Exercises: Chapter 20

Practise identifying different types of argument with these exercises:

1   The college and the mayor
2   Social inequality
3   Clever milk

1. The college and the mayor

In 2015 Bernard Fleming, a UK teacher, moved to a Southern European country and set up a training college in a large town. The college was running courses that were designed to train the employees of local businesses and anyone who wanted to retrain or gain promotion by getting better qualifications. Six months after the college had opened it was struggling to survive with very low student enrolments. Then Bernard had a visit from the local mayor, who explained that for a 'consideration' he would tell his employees that they must come and enrol on courses. Then he would tell other employers to follow his lead and send their employees to be trained. Each year, for a similar 'consideration', he would make sure that the enrolments kept growing.

Bernard knew that if the college were to survive he needed to get more students enrolled. He had tried everything. The mayor's offer now explained why all his efforts had come to nothing. Indeed local businessmen told him that nothing happens there without the mayor's approval. He could even close the college down if Bernard refused to go along with his plan.

What are the questions that Bernard has to address? Are they questions of fact, value or concept, or a mixture?

Answer:

1   First, there are certain questions of **fact** that Bernard will need to answer. Are the local businessmen right, that there is no alternative? Why are bribes routine and unavoidable in some cultures? Is it because officials are poorly paid or are such 'gifts' commonly accepted within the local culture as just an expression of respect?

2   Second, there are questions of **value**. Should he conduct himself in accordance with his own conscience, which might tell him that bribery is wrong, or should he be more pragmatic? Would he be right to insist upon working in accordance with the ethical values imported from his own upbringing in a different culture, or, as he has chosen to work within the culture of the country in which he is now living, should he just accept the ethical norms of that society?

3   Then, third, there is a question of **concept**. What is a bribe and how does it differ from gifts, like the tips we leave for those who wait on our table in a restaurant, or commissions, like the incentive packages negotiated with workers to increase their productivity?

2. Social inequality

A government spokesperson might argue, 'Since this government came to power the average disposable income has shown a significant improvement in the standard of living of people living in this country.'

To evaluate this claim we need to know whether it involves questions of fact, value or concept, or a mixture of all three.

Answer:

1   First we need to settle a question of **fact**. We need to know the actual figures for the rise in average disposable income.

2   Second we need to evaluate the spokesperson's use of the word 'significant'. This raises both questions of **concept** and **value**. What does he or she mean by this and can this value judgement be defended? What might seem a 'significant' improvement to the spokesperson may only be a negligible improvement to others.

3   Third we need to examine the spokesperson's use of the **concept** 'average'. We have to be clear what the spokesperson has in mind: mean, median or mode? In most cases it's mean or mode averages. But the mean average may be misleading, because it doesn't give us information as to how the results are distributed. They may be clustered around the centre, or evenly distributed from the lowest mark to the highest, or an unrepresentative few at the top may pull up the mean average or a few at the bottom pull it down. If the spokesperson were to use this to calculate the average disposable income, he or she could give a very false impression.

   For this the mode average is more useful. When the range of distribution is considerable it represents the group better, because, as it identifies the item that occurs most frequently, it indicates the largest sub-group in the whole series. For this reason it is often regarded as the 'typical' representative of the series. In our everyday speech 'the average' usually means mode: the thing you are most likely to run into; the 'mode' or 'model person'. It's not affected by being pulled up or down by the extremes on one side or the other like the mean average.

3. Clever milk

In 2005 a series of large newspaper advertisements appeared featuring a well-known scientist in the guise of an enlightened milkman advocating the health benefits of St. Ivel's Omega 3-enriched Advance milk. 'It's clever milk', he exclaimed, and then went on to explain that, 'Children of today do not have enough Omega 3 in their diet. The largest source of this nutrient is oily fish and, as many mums have found, this food is not popular with children. What has been lacking is an easier way for families to get more Omega 3 in a more user friendly format.' According to the

manufacturer, Dairy Crest, 'Anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents indicates that increasing intake of Omega 3 may improve learning and concentration of some children.'[1]

Like the other examples above, if we are to evaluate this claim we must first decide whether it raises questions of fact, value or concept, or, indeed, a mixture of all three.

Answer:

1   First we have to address the question of **fact** raised by the 'anecdotal evidence' on which this claim is based. What is this evidence and how reliable is it? There is also the question of **fact** raised by the claim that 'increasing intake' may improve learning and concentration. How much would need to be consumed to have a measurable effect?

2   Second there are the questions of **value** contained in the phrase 'may improve learning and concentration of some children.' We need to know what is the likelihood of this and if only 'some' children might be affected, what proportion does this represent.

3   Finally, we have to uncover what is meant by the **concept** 'clever milk'. Omega-3 has been associated with improvements in learning. However, although one meta-analysis has concluded that Omega-3 fatty acid supplementation has demonstrated a modest improvement in ADHD symptoms, other reviews have concluded that there is insufficient or inconclusive evidence.

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[1] The Guardian, 1st. September 2005.