

# Book Review

## If Only It Were So Easy

ROBERT C. ROWLAND *University of Kansas*

Makau, Josina M. (1990). *Reasoning and Communication: Thinking Critically About Arguments*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 241 pages. ISBN 0-534-12390-2. Paper.

In *Reasoning and Communication*, Josina M. Makau provides a brief overview to a variety of issues relating to argument analysis and evaluation, critical thinking, argument creation, and the ethics of rhetoric. In the nine chapters in the book Makau defends the importance of argument analysis as a means of facilitating critical thinking and makes a start toward creating a pedagogical plan for teaching those critical thinking skills.

The book opens with a defense of the value of critical thinking. In a very standard treatment, Makau argues that critical thinking is needed in order to make effective decisions at all levels of a society from personal choices to the most crucial political decision. Makau also claims that the critical thinking process is essential to protecting liberty.

The chapters that follow provide a short course in rational argumentation and persuasion skills. The second chapter discusses a number of elements in the critical thinking process including questioning skills, research skills, reading skills, and means of discovering underlying assumptions and values. In the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, Makau moves to a consideration of issues of interest to an argumentation theorist. This section begins with a defense of the value of argument that focuses on the link between rational consideration of the

issues and good policy outcomes. In this section, Makau distinguishes between competitive and cooperative decision making, concluding that competitive decision making may lead advocates "to seek only evidence that advances a preconceived, narrow perspective" (49). Cooperative argument, by contrast, "is a process of reasoned interaction on a controversial topic intended to help participants and audiences make the best assessments or decisions in any given situation" (49). Makau follows this relatively standard defense of the value of argument with a discussion of the characteristics of argument, concluding that good argument "involves a balance between logic and emotion" (57).

The fourth chapter breaks down arguments into a variety of elements. Makau's treatment of the various parts making up argument is relatively standard and includes a focus on claims, issues, commonplaces, presumption and burden of proof, definitions, types of evidence, and inferences. In this section, Makau also draws a traditional distinction between deductive and inductive argument forms.

The fifth chapter moves to a focus on the types of audiences that are exposed to argument and the various situations in which argument occurs. Makau's analysis of the audience focuses on what she calls the "composite audience" that is described as follows:

This is an audience, either imagined or real, that includes people whose critical thinking skills permit them to make reasoned decisions about controversial issues. Members

of the composite audience also have enough information on the particular topic to make an informed judgment about it. (103)

The composite audience then functions as an ideal for decision making and could be thought of as a practical definition of Perelman's universal audience. Later in this chapter, Makau discusses specific contexts in which argument occurs, including dialogic contexts, written contexts, public address contexts, and legal argument.

In the sixth chapter Makau treats standards for communication ethics. The focus is heavily on the importance of telling the full truth. Makau also cites the composite audience as an appropriate standard for judging the ethics of communication practices.

The last three chapters are grouped together under the general heading "Applications." In chapter 7 Makau focuses on developing arguments to be used in advocacy, especially emphasizing the process of developing an issue brief for advocating a position. Chapter 8 consists of discussion of the argument evaluation process and concludes with a discussion of 21 different fallacies (184-198). In chapter 9, Makau applies the previous analysis to four key issues of the day: sexual identity and gender norms, public policy and family, gay rights, and surrogate motherhood.

*Reasoning and Communication* clearly possesses a number of strengths. The most obvious strength of the work is the breadth of its coverage. In slightly less than 250 pages Makau manages to cover many important issues relating to the philosophical justification behind critical thinking and argumentation, argument description, argument evaluation, fallacy theory, the ethics of advocacy, and argument creation. While the work is brief, Makau does a good job of laying out a clear position on any number of issues. For example, Makau's defense of argument as a means to critical thinking, which is in turn important for its effect on personal and societal decision making, is

extremely cogent. At other points Makau provides useful "rules of thumb" to be applied in the argument generation or evaluation process. For example, early in the work Makau defends the value of the following questions as one means of aiding the development of critical listening and reading skills:

What conclusions does the artist, author, or speaker want me to draw?

What support does the source give for these conclusions?

Is the support relevant, reliable, and adequate?

What are the assumptions underlying the author's or speaker's reasoning?

Are these assumptions acceptable to me?

Has the author or speaker adequately considered and presented alternative perspectives? (21)

While clearly not unique, these questions represent a useful approach to one aspect of the critical thinking process.

The work has other values as well. Makau's focus is on recent public controversies, events such as the Exxon Valdez tanker disaster and the Iran/Contra affair. This consideration of recent events is useful for providing students with a frame of reference. Makau's work is also valuable in that it is clearly written and explained. The examples and illustrations within it tend to be topical and interesting.

Despite its obvious strengths, *Reasoning and Communication* possesses significant weaknesses that restrict the contexts in which it can serve as a useful text. The most important weakness of the book is derived directly from its main strength, breadth of coverage. The obvious problem with Makau's broad approach is that it cannot do justice to the wealth of important issues of concern to a student of argumentation and critical thinking. For example, there is almost no discussion of the process of describing arguments. Makau seems to operate on the assumption that the relationship between the claims, evidence, and reasons that make up an argumentative position will be relatively clear. Of course, this

is often not the case. It is therefore not surprising that Makau gives virtually no consideration to the difficulties involved in identifying unstated enthymematic premises and conclusions. Clearly, Makau assumes that the structure of argument is readily apparent in most cases, an assumption that most argumentation theorists probably would deny. Similarly, the treatment of fallacies is largely undeveloped; 21 fallacies in 14 pages obviously can not provide an adequate discussion of the complexities involved in fallacy theory or even a complete introduction to their application.

Makau's text is a useful broad introductory text, with current illustrative examples. From a pedagogical perspective, however, the book is lacking in developed illustrations of the argument evaluation process and also in extended case-studies for student analysis. Put differently, the main strength of the work, its breadth of coverage, is also its main weakness. If one is seeking a broad introduction, this is a fine book. If one wants an in-depth introduction to argument description and analysis, then other works might be more appropriate.

The final weakness of the work relates to the implicit view of rational decision making in the work. While most students

of argumentation would endorse Makau's defense of the value of critical thinking skills, Makau makes that relationship sound more direct than it is. From reading *Reasoning and Communication*, one could get the view that if all decision makers only had these basic skills then immediately they would begin making better decisions. Of course, the world is not that simple and the relationship between the "best arguments and reasoning" and the "best" policy is at best problematic. This in no way undercuts Makau's analysis of the function of argumentation, but it does suggest that argumentation theorists should be careful not to oversell their product. Developed argumentation skills do not guarantee good decisions; many of our most disastrous decisions have been made by individuals who essentially were following the principles outlined by Makau. But the alternative is much worse. Reason may be a weak light to illuminate the world, but it is the only light that we have.

ROBERT C. ROWLAND  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION  
STUDIES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS  
LAWRENCE, KS 66045-2177

□