Chapter 5: Strategies for Assessing Arguments

For the rest of this semester we will focus on the assessment of arguments. As we may now see, every argument supports its conclusion by making a double claim: (a) that its premises are true and (b) that its premises support its conclusion. Thus, every argument supports its conclusion by claiming that the argument is sound. To assess an argument, then, is to determine if claims (a) and (b) are true. Good arguments do what they claim to do and bad arguments do not.

Philosophers have developed two strategies for assessing arguments. There is the more traditional approach called the fallacies approach, in which specific fallacies that weaken the strength of an argument are identified and assessment of arguments works by determining if an argument commits fallacies. The other, more recent, approach is called the criterial approach, in which criteria that good arguments must satisfy are laid out and an assessment of arguments works by determining if a given argument satisfies these criteria. The criterial approach is the better of the two, as we shall see.

1.1 The Fallacies Approach

A fallacy is any error or weakness that detracts from the soundness of an argument. An example of a fallacy is the fallacy of inconsistency. Consider the following statements:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mary is older than Tom} \\
\text{Tom is older than Mary}
\end{align*}
\]

To assert either of these premises on their own is fine but to assert them together is to assert

\[
\text{Mary is older than Tom and Tom is older than Mary,}
\]

which is a blatant contradiction. An argument in which these statements appear in the premises commits the fallacy of inconsistency, i.e., the premises are inconsistent. In this case the fallacy prevents us from accepting the premises, i.e., the premises cannot/are not all true together and so the argument fails to be sound. Other fallacies, such as Hughes’ appeal to pity example (p. 114), affect the logical strength of an argument.

Logicians have identified and characterized somewhere of the order of 150 different types of fallacies. This long list captures most of the problems with arguments that one is likely to encounter in practice. It cannot, however, be considered to be complete, since there may always be a new sort of fallacy that no one has identified. This is one weakness of the fallacies approach—one may think that an argument is sound because it has not committed any known fallacies but it may commit a fallacy that no one has recognized. The other main weakness of the fallacies approach is that the length of the list makes it difficult to use the fallacy approach effectively, both in memorizing the list of fallacies and in identifying the correct weakness.

1.2 The Criterial Approach

The fallacies approach takes a negative approach, by looking for features that make a bad argument. It is this approach which leads to its weaknesses. The criterial approach, on the other
hand, take a positive approach by identifying criteria that any good argument must satisfy. It turns out that there are three main criteria that a sound argument must satisfy.

1.2.1 Acceptability

Recall that the definition of a sound argument is one that (a) is logically strong and (b) has true premises. The first criterion concerns the second part (b) of the definition and the second and third concern the first part (a) of the definition.

For a premise to provide you any reason to believe the conclusion, that premise must be true. This is beyond doubt. There are cases however, where it may be impossible to prove that a premise is true and so we must use different means to assess its truth. Moral claims, i.e., what one should do, are of this sort but certain causal claims, such as the claim that cigarette smoking is a health hazard, also fall into this category. Thus, the first criterion must account for the fact that we cannot know for certain if the premises are true and give criteria for reasonably considering a premise to be true in a particular context. Thus, the first criterion is that the premises be acceptable.

1.2.2 Relevance

For an argument to have logical strength, the premises must be relevant to the conclusion. If premises have no relation to the conclusion, it doesn’t matter whether the premises are true or not, the argument cannot be sound. Thus premises must provide us with information that is relevant to whether the conclusion is true or not. Determining this may sometimes be tricky, but, in any case, we have the second criterion, that of relevance.

1.2.3 Adequacy

The important thing about the degree of logical strength for sound arguments is that it must be of a high enough degree so that if we accept the premises then we will accept the conclusion (the argument is sound or it is not, soundness does not come in degrees). This means that if the premises are acceptable and relevant to the conclusion, they must still give us enough reason to believe that the conclusion is true. That is to say, the premises must adequately support the conclusion. Thus, the third criterion is that the premises must provide adequate support for the conclusion.

Therefore we have our three criteria for a good argument:

1. The premises must be acceptable
2. The premises must be relevant
3. The premises must be adequate

An argument that meets these criteria can be considered sound. If it fails to meet any one of these criteria we should consider it a weak or defective argument.
1.3 Seven Rules for Assessing Arguments

I now give you Hughes’ set of rules to follow in the assessment of an argument. (See Hughes pp. 117-119 for expansion on each point):

1. Identify the Main Conclusion
2. Identify the Premises
3. Identify the Structure of the Argument (Standard Form)
4. Check the Acceptability of (particularly the unsupported) Premises
5. Check the Relevance of the Premises
6. Check the Adequacy of the Premises
7. Look for Counter-arguments