

Exercises: Chapter 9

Develop your critical reasoning skills with these exercises:

- 1 Analogies
- 2 Begging the question
- 3 Equivocation
- 4 Jargon

I. Analogies

Read the following analogies and decide which you think are reliable. List your reasons for coming to your conclusions.

- 1 In the eighteenth century the philosopher William Paley argued that when he saw a complex object, like a watch, he immediately knew it was designed. Therefore, in the same way, when he saw a complex object, like an eye, he must likewise infer that it, too, has been designed. He argued that the natural world is as complex a mechanism, and as manifestly designed, as a watch. The rotation of the planets in the solar system, and on earth the regular procession of seasons and the complex structure and mutual adaptation of the parts of a living organism, all suggest design. Such complex and efficient mechanisms, he claims, could not have been created by chance. Insofar as we infer from a watch that there must be a watchmaker, we can likewise infer from the world that there must be God. This is the argument from design, also known as the teleological argument.
- 2 'Freedom of speech is obviously vital in a civilized community. But when a community is at war, and the basis of its civilization threatened, then freedom of speech has to be curtailed. We are a nation at war, and the war is the more insidious for being fought with words rather than bombs. Our most cherished institutions, church, family, and private property are under attack.'
- 3 'Democracy must include not just the freedom to determine by one man one vote in elections every few years who governs the country, but also the freedom to determine how the resources of the country are distributed by how people vote to spend their money every day in the market place.'
- 4 'There were people who objected to trains. There were people who objected to aeroplanes. Every invention beneficial to mankind has had its critics. No doubt somebody objected to the wheel. So those who object to GM food should think again.'
- 5 'Trying to interfere with the course of Nature is like putting your finger among the cogs of a huge machine. The machine will continue to function unaffected, but you will lose a finger. Leave Nature well alone.'
- 6 'If you introduce a policy designed to reduce the numbers of obese people on the grounds that over-eating is a dangerous thing to do, you might as well also try to reduce the numbers

involved in watching football, in studying science, and in buying cars and electric can-openers.’

- 7 ‘We maintain the health of our bodies through exercise. The same applies to the ‘body politic’: for any state a just and honourable war is the essential exercise it needs from time to time in order to maintain its health.’

Answers:

- 1 The analogy between the world and a human artifact, such as a watch, is weak, because the universe is not particularly like a vast machine. One could just as plausibly liken it to a great inert animal, such as a crustacean, or to a vegetable. And, if this were the case, the argument would fail, for whether crustaceans or vegetables are, or are not, consciously designed, is particularly the question at issue. Only if the world is shown to be rather strikingly analogous to a human artifact is there any proper basis to infer an intelligent designer.
- 2 During the Cold War this analogy was pressed into service to justify restricting freedom of speech and information generally. But the main reason it is unreliable is that during an actual war operational intelligence as to what the military plans to do can have a significant impact on the success of its operations. Consequently, it is important to restrict access to this sort of information. In the Second World War this included all sorts of information that ordinary people might convey in personal correspondence and everyday conversation. But during the Cold War there were no similar operations that would involve actual armed conflict. Therefore, the only information that needed to be restricted was that involving the latest research into defence technology, to which only a few scientists and civil servants had access.
- 3 This analogy is unsafe for a number of reasons. As the quotation makes clear democracy, or at least liberal democracy, involves the equal distribution of political influence, ensured by one person having a single vote periodically every few years. But the influence people wield in the market place as they purchase goods and services is not distributed equally. Those who have more wealth exert more influence on how the resources of a country are distributed, because they have more money to spend.
- 4 This is similar to the analogy in Chapter 9 involving nuclear power. It is unsafe for the same reasons. Comparing trains, aeroplanes and the wheel with GM food underestimates the scale of the risk that GM food might present to health, farmers and to the environment. Some health groups point to unanswered questions regarding the potential long-term impact on human health. In addition, unlike these other inventions, GM food has the tendency to concentrate power and influence into the hands of a few large companies that have patented grains.
- 5 The main reason this analogy fails is that nature does not function like a machine. Unlike the description of a machine causing injury if you interfere with it, we can and do routinely interfere with nature to our own advantage. The achievements in medical science over the last three hundred years in finding cures and developing techniques to improve health care have amounted to man’s most successful attempt to frustrate nature, to extend life and to evade death. Rather than posing the danger described in this analogy, it demonstrates that it is possible to interfere with nature for the benefit of mankind.
- 6 Like the analogy in Chapter 9 and the one above concerning GM food, this one is unreliable because it oversimplifies the comparison it is making. Consequently, it underestimates the impact of obesity on

people’s health. It can lead to cardiovascular disease (heart disease and strokes), type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, like osteoarthritis, and different forms of cancer. In contrast, the dangers involved in watching football, studying science, and in buying cars and electric can-openers, are much less significant. The one exception to this might be buying cars. However, although buying a car can lead to injuries and even fatalities as a result of careless driving, these are far from being probable consequences as many careful drivers can testify. In contrast, the likelihood of developing serious health conditions as a result of being obese is much higher.

- 7 Advocates of this analogy seem to be arguing that in the same way that physical exercise places demands on our bodies and gets us to use them in ways we don’t usually, sending young people off to fight in a war detaches us from our habitual concerns and gets people thinking patriotically about the sacrifices they need to make for the state. Rather than thinking about themselves, they begin to think beyond self-interest about the needs of the nation and society as a whole; about the importance of defending tradition and national values.

The analogy seems to work to a degree, but, as we discovered in Chapter 9, all analogies tend to break down at some point. This one rests heavily on the concept of the state as one coherent, organic being, which, like an individual, needs exercise to maintain its health. But it is here that the analogy breaks down. In liberal democracies, societies are conceived as just collections of individuals, all of whom have rights, freedoms and interests invested in them as individuals. The state is merely the means of protecting and promoting these: it has no claim to being pre-eminent over the individual. Quite the contrary, the individual, and his or her interests, comes first. The state is merely the means of serving these interests.

2. Begging the question

In Chapter 9 we found that we lose control over the direction of our ideas as a result of being unclear about the implications of the words an author uses, particularly those that are loaded. The other way is through begging the question, which occurs when an author accepts as an assumption what he is arguing for as a conclusion. We are manipulated without knowing by the author smuggling into the premises the conclusion about to be deduced. Strictly speaking, this is what we know as arguing in a circle or, more familiarly, the fallacy of the vicious circle. An author uses a premise to prove a conclusion and then uses the conclusion to prove the premise.

Begging the question	To accept as an assumption what we’re arguing for as a conclusion
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Read the following statement made by a politician and see if you can identify where he has begged the question.

‘Ensuring that every business person has unrestricted freedom to pursue their individual interests must always be a good thing for the country, because it is in the interests of the community that each individual should enjoy complete liberty to maximise their own income.’

Answer:

As you can see, 'a good thing for the country' means 'in the interests of the community'; they are synonymous. The conclusion clearly repeats the reason or premise. So the very issue that is in dispute is begged. The argument, therefore, is only trivially true, as all examples of these arguments are. They are tautologies: the politician has so arranged things that his argument is true by definition and by no reference to anything outside it. And, of course, it's easy to persuade someone of anything if you're free to monopolize words and give them your own meaning. At best such an argument is useless: A in and of itself does not give us grounds for saying A is true.

3. Equivocation

Read through the following arguments and identify the equivocation. Then explain why you think this is an equivocation.

1 Lockdown

Under the conditions of the lockdown I am denied the liberty of going out to my local pub and having a drink. Anyone who is denied their liberty is being forced to live in a dictatorship.

2 Farmers

Farmers have tilled the earth in traditional ways for generations. They are now being encouraged to use chemical fertilisers and modern insecticides, and grow GM crops that threaten the survival of the earth, which is a farmer's responsibility to protect to ensure the survival of all the creatures that live on it.

3 Lawgiver

Any law implies a lawgiver. There are laws of nature, so there must be a natural lawgiver: a God who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent.

4 Education

The importance of a university education lies in the influence it can have on your ability to think. Learning to argue a case and use evidence and language effectively is an essential ability for many professions and for all citizens within a democracy. However, it also has its drawbacks. There is in the world far too much argument already. We need less, not more, conflict.

Answers:

- 1 In this argument the author has confused the concept of 'a' liberty with a small 'L', such as the liberty of buying a drink, with liberty with a capital 'L', the rights and freedoms enshrined in a constitution or a bill of rights, like the right to free speech and the freedom of association.
- 2 Similar to the first argument, this one uses the word 'earth' to mean that which a farmer will plough, cultivate and sow, but then, when the word is used a second time, it refers to the planet and all those who are dependent on it for their survival.
- 3 In this argument the word 'law' is the subject of equivocation. In the first sense it refers to civil laws: laws which are created by governments to regulate the relations between citizens and organisations.

In the second sense it refers to laws of nature, which simply describe observed regularities in natural events. They help us understand nature, so that we can organise our lives and avoid the most harmful effects. For this we need not presume a 'lawgiver'.

- 4 In this argument the word that is equivocated is 'argue'. In the first sense, as the arguments makes clear, we mean the ability to create a consistent argument, use evidence well and language clearly and consistently. But in the second use the meaning shifts to imply conflict and disputes. The first sense need not necessarily imply the second: the fact that you learn to argue consistently need not promote more conflict.

4. Jargon

In the following exercises translate the passages into everyday language that makes the meaning immediately clear. Where it is possible I have offered my translation, but where there is too much doubt I have refrained from suggesting what I think it might mean.

- 1 From the chairman of a committee of a major corporation describing the purpose of his committee:

It's an umbrella group that interacts synergistically to platform and leverage cultural human resources strategies company-wide.

- 2 A Foreign and Commonwealth Office job advert contained the following explanation of the duties of a 'reputation manager':

'Maintenance and development of job narrative around FCO and its value proposition, using insights from research and evaluation as well as knowledge of the evolving FCO strategy to inform resonant messaging....'

Answer:

Write positively about the FCO using reports about its research, how well it does its job and the changing strategies.

- 3 From a 34 page 'self-assessment' document from NHS Lanarkshire in the 'clinical effectiveness' section referring to reports on infection rates:

These are cascaded to senior staff across the organisation through to frontline staff via a structured mechanism to facilitate ownership of data.