

Preface to Instructors

Professor Weise: Today I'd like to continue our discussion of fallacies, beginning with the fallacy of ad hominem. There are two kinds of ad hominem fallacies. The most notorious is the abusive ad hominem, which consists of using a malicious denigration of a person to reject his or her argument or position.

Student: Professor Weise, I have a question. It may be a little off topic, but it's something that's been bothering me for a while.

Professor: Of course – go ahead.

Student: When I saw this course on critical thinking in the calendar, I thought, “Great! This will really help me to think about all those issues out there—like what we ought to do about global warming or the economic crisis. It might even help me make decisions like whether I should buy a car or take the bus.”

Professor: Well, it can do all those things, though perhaps indirectly . . . or at least provide a necessary condition.

Student: Intending no disrespect, but I just don't see it. You've got these folks debating about global warming, and one of them has a bunch of arguments claiming one thing and another has this evidence claiming the opposite, and then they argue with each other, and then a third person chimes in, and I'm not even sure if they're all arguing about the same thing! So finding a few logical mistakes may be useful. But I don't see how that helps me figure out what to believe.

Professor: Knowing whether the various participants in the debate are reliable sources or whether there are errors in their reasoning are important aspects in evaluating their arguments.

Student: Sure, I see that all that stuff's important, but I don't see how it gets me to the point of figuring out what's the best view.

This dialogue may have a ring of familiarity about it. It certainly does for us. And we take seriously the issue that it raises: How can we teach critical thinking in such a way as to provide students with the understanding and skills to be able to make reasoned judgments in real-life contexts? This was the issue that motivated us to develop a new approach, and it is the issue that prompted us to write this text.

We began our quest for a better approach by looking at the actual practice of critical thinking and what it involves. We concluded that coming to a reasoned judgment on complex issues is at the heart of the kind of critical thinking which actually takes place both in the academic disciplines and in everyday life. Yet students tend to have very little instruction in how to go about the inquiry process and in understanding the criteria used to make such reasoned judgments. It is the goal of our text to address this problem.

Thus, unlike most texts in the area, which have as their central focus the analysis and critique of individual arguments, *Reason in the Balance* focuses more broadly on the practice of inquiry. By inquiry we intend **critical** inquiry, the process of carefully examining an issue in order to come to a reasoned judgment. The notion of reasoned judgment is crucial here: we are not referring to inquiry as simply the process of gathering information but rather as the process of coming to a reasoned judgment based on a critical evaluation of relevant reasons. The analysis and critique of individual arguments certainly have an important role to play and are given due emphasis in the text; however, our book goes beyond this dimension to focus on the various aspects that go into the practice of inquiry, including identifying issues, identifying the relevant contexts, understanding the competing cases, and making a comparative judgment among them.

Distinctive Features of the Text

This inquiry orientation gives rise to certain distinctive features of the text:

- emphasis on the dialectical dimension of critical thinking
- inclusion of inquiry in specific contexts
- attention to the dialogical aspects of inquiry
- emphasis on the spirit of inquiry

Emphasis on the Dialectical Dimension of Critical Thinking

Arriving at reasoned judgments is a dialectical process which takes place in contexts of disagreement, debate, or challenge. It involves the adjudication among various positions offered in the context of such debate. Our text puts significant emphasis on this dialectical dimension. This takes several forms:

Emphasis on the Current Debate

The text focuses not just on evaluating particular arguments but more broadly on making a comparative assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the competing views in the debate. This involves knowing the various positions, the evidence and arguments mustered in their favor, the criticisms and objections which have been leveled against them, the responses to the criticisms and objections, and alternative arguments and views.

Attention to the History of the Debate

When an issue is controversial or has been contested, discussion and debate will likely have gone on over a period of time. The text gives due attention to learning about the history of the debate in order to understand the issue, the various positions which are contesting for acceptance, and where the burden of proof lies.

Attention to Relevant Aspects of the Context of the Debate

Certain aspects of the context surrounding a debate, including the intellectual, political, social, historical, and disciplinary contexts, are usually relevant in understanding some positions and the assumptions behind them. We explore in the text in what ways a consideration of various aspects of context is relevant in arriving at a reasoned judgment.

Inclusion of Inquiry in Specific Contexts

With our focus broadening from argument evaluation to inquiry, the range of material treated has broadened as well. Thus, the text goes beyond a focus on individual arguments found in media, politics, and everyday interactions to treat inquiry which takes place in a variety of different contexts, both disciplinary and everyday. There are chapters on inquiry in the natural sciences, in the social sciences, and in the arts, as well as a chapter on inquiry into extraordinary claims. These chapters use detailed examples to demonstrate the common structure of inquiry across these areas as well as the types of judgments and criteria which are distinctive to each. While instructors may choose to use only some of these chapters, the wide range of topics is supplied in order to provide ample opportunity for the application of the strategies and criteria of inquiry in a diversity of areas.

Attention to the Dialogical Aspect of Inquiry

In actual contexts, inquiries are conducted not only in written form but very often in the form of dialogues among individuals or groups of individuals. Even when there is not an actual dialogue with people talking face-to-face, inquiries involve a number of views or positions in conversation with each other and thus can be seen to exhibit the characteristics of a dialogue. This dialogical aspect is one which is given attention in our text through the extensive use of dialogues with an ongoing cast of characters to exemplify the topics under discussion. Students will identify with the characters in these dialogues, providing a very accessible and engaging narrative entry point for them. The dialogues also serve to model the process of inquiry which the students are learning. In addition, the text encourages the creation and use of dialogues in and out of class as a way to conduct and represent inquiries.

Emphasis on the Spirit of Inquiry

Reason in the Balance puts considerable emphasis on the attitudes or habits of mind necessary for inquiry, such as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, a willingness to follow arguments where they lead, and an acceptance of uncertainty. It also highlights the numerous biases in reasoning and common irrational tendencies which are obstacles to the spirit of inquiry and proposes strategies for helping to counter them. We also emphasize the attitudes required for conducting a civil, respectful, and productive inquiry dialogue.

New Features of the Second Edition

- updated examples and items of current interest
- new dialogues on vaccination, prostitution, and climate change
- new material on biases in reasoning, including emotional and psychological, social, and cognitive biases
- material on deduction and formal logic supplemented with Appendix on Logic on the Web site, including links for further learning and practice

Reason in the Balance Web site

For Students

- Appendix on Logic
- Exercises
- Quizzes

For Instructors

- Instructor's Manual
- PowerPoint Slides
- Reference List
- Quizzes and Answers Key