



Analogies

It's not unusual to read an article or an argument in which an author uses an analogy to make her points. This means that we have to ask ourselves constantly whether an analogy is safe or not. Consider the following example:

Example: A newspaper report

A newspaper account of a speaker at a conference reported, 'He told the Conference last week that football hooliganism was exacerbated by press coverage. This was rather like blaming the Meteorological Office for bad weather.'

It's not difficult to see that this is not a safe analogy. It may indeed be true that in many cases newspaper reports had no influence on the activities of football hooligans at all, but the analogy the report uses differs in such significant and obvious ways as to make the argument quite untenable. As you can see, the key difference which weakens the argument is that the weather cannot be influenced in its behaviour as football hooligans can by reading press reports of them and their behaviour.

Now try this one:

Example: Business management and Darwinian theory

Some business people use the analogy between competitive markets and Darwin's theory of the competitive struggle for survival in nature to justify their methods of doing business. Cut-throat economic competition, they argue, is the natural state of affairs and the rise to the top of the strongest is an inevitable law of nature. They describe their working lives as a jungle in which they are continually engaged in a struggle with others for survival. Everything, they argue, is justified as long as it promotes survival.

What differences between this description of business management and Darwinian theory make this analogy unsafe?

Answer

Darwin's theory of natural evolution is driven by blind forces that select from random mutations those characteristics that improve the chances of survival. Business, on the other hand, is driven by conscious intentions and nothing guarantees that this will result in the best run businesses surviving, while the worst lose out: it is just as likely that bad management will drive out good.

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Exercises

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 Just as a sword is the weapon of a warrior, a pen is the weapon of a writer.
- 3 A doctor diagnoses diseases like a detective investigates crimes.
- 4 '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.'
- 5 '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.'
- 6 '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.'
- 7 The effect of the Japanese earthquake and the nuclear crisis that developed around the Fukushima nuclear power plant appears to have damaged the chances of a revival of the American nuclear industry struggling to emerge from the shadow of its own disaster at Three Mile Island in 1979. The *Guardian* reported,

'In the US, proponents of nuclear power remained steadfast. Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican who has called for building 100 reactors in the next 20 years, called on America to cling fast to the nuclear dream. 'We don't abandon highway systems because bridges and overpasses collapse during earthquakes', he said in a speech to the Senate.'¹
- 8 'Some basic facts about memory are clear. Your short-term memory is like the RAM on a computer: it records the information in front of you right now. Some of what you experience seems to evaporate – like words that go missing when you turn off your



computer without hitting SAVE. But other short-term memories go through a molecular process called consolidation: they're downloaded onto the hard drive. These long-term memories, filled with past loves and losses and fears, stay dormant until you call them up.'²

Answers

- 1 The analogy between the world and a human artefact, 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 artefact is there any proper basis to infer an intelligent designer.
- 2 This analogy is more reliable. However, it depends on how it is used. It would certainly be difficult to argue convincingly that, like a warrior, a writer uses his pen to kill his enemies. But in more general terms we can say that some writers use their pens, like a warrior uses his weapon, to win conflicts and differences of opinion.
- 3 This, too, is a reliable analogy as long as it is not taken too far. A doctor, like a detective, will ask questions and gather evidence before he comes to a diagnosis, in the same way that a detective will ask questions and gather evidence from witnesses before he or she develops a theory as to who might have committed the crime.
- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 This is similar to our third analogy 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.



- 7 The weakness in this analogy lies in the depth and breadth of harm that a malfunctioning nuclear generating plant can cause compared with the collapse of a bridge or an overpass. If a nuclear generating plant goes into meltdown or just releases nuclear radiation in whatever form, this can not only cause a large number of deaths, but result in long term illnesses, like cancer, and even genetic harm that can be passed on to future generations. In contrast, the collapse of a bridge or overpass results in fewer fatalities and casualties. You might also argue that in most cases with bridges and overpasses there is no alternative, whereas there are alternative methods of generating electricity.
- 8 This seems to be a fairly reliable analogy. The one difference that may make it unsafe is that short-term memory works by a process of reinforcement. In the immediate period after we have learned something, the memory degrades quite rapidly from hour to hour. But if we revise it a number of times at regular intervals, we reinforce the memory and, as a result, we are able to recall it quite accurately. In contrast, with RAM, once we have switched the computer off without saving the information, we have lost it. And, by the same token, once we have saved something, it doesn't degrade as with our short-term memory.

Other examples to work on:

1. The Watergate Hearings

Critically evaluate the following argument by checking the relation between the analogy and the conclusion drawn from it. Pay particular attention to whether the analogy is of the right strength and reflects the similarities and differences between it and the situation it helps to explain (read Chapter 33 of *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*).

'During the Watergate hearings in the 1970s, the second-in-command at the White House, John Ehrlichman, used an analogy to explain why he thought it was appropriate to burgle the offices of the psychiatrist who was treating Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon consultant who released the Pentagon Papers to the press. Clearly they were after something they could use to discredit, or even blackmail, him.

Ehrlichman said the situation was like the following: suppose you heard that there was in a safe deposit box in a bank vault in Washington DC a map showing the location of an atomic bomb due to go off the following day in the middle of the city. Breaking into the vault would be like breaking into the psychiatrist's office. It was the only reasonable thing to do.

One of the senators on the investigating committee then suggested that in such circumstances it would have been more appropriate to phone the bank president, ask for the keys and explain why you needed them. In response, Ehrlichman argued that they had, in fact, attempted the equivalent: they had tried to bribe a nurse in the psychiatrist's office to give them the file.'³

2. Political parties

'There's no more reason for a country to have two political parties than there is for a man to have two heads.'



3. Advertising copywriter

'Writing cigarette copy doesn't worry me at all. Why should it? Should a copywriter of car commercials worry about writing copy for cars just because thousands of people die in car accidents every year? Is it wrong to write alcohol advertisements just because there are alcoholics?'

4. Parliamentary government

In support of his opposition to the parliamentary system of government by representation Thomas Carlyle argued that a ship could never be taken round Cape Horn if the crew were consulted every time the captain proposed to alter the course.

5. Obesity

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.

6. Nature

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.

7. Politics

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.

¹ *Guardian Weekly*, 25th March, 2011.

² 'To Pluck a Rooted Sorrow', *Newsweek*, 27th April, 2009.

³ Michael Scriven, *Reasoning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 213.