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## Argument An Introduction

One ought to begin a book on argument by telling the reader straight out what argument is. But we can't. Philosophers and rhetoricians have disagreed for centuries about the meaning of the term and about the goals that arguers should set for themselves. So in place of a simple definition, we'll show you several different ways of thinking about argument as a way of helping you become a more powerful arguer yourself.

After explaining how arguments make claims and provide justifications for those claims, we will consider argument from two different perspectives—as product and process. We'll also explain how arguments combine two distinct and sometimes conflicting purposes—**truth seeking** and **persuasion**. Because of the importance of this last distinction, we'll explore extensively the debate over truth versus victory as the goal of argument.

### What Do We Mean by Argument?

Let's begin by rejecting two popular synonyms for "argument": *fight* and *debate*.

#### Argument Is Not a Fight or a Quarrel

The word *argument* often connotes anger, as when we say, "I just got in a huge argument with my roommate!" We may picture heated disagreements, rising pulse rates, and slamming doors. We may conjure up images of shouting talk-show guests or fist-banging speakers.

But to our way of thinking, argument doesn't necessarily imply anger. In fact, arguing can be pleasurable. It can be a creative and productive activity that engages our minds and our hearts in conversations with people we respect about ideas that we cherish. For your primary image of argument, we invite you to think not of a fist-banging speaker but of a small group of reasonable persons seeking the best solution to a problem. We will return to this image throughout the chapter.

*problem solvers*

## Argument Is Not Pro-Con Debate

Another popular conception of argument is debate—a presidential debate, perhaps, or a high school or college debate tournament, in which, according to one popular dictionary, “opposing speakers defend and attack a given proposition.” While formal debates can develop our critical thinking powers, they stress winning and losing, often to the detriment of cooperative inquiry.

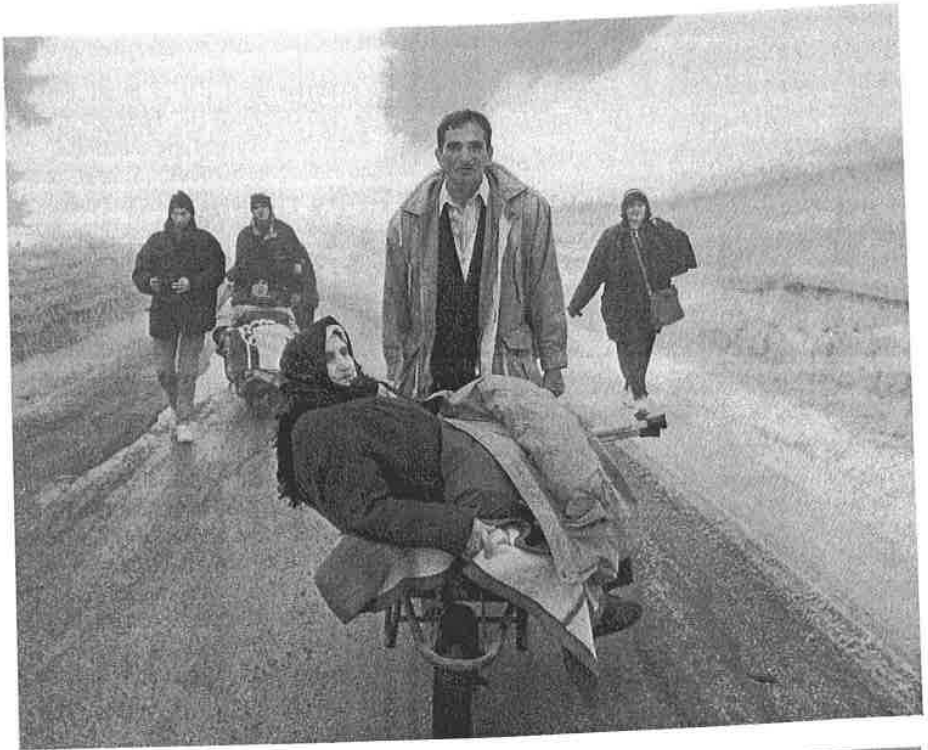
To illustrate the limitations of debate, consider one of our former students, a champion high school debater who spent his senior year debating prison reform. Throughout the year he argued for and against such propositions as “The United States should build more prisons” and “We must find innovative alternatives to prison.” One day we asked him, “What do you personally think is the best way to reform prisons?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “I’ve never thought about it that way.”

Nothing in the atmosphere of pro-con debate had engaged this bright, articulate student in the important process of clarifying his own values and taking a personal stand. As we explain throughout this text, argument entails a desire for truth seeking, not necessarily Truth with a capital T but truth as a desire to find the best solutions to complex problems. Of course, arguers often passionately support their own points of view and expose weaknesses in other views. However, arguers’ passionate defenses and relentless probings are not moves in a win-lose game but rather moves toward discovering and promoting the best belief or best course of action.

## Arguments Can Be Explicit or Implicit

Before proceeding to some defining features of argument, we should note also that arguments can be either explicit or implicit. An explicit argument states directly a controversial claim and supports it with reasons and evidence. An implicit argument, in contrast, doesn’t look like an argument. It may be a poem or short story, a photograph or cartoon, a personal essay, or an autobiographical narrative. But like an explicit argument, it persuades an audience toward a certain point of view. For example, a famous World War I poem (Wilfred Owen’s “*Dulce et Decorum Est*”) challenges the patriotic notion that it is “sweet and fitting” to die for one’s country. Instead of using the ordered thesis, reasons, and evidence found in explicit arguments, this poem employs a horrible image—a soldier drowning in his own fluids from a mustard gas attack—to impel readers to see the gruesome senselessness of war.

Visual images can also make implicit arguments, often by evoking powerful emotions in audiences. The perspective that photos take, the stories they tell, or the vivid details of place and time they display compel viewers literally to see the issue from a particular angle. Take, for instance, Figure 1.1, a photo of homeless Albanian refugees during the Kosovo War. By foregrounding the old woman, probably a grandmother, perched precariously atop a heavily loaded wheelbarrow, her canes or crutches sticking out from the pile, and the six persons in the scene hastening down a stark road against an ominous gray background, the photographer conveys the nightmare of this war. Here showing the urgency of the Albanians’ flight for their



**FIGURE 1.1** Albanian refugees during the Kosovo War

lives and the helplessness of the two who can't walk is an effective strategy to arouse sympathy for the Albanians. Photographs of this kind regularly appeared in American newspapers during the war, serving to heighten U.S. support of NATO's bombing. Meanwhile, Serbs complained that no American newspapers showed photographs of KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) atrocities against Serbs.

## Argument and the Problem of Truth

The tension that we have just examined between truth seeking and persuasion raises an ancient issue in the field of argument: Is the arguer's first obligation to truth or to winning the argument? And just what is the nature of the truth to which arguers are supposed to be obligated?

In Plato's famous dialogues from ancient Greek philosophy, these questions were at the heart of Socrates' disagreement with the Sophists. The Sophists were professional rhetoricians who specialized in training orators to win arguments. Socrates, who valued truth seeking over persuasion and believed that truth could be discovered through philosophic inquiry, opposed the Sophists. For Socrates, Truth resided in the ideal world of forms, and through philosophic rigor humans could transcend the changing, shadowlike world of everyday reality to perceive the world of universals where Truth, Beauty, and Goodness resided. Through his method of questioning his interlocutors, Socrates would gradually peel away layer after layer of false views until Truth was revealed. The good person's duty, Socrates believed, was not to win an argument but to pursue this higher Truth. Socrates distrusted rhetoricians because they were interested only in the temporal power and wealth that came from persuading audiences to the orator's views.

— Let's apply Socrates' disagreement with the Sophists to a modern instance. Suppose your community is divided over the issue of raising environmental standards versus keeping open a job-producing factory that doesn't meet new

guidelines for waste discharge. The Sophists would train you to argue any side of this issue on behalf of any lobbying group willing to pay for your services. If, however, you followed the spirit of Socrates, you would be inspired to listen to all sides of the dispute, peel away false arguments, discover the Truth through reasonable inquiry, and commit yourself to a Right Course of Action. you  
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But what is the nature of Truth or Right Action in a dispute between jobs and the environment? The Sophists believed that truth was determined by those in power; thus they could enter an argument unconstrained by any transcendent beliefs or assumptions. When Socrates talked about justice and virtue, they could reply contemptuously that these were fictitious concepts invented by the weak to protect themselves from the strong. Over the years, the Sophists' relativist beliefs were so repugnant to people that the term *sophistry* became synonymous with trickery in argument.

However, in recent years the Sophists' critique of a transcendent Universal Truth has been taken seriously by many philosophers, sociologists, and other thinkers who doubt Socrates' confident belief that arguments, properly conducted, necessarily arrive at a single Truth. For these thinkers, as for the Sophists, there are often different degrees of truth and different kinds of truths for different situations or cultures. From this perspective, when we consider questions of interpretation or value, we can never demonstrate that a belief or assumption is true—not through scientific observation, not through reason, and not through religious revelation. We get our beliefs, according to these contemporary thinkers, from the shared assumptions of our particular cultures. We are condemned (or liberated) to live in a pluralistic, multicultural world with competing visions of truth. mm

If we accept this <sup>multic</sup> pluralistic view of the world, do we then endorse the Sophists' radical relativism, freeing us to argue any side of any issue? Or do we doggedly pursue some modern equivalent of Socrates' truth?

Our own sympathies are with Socrates, but we admit to a view of truth that is more tentative, cautious, and conflicted than his. For us, truth seeking does not mean finding the "Right Answer" to a disputed question, but neither does it mean a valueless relativism in which all answers are equally good. For us, truth seeking means taking responsibility for determining the "best answer" or "best solution" to the question for the good of the whole community when taking into consideration the interests of all stakeholders. It means making hard decisions in the face of uncertainty. This more tentative view of truth means that you cannot use argument to "prove" your claim, but only to make a reasonable case for your claim.

One contemporary philosopher says that argument can hope only to "increase adherence" to ideas, not absolutely convince an audience of the necessary truth of ideas. Even though you can't be certain, in a Socratic sense, that your solution to the problem is the best one available, you must ethically take responsibility for the consequences of your claim and you must seek justice for stakeholders beyond yourself. You must, in other words, forge a personal stance based on your examination of all the evidence and your articulation of values that you can make public and defend. my  
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To seek truth, then, means to seek the best or most just solution to a problem while observing all available evidence, listening with an open mind to the views of all stakeholders, clarifying and attempting to justify your own values and assumptions, and taking responsibility for your argument. It follows that truth seeking often means delaying closure on an issue, acknowledging the pressure of alternative views, and being willing to change one's mind. Seen in this way, learning to argue effectively has the deepest sort of social value: It helps communities settle conflicts in a rational and humane way by finding, through the dialectic exchange of ideas, the best solutions to problems without resorting to violence or to other assertions of raw power.

### For Class Discussion

On any given day, newspapers provide evidence of the complexity of living in a pluralistic culture. Issues that could be readily decided in a completely homogeneous culture raise many questions for us in a society that has few shared assumptions. Use the following story as the subject for a "simulation game" in which class members represent the points of view of the persons involved in the mosh pit controversy.

#### MOSH PITS: IT'S NOT ALL FUN AND MUSIC

This article begins with the case of a fourteen-year-old boy who suffered brain damage when he was dropped while crowd surfing at a Rage Against the Machine concert in Seattle. The article then discusses the controversy over crowd safety at grunge concerts:

Most concerts do not result in injuries and deaths. But the increasing frequency of serious injuries—including broken bones, brain damage and paralysis—is shining a spotlight on what some critics see as fun and freedom pushed to irresponsible limits.

The injuries have prompted a handful of U.S. cities and some bands to ban crowd surfing and stage diving, but there are no national standards for concert safety, and no one has exact numbers on how many people are injured in mosh pits every year. One survey cites at least 10 deaths and more than 1,000 injuries resulting from just 15 U.S. concerts last year.

**Your task:** Imagine a public hearing in which city officials are trying to develop a city policy on mosh pits at concerts. Should they be banned altogether? If not, how might they be regulated and who is responsible for injuries? Hold a mock hearing in which classmates present the views of the following: (a) a rock band that values crowd surfing and stage diving; (b) several concert fans who love mosh pits; (c) parents of a teenager seriously injured in a mosh pit accident; (d) a woman who was groped while crowd surfing; (e) local police; (f) concert promoters; (g) a venue owner fearing a liability lawsuit; (h) a city attorney fearing a liability lawsuit.