

PROLOGUE

Some subjects are so well defined by ordinary usage that any book on such a subject will have a fairly standardized kind of presentation that will meet the typical expectations of a potential reader. Two things are necessary in order for this statement to be at least approximately true. First, there must be general agreement concerning what the subject is. Second, there has to be general agreement that some particular logical development of the various topics within the subject is the most “natural.” Consider examples such as thesauri, dictionaries, atlases, first-year language books, introductory algebra texts, Euclidean geometry texts, introductory economics texts, first-course treatments of most subjects, and numerous others for which books do have a fairly standardized kind of presentation.

Many different books dealing with arguments are remarkably diverse. The potential students of the subject surely need some kind of guide such as this prologue in order to select the best book for their purposes. Many books on argumentation are suitable for the equivalent of a first-year course on the subject. Our goal in this prologue is to state as clearly as possible the ways in which this book differs from other books that might be considered alternatives. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this is to call attention to the major differences among conceptions of the subject that have resulted in the striking diversity among the many books on argumentation.

The first difference results from the fact that in the English language we correctly use the word “argument” in two major senses. Thus, one might say, “I had an argument with Al about adequate laws and punishments for convicted pedophiles.” Then one might add, “My argument was that the rate of recidivism is so high for pedophiles that it is essential to maintain permanent legal supervision for such persons.” In the first statement “argument” refers to the verbal interaction when they are “arguing.” Such an “argument” can occur in any kind of gathering or meeting and can be on any subject. Often such an argument is referred to as a “catch-as-catch-can” argument. In the second statement “argument” is correctly used to describe the formulation of reasons for the support of the position taken. This second use is the same one as when persons say, “The argument of the lecture today was . . .” or “In his talk, President Bush presented the argument that . . .”.

This suggests immediately that some books on argumentation will be devoted to methods for “arguing” while others will be devoted to methods for creating or understanding the formulation of reasons in support of a position taken. Thus, Michael A. Gilbert’s *How to Win an Argument* is on “arguing” and Alec Fisher’s *The Logic of Real Arguments* is primarily on critical thinking about arguments in our second sense, as above. Of course, there is nothing to prevent one book covering both “arguing” and “arguments”—other than possible considerations of length. The excellent book by Robert J. Fogelin and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Understanding Arguments*, is an example.

The second difference reinforces the first one even though it has a dissimilar basis. Perhaps the first obvious indication of this difference is that one cannot help noticing that a fair number of books that apparently deal with the general subject of argumentation have quite different titles than the ones we have quoted so far. Thus, we find *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*, by Howard Kahane and Nancy Cavender; *A Rhetoric of Argumentation*, by Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor; and a book that is often given pride of place and is surely one of the largest books on the subject, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* by Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, (translated from the French by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver). The major difference of these titles from the ones previously quoted is the inclusion of the word “Rhetoric.” What is the significance of this word?

This question will be intensively discussed in this book. Aristotle developed his syllogistic theory of logic as a weapon to be used in arguing, by which he meant primarily an argument between two persons holding contradictory positions on some question. Aristotle also developed a different theory, rhetoric, for the many situations in which the goal is the effect on an audience. In the overwhelming majority of the cases where the audience is of primary importance to the speaker it is a fact that a speech is being made. In other words, one can correctly think of the ancient theories of rhetoric as being theories of oratory. The traditional theories of rhetoric maintained that there were three kinds of rhetorical speeches: deliberative, where the orator advises and dissuades and finally recommends the best thing that should be done; forensic, in which the orator accuses or defends with the goal of achieving a just decision on an issue of guilt or innocence; and epideictic, in which the orator praises or blames some person or thing with the goal of demonstrating the worthy or the unworthy.

Any one of the three kinds of speeches is an “argument” in the second sense since the speaker will be offering a number of reasons for the conclusion the speechmaker wants to present to the audience. Hence, they are all arguments and are legitimately so called but they are totally different from catch-as-catch-can arguments or, indeed, totally different from any argument that involves dialogue between two opponents. The reason is obvious: in an argument involving dialogue an opponent must respond to specific questions that are addressed to him or her. This kind of back-and-forth questioning creates the distinctive structure of catch-as-catch-can arguments. For speeches, this is definitely not true. The exclusive interest in this book is in strategies for arguments involving dialogue, and particularly for the ordinary catch-as-catch-can variety. Any theory of arguments as speeches, including rhetoric, has no use for these purposes.

More generally, no treatment of methods for understanding written arguments or speeches will provide any additional skill in arguing, meaning two opponents and involving dialogue. The authors who include “rhetoric” in their titles seem to think otherwise. The basic reason is that written arguments and most speeches have a much more complicated structure than do the ordinary arguments that are likely to arise in a catch-as-catch-can argument. In catch-as-catch-can, if one opponent offers a complicated argument, then the other opponent will request an explanation, “What are you trying to prove and how is it related to our argument?” The ultimate test of one’s argumentative skills is catch-as-catch-can arguments.

If an argument involves dialogue, the strategies of rhetoric will be of no use. The methods for winning an argument are precisely the subject of this book. This is why this book has very little interest in the traditional theory of rhetoric. Most of us very rarely have occasion to make speeches, but we often have occasion to defend a point of view or take strong exception to someone else’s point of view. The goal in this book is to provide means for doing either one successfully.

Thus, the goal of this book is to present the method of arguing. We want a method so that when we are right, we will surely win the argument, and when we lose, we will know that we are wrong. This is the major goal for anyone who wants to argue. Nonetheless, only a small handful of books deal with this subject, the greatest of which is by F. Binder. Another book that treats this subject is Michael A. Gilbert’s *How to Win an Argument*, also a fine book but somewhat shorter.

Two more books that may be of this type have similar titles. One is Gerry Spence’s *How to Argue and Win Every Time* (1995) and the other is Nicholas Capaldi’s *How to Win Every Argument* (1999). The titles alone are sufficient to make one realize that something is idiosyncratic. It is simply not possible to “win every time” or to “win every argument.” With the usual meaning of “win,” there is no way to have a system that guarantees “winning” every time. Despite their optimistic titles, the last two cited books will not guarantee winning an ordinary catch-as-catch-can argument. Similarly, none of the books including “rhetoric” in their title will be of help in catch-as-catch-can arguments. Nor will books dealing with the

second meaning of “argument.” such as Alec Fisher’s excellent book *The Logic of Real Arguments* (1988), be of help to the would-be catch-as-catch-can arguer. Parts of other books that will be useful to persons who want to master the methods of catch-as-catch-can arguing. But the present book is specifically addressed to persons who are interested in learning appropriate methods for handling ordinary catch-as-catch-can arguments that arise so often in the usual processes of exchanging opinions about the world and all that goes on within it. If that is what you want, then this book is it!