without reference to the attainment of correct belief. They are picked up—we know not how. From obscure sources and by unnoticed channels they insinuate themselves into acceptance and become unconsciously a part of our mental furniture. Tradition, instruction, imitation—all of which depend upon authority in some form, or appeal to our advantage, or fall in with strong passions—are responsible for them. Such thoughts are prejudices, that is, prejudgments, not judgments proper that rest upon a survey of evidence. (John Dewey, How We Think, pp. 4-5, emphasis added.)

People—all of us—routinely adopt beliefs and attitudes that are prejudices in Dewey’s sense of being prejudgments, “not judgments proper that rest upon a survey of evidence.” One goal of critical thinking education is to provide our students with the means to be able, when it really matters, to “properly survey” the grounds for beliefs and attitudes.

Arguments supply one such means. The grounds for beliefs and attitudes are often expressed, or expressible, as arguments for them. And the “proper survey” of these arguments is to test them by subjecting them to the critical scrutiny of counter-arguments.

Arguments also come into play when the issue is not what to believe about a contentious issue, but in order just to understand the competing positions. Not only are we not entitled to reject a claim to our belief if we cannot counter
the arguments that support it; some would say we have no right to say we have a thorough understanding of a claim if we cannot formulate the arguments that support it to the satisfaction of its proponents.

Furthermore, arguments can be used to investigate a candidate for belief by those trying “to make up their own minds” about it. The investigator tries to find and express the most compelling arguments for and against the candidate. Which arguments count as “most compelling” are the ones that survive vigorous attempts, using arguments, to refute or undermine them. These survivors are then compared against one another, the pros weighed against the cons. More arguments come into play in assessing the attributed weights.

In these ways, a facility with arguments serves a critical thinker well. Such a facility includes skill in recognizing, interpreting and evaluating arguments, as well as in formulating them. That includes skill in laying out complex arguments, in recognizing argument strengths and weaknesses, and in making a case for one’s critique. It includes the ability to distinguish the more relevant evidence from the less, and to discriminate between minor, fixable flaws and major, serious problems, in arguments. Thus the critical thinker is at once adept at using arguments in various ways and at the same time sensitive in judging arguments’ merits with discrimination, applying the appropriate criteria.

Moreover, arguments in the sense of “reason-claim” complexes surround us in our daily lives. Our “familiars”, as Gilbert (2014) has dubbed them—our family members, the friends we see regularly, shopkeepers and others whose services we patronize daily, our co-workers—engage us constantly in argumentative discussions in which they invoke arguments to try to get us to do things, to agree, to judge, to believe. The public sphere—the worlds of politics, commerce, entertainment, leisure activities, social media (see Jackson’s chapter)—is another domain in which arguments can be found, although (arguably) mere assertion predominates there. In the various roles we occupy as we go through life—child, parent, spouse or partner, student, worker, patient, subordinate or supervisor, citizen (voter, jurist, community member), observer or participant, etc.—we are invited with arguments to agree or disagree, approve or disapprove, seek or avoid. We see others arguing with one another and are invited to judge the merits of the cases they make. Some of these arguments are cogent and their conclusions merit our assent, but others are not, and we should not be influenced by them. Yet others are suggestive and deserve further thought.

We can simply ignore many of these arguments, but others confront us and force us to decide whether or not to accept them. Often it is unclear whether someone has argued or done something else: just vented, perhaps, or explained rather than argued, or merely expressed an opinion without arguing
for it, or was confused. So we initially might have to decide whether there is an argument that we need to deal with. When it is an argument, often in order to make up our minds about it we need first to get clear about exactly what the argument consists of. So even before we evaluate this argument we have to identify and analyze it. (These operations are discussed in Chapter 12.)

In the end we have to decide for ourselves whether the argument makes its case or falls short. Does the conclusion really follow from the premises? Is there enough evidence to justify the conclusion? Is it the right kind of evidence? Are there well-known objections or arguments against the conclusion that haven’t been acknowledged and need to be answered satisfactorily? Can they be answered? And are the premises themselves believable or otherwise acceptable? Are there other arguments, as good or better, that support the claim?

Critical thinking can (and should!) come into all of these decisions we need to make in the identification, the analysis and the assessment of arguments.

2.2 Critical thinking about things other than arguments

Many critical thinking textbooks focus exclusively on the analysis and evaluation of arguments. While the centrality of arguments to the art of critical thinking is unquestionable, a strong case can be made that critical thinking has other objectives in addition to appreciating arguments. In their analysis of the concept of critical thinking, Fisher and Scriven suggest the following definition:

Critical thinking is skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation. (1997, p. 21, emphasis added)

We agree with the gist of this claim, but notice what Fisher and Scriven propose as the objects to which critical thinking applies. Not just argumentation, but as well observations, communications and information. About observations, they note that:

What one sees (hears, etc.) are usually things and happenings, and one often has to interpret what one sees, sometimes calling on critical thinking skills to do so, most obviously in cases where the context involves weak lighting, strong emotions, possible drug effects, or putatively magical or parapsychological phenomena. Only after the application of critical thinking—and sometimes not even then—does one know what one “really saw” … When the filter of critical thinking has been applied to the observations, and only then, one can start reasoning towards further conclusions using these observations as premises. (Ibid., p. 37)
An example is the recent large number of convictions in the U.S.A. that originally relied on eyewitness testimony but that have been overturned on the basis of DNA evidence.¹

The DNA evidence proved that the accused was not the culprit, so the moral certainty of the eyewitness had to have been mistaken. The observation of the eyewitness was flawed. He or she did not think critically about whether the conditions needed to make a reliable observation were present (e.g., were strong emotions like fear involved? was the lighting good? has he or she ordinarily a good memory for faces? was there time to observe carefully? were there distractions present?). Neither, probably, did the lawyers on either side, or else they immorally suppressed what should have been their doubts. As a consequence of poor critical thinking about observations, innocent people languished in jail for years and guilty parties went free.

Communications are another object for critical thought. When in reply to Harry’s question, “How are you doing?” Morgan says, in a clipped and dull voice and a strained expression on her face, “I’m fine”, Harry needs to be aware that “How are you doing?” often functions as equivalent to a simple greeting, like “Hi” and so the response “Fine” could similarly be functioning as a polite return of the greeting, like “Hi back to you”, and not as an accurate report of the speaker’s condition. Harry needs to notice and interpret other aspects of Morgan’s communication—her lethargic tone of voice and her anxious facial expression—and to recognize the incompatibility between those signals and the interpretation of her response as an accurate depiction of Morgan’s state of well-being. He needs to employ critical interpretive skills to realize that Morgan has communicated that she is not fine at all, but for some reason isn’t offering to talk about it.

If President Trump did in fact say to his then F.B.I. director James Comey, about the F.B.I. investigation of former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn “I hope you can let this go”, was it legitimate for Comey to interpret the President’s comment as a directive? And was Comey’s response, which was simply to ignore President Trump’s alleged comment, an appropriate response? What was going on? It takes critical thinking to try to sort out these issues. Taking the President’s alleged comment literally, it just expresses his attitude towards the FBI investigation of Flynn. But communications from the President in a tête-à-tête in the White House with the Director of the FBI are not occasions for just sharing attitudes. This was not an occasion on which

¹ According to the Innocence Project, “Eyewitness misidentification is the greatest contributing factor to wrongful convictions proven by DNA testing, playing a role in more than 70% of convictions [in the U.S.A.] overturned through DNA testing nationwide.” (https://www.innocenceproject.org/causes/eyewitness-misidentification/, viewed August 2017).
they could step out of their political roles and chat person-to-person. The President can legitimately be presumed to be communicating his wishes as to what his FBI Director should do, and such expressions of wishes are, in this context, to be normally understood as directives. On the other hand, for the President to direct that an ongoing investigation by the FBI be stopped, or that it come up with a pre-determined finding, is illegal: it’s obstruction of justice. So Comey seemed faced with at least two possible interpretations of what he took the President to be saying: either an out-of-place expression of his attitude towards the outcome of the Flynn investigation or an illegal directive. Which was the President’s intention? However, there are other possibilities.

Was President Trump a political tyro whose lack of political experience might have left him ignorant of the fact that the FBI Director has to keep investigations free of political interference? Or might Trump have thought that the Presidency conveys the authority to influence the outcome of criminal investigations? Or might President Trump have been testing Mr. Comey to see if he could be manipulated? And Mr. Comey could have responded differently. He could have said, “I wish we could let this go too, Mr. President, but there are questions about General Flynn’s conduct that have to be investigated, and as you know, we cannot interfere with an ongoing FBI investigation”. Such a response would have forced the President to take back what he allegedly said, withdrawing any suggestion that his comment was a directive, or else to make it plain that he was indeed directing Comey to obstruct justice. In the event, apparently Mr. Comey did not take this way out, which would at once have displayed loyalty to the President (by protecting him from explicitly obstructing justice) and also have affirmed the independence of the FBI from interference from the White House. Perhaps he thought that the President clearly had directed him to obstruct justice, and judged that giving him an opportunity explicitly to withdraw that directive amounted to overlooking that illegal act, which would be a violation of his responsibilities as Director of the FBI. If so, however, simply not responding to the President’s comment, the path Comey apparently chose, also amounted to turning a blind eye to what he judged to be President Trump’s illegal directive.

As these two examples illustrate, the interpretation of communications, and the appropriate response to them can require critical thinking: recognizing different functions of communication, and being sensitive to the implications of different contexts of communication; being sensitive to the roles communicators occupy and to the rights, obligations, and limits attached to such roles.

As Fisher and Scriven acknowledge, “defining information is itself a difficult task.” They make a useful start by distinguishing information from raw data (“the numbers or bare descriptions obtained from measurements or observations”, op. cit., p. 41). No critical thinking is required for the latter;
just the pains necessary to record raw data accurately. In many cases, though, the interpretation of raw data, the meaning or significance that they are said to have, can require critical thinking.

One might go beyond Fisher and Scriven’s list of other things besides arguments to which critical thinking can be applied. A thoughtful appreciation of novels or movies, plays or poetry, paintings or sculptures requires skilled interpretation, imagining alternatives, thoughtful selection of appropriate criteria of evaluation and then the selection and application of appropriate standards, and more. A good interior designer must consider the effects and interactions of space and light and color and fabrics and furniture design, and coordinate these with clients’ lifestyles, habits and preferences. Advanced practical skills in various sciences come into play. A coach of a sports team must think about each individual team member’s skills and deficiencies, personality and life situation; about plays and strategies; opponents’ skill sets; approaches to games; and much more. Conventional approaches need to be reviewed as to their applicability to the current situation. Alternative possibilities need to be creatively imagined and critically assessed. And all of this is time-sensitive, sometimes calling for split-second decisions. The thinking involved in carrying out the tasks of composing a review of some work of literature or art or of coaching a sports team can be routine and conventional, or it can be imaginative, invoking different perspectives and challenging standard criteria.

The list could go on. The present point is that, while argument is central to critical thinking, critical thinking about and using arguments is not all there is to critical thinking.2

References


2 I owe the general organization and many of the specific ideas of this chapter to a series of lectures by Jean Goodwin at the Summer Institute on Argumentation sponsored by the Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation and Rhetoric at the University of Windsor.


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