

B.H. CARROLL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
AT
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REVIEW OF *A RULEBOOK FOR ARGUMENTS*

A BOOK REVIEW SUBMITTED TO
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BY
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A Rulebook for Arguments, 3rd edition. By Anthony Weston. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. 87 pages. Paperback. \$5.95.

Anthony Weston is Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies and Chair, Department of Philosophy at Elon University, Elon, North Carolina. Weston contributes to publications related to critical thinking and to ethics. He has written several books and articles in these areas.¹

Weston provides a compact work giving the essential rules for critical thinking and a process for developing logically structured argumentative essays. The book is organized around three major topics of critical thinking: rules for composing short arguments (chapters 1 – 6), composition of an argumentative essay (chapters 7 – 9) and fallacies of argumentation (chapter 10). Included is one appendix which presents rules for the development of clear definitions of the key terms used in arguments.

The first six chapters address Weston’s thirty rules for composition and assessment of short arguments. A short argument “. . . simply offers its reasons and evidence briefly, usually in a few sentences or a paragraph” (Weston, xiv).

Chapter one, “Composing a Short Argument,” gives seven general rules: (1) Distinguish premises and conclusion, (2) Present your ideas in a natural order, (3) Start from reliable premises, (4) Be concrete and concise, (5) Avoid loaded language, (6) Use consistent terms, and (7) Stick to one meaning for each term.

1. Biographical information provided here was found in the book under review.

Chapter two, “Arguments by Example,” adds four rules to be followed when using examples to formulate an argument: (8) Give more than one example, (9) Use representative examples, (10) Include crucial background information, and (11) Consider counterexamples.

Chapter three, “Arguments by Analogy,” provides one rule which is used as an exception to rule 8. Weston advises following rule 12, analogy requires a relevantly similar example, when arguing that since “. . . two examples are alike in many ways they are also alike in one further specific way” (Weston, 19).

Chapter four, “Arguments from Authority,” adds five rules to be used as “. . . a checklist of requirements that good arguments from authority must meet” (Weston, 25). The rules for use when arguing from authority are: (13) Sources should be cited, (14) Seek informed sources, (15) Seek impartial sources, and (16) Cross-check sources.

Chapter five, “Arguments about Causes,” gives six rules for use when making cause-effect arguments: (18) Explain how cause leads to effect, (19) Propose the most likely cause, (20) Correlated events are not necessarily related, (21) Correlated events may have a common cause, (22) Either of two correlated events may cause the other, and (23) Causes may be complex.

Chapter six, “Deductive Arguments,” provides seven rules for the use of deductive argumentation via (24) *Modus Ponens*, (25) *Modus Tollens*, (26) Hypothetical Syllogism, (27) Disjunctive Syllogism, (28) Dilemma, (29) *Reductio ad absurdum*, and (30) Deductive arguments in several steps.

In chapters seven through nine Weston moves to the second major topic, the process of composing an argumentative essay. Weston defines an argumentative essay as “. . . an

elaboration of a short argument, or a series of short arguments held together by a larger design” (Weston, 53). He provides fourteen rules to guide this process.

Chapter seven explores the issue to be argued using three rules: (A1) Explore the arguments on all sides of the issue, (A2) Question and defend each argument’s premises, and (A3) Revise and rethink arguments as they emerge.

Chapter eight addresses the development of the main points of the argument via five rules: (B1) Explain the question, (B2) Make a definite claim or proposal, (B3) Develop your arguments fully, (B4) Consider objections, and (B5) Consider alternatives.

Chapter nine completes the process of composition with six rules for writing an argumentative essay: (C1) Follow your outline, (C2) Keep the introduction brief, (C3) Give your arguments one at a time, (C4) Clarify, clarify, clarify, (C5) Support objections with arguments, and (C6) Don’t claim more than you have shown.

Weston discusses two great fallacies often found in argumentative essays: drawing conclusions based on too little evidence and overlooking possible alternative explanations in cause-effect arguments. Weston also provides a helpful list of twenty-two classical fallacies and their definitions.

The appendix of Weston’s work, “Definition,” provides three rules for developing a clear definition of terms used in either short arguments or argumentative essays: (D1) When terms are unclear, get specific, (D2) When terms are contested, work from the clear cases, and (D3) Don’t expect definitions to do the work of arguments.

A strength of the book is Weston’s concise and clear style of writing. Weston defines the complex terms of logic (e.g., *Modus Ponens*) using simple language. After defining technical terms, Weston leaves the difficult language of logic behind and provides the reader with clear

definitions of what the terms mean. Another strength is the book's logical structure. Weston uses his own rules in the development of his rulebook. He makes a strong, logical case for the application of critical thinking in the development of argumentative essays. A final strength of Weston's book is the helpful examples. The examples are clear and concise, enabling the reader to grasp the meaning or intended application.

A minor weakness of the book is some of Weston's personal views leak through in the examples. Weston may have an evangelical religious background based on one example which mentions both the "will of God" and God's "still small voice" and another which mentions a dilemma proposed by Jesus to the Pharisees (Weston, 28, 47). In the first example Weston's disdain for "religious moralists" is apparent (Weston, 28). While there is some merit in his argument that "God's will is not easy to ascertain . . .," his tone is that of a secular humanist (Weston, 28). Also, Weston implies support for both abortion and euthanasia in two examples (Weston, 81). Examples which reveal the moral viewpoints of Weston are not in accord with the purposes of the book and are a potential distraction to the reader. They are not raised in this review as an *ad hominem* attack. Such examples may sharpen a reader's desire to argue for or against the implied positions. That result would please Weston.

Weston makes a valuable contribution to the field of critical thinking with this rulebook. Following Weston's rules will help anyone desiring to develop logical arguments or effective argumentative essays. Weston himself uses an argument by analogy in noting his work is "a book in spirit much like" the classic compact work on style, *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (Weston, 87). Weston hopes both books will be used by the reader and not allowed to gather dust on the shelf (Weston, 87). Both advanced and beginning students will find this

compact work a valuable reference in forming logical arguments and building logically structured essays and theses.

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