Informal Logic
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book reviews

Claudia Bialke Debner, ed., CHEMICAL DEPENDENCE. OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS.

St. Paul: Greenhaven Press, 1985. 240pp. ISBN 0-89908-351-X (paper). US$7.95.

Julie S. Bach, ed., BIOMEDICAL ETHICS. OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS.

St. Paul: Greenhaven Press, 1987. 216pp. ISBN 0-89908-371-4 (paper). US$7.95.

Review by EVERETT TRAVERSO, Santa Rosa Junior College.

Instructors of critical thinking who want to supplement their texts with a source of long arguments might consider these two books, or others like them in the series "Opposing Viewpoints". There are 42 volumes in this series. Each volume has about 30 articles on a popular topic of discussion, and five or six chapters on particular aspects of that general topic. Most of the articles are paired with an article which presents a different view on the topic under discussion (hence, the series title: Opposing Viewpoints). The articles have been taken from a wide variety of sources. The average length is about three pages.

I find a number of advantages to using long arguments such as those found in these texts, rather than the short examples which are given in many critical thinking texts. One advantage is that a student has fewer difficulties understanding the meaning of an argument when the argument is read surrounded by the text intended by the author of the argument. Sentences and paragraphs which are puzzling when taken out of their intended context can be clear when read within that context. When a student has the whole of the original argument, or most of it, and still discovers ambiguity or vagueness, she can be more confident that the problem is in the writing itself, rather than in her lack of knowledge of what was deleted from the original argument.

Long arguments, especially a number of long arguments on the same subject, help develop in students the background information necessary to analyze many arguments. Many students fail to see the logical problems in an argument, not because they do not understand logical evaluation, but because they are unfamiliar with the subject being discussed. For instance, a student who is trying to find the conclusion of an argument on capital punishment but is unaware of the distinction between justifying capital punishment on retributive grounds and justifying it on consequentialist grounds will frequently fail to discover the correct conclusion. Similarly, many of the subtle uses of common fallacies cannot be discovered unless the student has the necessary background information about the subject under discussion. For example, a student unaware of the common arguments about a topic will not be able to spot the distortion of those arguments in a straw man argument. By reading four or five articles on the same subject, a student can acquire sufficient background knowledge to evaluate many arguments. For the instructor this means that if a student fails to see the logical problems of an argument, the failure is most likely caused by a lack of understanding of logic rather than of the subject being discussed.

Practice on long arguments is also necessary if a critical thinking course is intended to teach students to evaluate the serious arguments they come across in their everyday lives. Those arguments are frequently long arguments. My experience has been that there is some transfer of skill from learning to evaluate short arguments to learning to evaluate long arguments, but I find that transfer

to be limited. Long arguments frequently have a much more complex structure than normally found in short arguments, and they require a weighing of the parts of the argument that is more involved. Students need to practice frequently with long arguments if they are to learn to apply to them the basic principles of logic.

The texts under review here provide ample examples of arguments for these purposes. Each chapter has enough articles on an aspect of the general topic to build a student's background knowledge of the subject. Most of the examples are reprinted in their entirety. Where the editors have shortened articles or reprinted chapters of books, the portions printed express complete and coherent arguments. The average length of three pages is long enough to develop an argument without being so long that the logical analysis becomes a burden.

However, while these texts can be very useful for instructors looking for a source of long arguments, they have serious pitfalls for the unwary student or instructor. The problems these texts have for use in a critical thinking class all stem from the editorial changes and additions made to the articles themselves. One change the editors made is in the titles of the articles. Nearly all the titles have been changed to reflect the claim that the articles express opposing viewpoints. However, frequently the articles do not express directly opposed views, and thus the titles mislead unsuspecting students. For instance, in *Chemical Dependency* one article is given the title "Liquor Advertising Promotes Alcoholism" even though that point is not made in the article (pp. 73-78). Its companion article is given the title "Liquor Advertising Does Not Promote Alcoholism" although that point is only one of many points the author makes (pp. 79-82). Fortunately, the editors do give us the original titles in very fine print at the bottom of the page, but this is not enough to keep from confusing less sophisticated readers.

The most serious problems with these texts occur in the supplements at the end of each chapter which claim to teach critical thinking skills. These two-page supplements to each chapter show very little knowledge of the basic principles of critical thinking. Some of them are so misleading that they are probably harmful to the development of critical thinking skills.

One such critical thinking supplement purports to teach how to distinguish between fact and opinion. As an example of a fact the text gives the statement "Several thousand people are killed on the nations' highways every year by drunk drivers". As an example of opinion it gives the statement "If people who habitually drive while intoxicated were better educated regarding the effects of alcohol upon their bodies, there would be far fewer highway fatalities". This is said to be opinion because "The remedies for drunk driving depend on one's point of view" (155). This distinction between fact and opinion undermines what should be one of the goals of a critical thinking class. Students should be encouraged to look for the reasons given for complex statements like the one here labeled "opinion". By calling it "opinion" and contrasting it with "facts", students are invited to ignore the complicated network of reasons which might underlie such statements. Rather than develop critical thinking skills, this distinction encourages careless thinking.

In the text *Biomedical Ethics*, there is a two-page chapter supplement entitled "A Critical Thinking Activity: Recognizing Deceptive Arguments". The supplement (which begins on page 165) includes an explanation of deceptive arguments and provides a list of examples. Here is part of what is said:

> . . .When evaluating an argument, it is important for a reader to recognize the distracting, or deceptive, appeals being used. Here are a few common ones:
> a. bandwagon—the idea that "everyone" does this or believes this
> b. scare tactics—the threat that if you don't

do this or don't believe this, something terrible will happen
c. strawperson—distorting or exaggerating an opponent's ideas to make one's own seem stronger. . .
f. deductive reasoning—idea that since a and b are true, c is true also
g. slanters—to persuade through inflammatory language and exaggerated language instead of reason
h. generalization—using statistics or facts to generalize about a population, place or idea

The following activity will help to sharpen your skills in recognizing deceptive reasoning.

Obviously, this exercise will not only not sharpen a student's skills, but will seriously dull them. It is impossible to imagine what understanding of logical principles could include deduction and generalization on a list of common fallacies. To make matters even worse, of the twelve examples given on the next page, only two are arguments.

These "critical thinking" supplements to the chapters are so bad that they raise the question of whether these texts have any place in a critical thinking course. I think that properly used they can still be a fruitful source of long arguments. I sternly warn my students to ignore the editors' titles, ignore the editors' brief summaries of the articles, and to ignore the "critical thinking" supplements. For the most part, this advice is followed, and we successfully use these texts despite their serious shortcomings. □

Trudy Govier, A PRACTICAL STUDY OF ARGUMENT (2nd edition).

Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987. 384pp. ISBN 0-534-08262-9 (paper). US$25.35

Review by G. A. SPANGLER, California State University, Long Beach.

There has been, and perhaps always will be, serious controversy about how much, if any, formal logic ought to be covered in an undergraduate critical thinking class. This text emphasizes informal logic but relies on the basic concept of deductive entailment. It includes chapters on elementary propositional and categorical logic, but it can be used as a text in a course that is exclusively informal.

The heart of the book, on which this review shall focus, is a series of chapters on extended argument analysis making use of what Govier calls the "ARG" conditions, a mnemonic device whose letters stand for conditions fulfilled by cogent arguments. A cogent argument is one whose premises are acceptable, relevant to the conclusion and such as to provide adequate grounds for drawing the conclusion.

A Practical Study of Argument opens with the novel idea that an argument is directed at showing some claim to be acceptable. What is new here, at least in a textbook context, is the substitution of "acceptability" for "truth." This substitution is discussed mainly in connection with premises (Govier argues in a note to instructors later in the book that the truth of premises is neither necessary nor sufficient for them to provide a basis for cogent argumentation), but the point of arguing is understood to be the establishment of the rational acceptability of some claim. Guidelines for determining whether premises are rationally acceptable are spelled out in a separate chapter and the theory behind her approach is explained in an Appendix.