What are the criteria for a good argument?

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The following thought sometimes beguiles philosophers as they begin work on several problems: we need criteria to know what we are talking about. This thought shows up either overtly endorsed or as an assumption. Understanding words or terms, especially when they are philosophically loaded terms like knowledge, justice, art, is thought to require application of standards or criteria. As a result, definitions of terms in philosophy are often not reminders about how the terms are used in other more ordinary settings as much as they are recommendations of criteria for the application of the terms, which criteria are sometimes unconsciously revisionary of ordinary usage. Often these definitions are given as conditions which must be met and which, being met, guarantee we are applying the term correctly. For goodness, for example, it is thought there must be some set of rules or criteria in order to protect us from chaos or relativism. Much of the history of aesthetics has centered on debate about what art is, really, focusing on the criteria for a thing to be deemed art. The philosophical study of knowledge has been dominated for 2300 years by a search for a definition of knowledge articulated as a set of criteria.

A basic, forceful argument for this approach comes from Plato. For all those “What is X, really?” questions we get in Plato from Socrates, the argument that we need a definitional account including criteria could be put as follows: a list of examples (which are often offered to Socrates at the beginnings of dialogues) won’t do, because any such list is a many rather than the one about which we were asking. Examples (of knowledge, say) are a potentially interminable list with no way of separating which among the candidates should go on the list and which do not, and so we need to work out the criteria for sorting them. In my experience, many students and professors find this argument irresistible. I blame the argument for the current metastasizing mania for beginning academic discussions with definitions.

We need to handle that argument with care. For one thing, there are hints that Plato and Socrates are being ironic when they themselves give the argument. In roughly sixteen hundred pages of Plato’s work definitions seem to exist in order to be destroyed. Not a single definition is left standing at the end of any dialogue. Indeed, the dised examples are more likely to be all that’s left whole in the rubble at the end.

Further, Plato offers crucial arguments which undermine the search for definitions and for criteria. In the *Meno*, for example, Socrates is asked, how shall we know when we have completed our work and have the definition right? Socrates then offers a quick and disastrous objection to taking definitions as a basic aid to understanding: consider two people, one knowing the thing we are trying to define (think love, justice, music, meaning) and another not knowing; the one who knows will be able to recognize a good definition, a right set of criteria, but the definition will not help in understanding because the understanding was a prerequisite to appraising the definition, and so the definition is useless. Further, consider the person who does not know; that person will not be able to tell a good definition from a bad one and since bad ones are possible then definitions are dangerous to that person’s understanding. To the extent one knows, definitions are useless, and to the extent one does not know, definitions are dangerous. A more modern take involves pointing out that definitions cannot tell us whether they are good or bad, and if there is a possibility of a bad definition then definitions cannot be a source of wisdom. Applied to the question of what is a good argument, this amounts to a claim that becoming knowledgeable about good arguments through arguing, through focused involvement and educational progress through stages of deepening understanding, is a logically prior requirement to being able to give a set of criteria or definition, or even to tell that a definition is correct. Rather than seek a definition or criteria, we should seek expertise, arguments, mistakes and the corrections of those mistakes, wisdom regarding what we were tempted to define through the long, slow, and gradually deepening involvement in thinking through the relevant issues.

There may, then, be something wrong with the question.

Logic?

Logic has undeniable benefits for students, including cultural and historical literacy (though these are too seldom addressed reflectively in logic texts or courses), and facility with some distinctions such as validity vs. truth, inconsistency vs. contradiction, abstract form vs. content. However, logic cannot provide criteria for deciding whether an argument is a good argument, with a possible exception for mathematical proofs. One problem (the dust is not yet settled) is that deductive validity is difficult to apply and often is not applicable at all. In reading letters to the editor or in processing discussions in committee meetings, only in exceptional cases can the issue of whether the argument is deductively valid be helpfully brought to bear. Also, logic is silent on whether among valid arguments any are more crucial or relevant or better or worse than any other valid argument. Thumbs up or thumbs down is a coarse and inadequate sieve in sorting arguments on real issues. Further, formal logic can become applicable or relevant only after an argument has been rendered or translated into its form, and logic offers nothing to help us appraise whether that translation has been done well or ill, whether the purported form is indeed the right form on which we should turn the spotlight of our logical criteria. Finally, because logic takes arguments to consist only of premises and conclusions and neglects the description of the issue or the context in describing the argument, it notoriously leads logicians into an inability to tell arguments from non-arguments.

In support of that last, consider two uses of one of the most famous arguments in logic.

The first use: I put on the blackboard in a logic class the hoary series of three sentences which still keep showing up in the early pages of logic texts and with which we are all familiar--which students still can finish in a chorus: *All Men are Mortal. Socrates is a Man. Therefore, Socrates is Mortal.*
In this first use, I work with the three sentences on the board to make some claims about validity, and to introduce logical terminology, e. g. draw distinctions between content and form. I treat the three sentences as they or similar sentences are often treated in textbooks: I illustrate terms of art by referring to the sentences (terms such as statement or sentence, truth or truth value, form, predicate, substitution). I substitute terms, changing the series of sentences into sentences about, say, horses and quadrupeds and Man O’ War, or tomatoes and fruits and this persimmon in my hand. I may also follow many textbooks and have students take the series of sentences as an argument, as a good argument, as an argument, even, that is as good as arguments get, since it has a valid form and true premises. I may touch on whether this argument is a syllogism, or mention Barbara, the pattern (named by medieval logicians) of that most obvious of syllogisms: all A are B; All B are C; therefore all A are C. I engage in a discourse with the class in which we brandish the terms argument, good argument, conclusion, and so on. The class (or most of the class) learns how to converse in the same way I do and so we do converse in that way. We are enabled by this talk and by subsequent practice to talk using the language of logic for the rest of the term.

But there is a sea change, dizzying for the logician and for the logic students, if we try to think of a second use: if we ask what is at issue in the argument on the blackboard, and if we try to consider a context in which such an argument would actually be called for, the kind of thinking we have to do changes. We might try to rescue the apparent issue, “Is Socrates mortal?” by way of non-literal talk of mortality, mortality as in Shakespeare’s sonnets, mortality as the durability of one’s work (in which case the soundness of the argument is sucked up the same waterspout which takes away the truth of the first premise), but then there’s no literal issue--no one is trying to resolve either question, whether Socrates has died or if his work will live forever. Both issue are non-issues.

Raising the issue would seem to require desperate measures or at least a philosopher with a thought experiment.

Suppose you are as I was, a teenaged rustic, a hillbilly with a strong religious background, terribly bright but also terribly ignorant, somewhat superstitious, and suppose that you finally come down out of the hills into the nearest big city, and that city is Athens in about 405 B.C. You make your way toward your city cousin’s house, gaping at the exotic persons, the animals, the dust and throngs and jabbering in other tongues and grand houses, and on your way through the agora you eavesdrop and slow and get pulled around as by Charybdis and then stop on the edge of a group of vehement and serious discussants, though their talk is often mixed with laughter and with wisecracks. You struggle fascinated as the group worries over ideas you barely grasp, and an old, ugly man badgers discussants with questions and comments. He asks what about this? and, if that were true then would it not be that this other thing you do not want is true? and, will our argument not, unless we are careful, have no mercy on us, but trample us like sailors over seasick passengers? and, must you not at this point choose between the thing you said and the thing you say now? Though the other interlocutors work away and are very bright, sooner or later they wind up retreating, and say, well, Socrates, I did not see that. I stand corrected, Socrates. I think you must be right, Socrates, to question this matter. I am now confused, Socrates, and must go away and consider your questions. You continue and they continue into the dark as the agora’s lamps are lit. Dinntime comes and goes, with some changes in the cast of characters. The knot of arguing and questioning philosophers begins to thin and you come to your senses as if from an absense seizure and make your way through the maze of streets to your city cousin’s house. Your city cousin answers the door, and youll at you, “Where the hell have you been? We called the cops hours ago.” You explain you have been in the agora, and what you’ve been doing. “One old man, though mostly he only asked questions, seemed preternaturally wise, Socrates.” “Aiee, Socrates,” your city cousin rolls her eyes. You say, “I was thinking as I walked that no human could be so wise, and I wonder, Coz, whether you agree. I think Socrates might be a god come to earth in disguise in order to enlighten us. What say you? Do you think Socrates might really not be a mortal?”

In this second use we come close to raising the issue, and the thought experiment lets us see that if your city cousin were to give the three lines we put on the blackboard (something which seems so unlikely as to be absurd), it would be a very poor argument, since it would not take the question seriously. If she were to do, “What rot, of course he’s mortal. All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal.” --if she were to say that, then she has not addressed your question at all but instead has begged the question. Or she’s joking, a scary in-joke, and not arguing at all.

The first use, the blackboard example, was not offered in hopes of settling some such question, was not offered in order to settle any issue at all. That first use helps instead to illustrate distinctions in logic, to show some of how a logical approach works, maybe with the goal of helping students become more precise and self-aware. And none of that is taken away by remarking that it is not really an argument, unless some think its being an argument is important. But then they are wrong. Their being wrong is partly because of their not paying attention to questions about issues or contexts of arguments which contribute to the identities of those arguments.

There are some implications for logical theory and for our understanding of what an argument is. Or perhaps they are implications for our misunderstanding, thinking an argument is (here’s a standard view in logic) a series of statements one of which is allegedly supported by the others. The implications help make a case that there may be a danger in taking a term, argument, out of the contexts in which it makes sense. The danger is that we turn the term into nonsense. The three lines on the blackboard are either not an argument at all, or they are a very bad argument. It would be better, for instance, if your city cousin were to say (though I am perhaps unfairly buying into the bad rap she has had in Dead White European Male history), ”What rot; Socrates is a mortal, all right; you should see the way his wife Xantippe treats him—no god would take that kind of crap,” or, ”when he eats fish and milk together he gets diarrhea, which surely no god would do.”

We may, then, have bought into logic’s conception of arguments too quickly and too uncritically. We may have thought that three sentences on the blackboard actually say something when we would have been better off to treat them only as sentences on a blackboard which illustrate some ways of
talking we do in logic. (Frank Ebersole used to call this thinking that sentences on a blackboard which are not part of an example say something the Blackboard Fallacy.)

Logic, then, not only cannot provide criteria for good arguments, it sometimes cannot recognize what an argument is.

Fallacies?

Well, of course not. The fallacy approach, also ancient among approaches to arguments (see Aristotle on sophistical refutations in the Posterior Analytics), never pretended to tell us what a good argument is, only bad. The fact that an argument does not commit a fallacy says next to nothing about its being a good argument and certainly is no criterion. Granted, there are benefits to studying fallacies. Schopenhauer's ironic endorsement of fallacies, and his instruction in how to use them to win in disputes, can be a valuable lesson in teaching the differences between rhetorical effectiveness and critical thinking. But even if we knew all two thousand-odd fallacies cold and never missed an instance, no one has ever claimed that these are all or even most of the possibilities for going wrong. Too many of the fallacies also depend on context for their being labeled a fallacy to be a fair appraisal. Saying something which would be a vicious ad hominem in a city council meeting may be exactly the right thing to bring up in a criminal trial when the credibility of a witness is a legitimate issue.

What is left?

There are a few more suggested approaches. Bloom’s Taxonomy is sometimes cited as a guide to “higher order thinking skills.” Inductive logic, scientific method, and legal procedures from case law are sometimes recommended. What is sometimes called the “dialogic approach” offers different models of appropriate argumentation for different disciplinary families. To the extent that those approaches are consistent with the worry method, sketched now, they do offer help for thinking about arguments. But in every case they too are to be evaluated by comparison not with criteria but by engaging in a full-fledged and thorough exploration of all the relevant arguments. Consider that.

If we remind ourselves of how we work with arguments when we are doing a good job, that might go as follows: we take pains to be clear about what is at issue by exploring how the issue arises, what the possible answers are, what is at stake, relations with other issues. We articulate all the relevant arguments and all the relevant objections and array them so that their strengths and weaknesses are illuminated in the light of the other arguments. Finding the relevant arguments may involve research or discussions with persons whose views are not the same as our views. Those who disagree with what we hope will be supported, provided we are willing to change our minds to follow the arguments where they lead, are still helps in getting all the arguments out. In doing this, all relevant arguments become our friends because all arguments can help us in thinking the issues through (some because we can see through their flaws). The process is slow—no definitions or mechanisms or logic chopping shortcuts are to be trusted. This approach offers no guarantee of success. Often we must backtrack or must wait for more data or must imagine what the best objections will be, better than they have in fact been given. Sometimes we must say, “we do not know.” Some of us call this “the worry method” because it has almost no method and requires uncertainty. It is uncommon among intellectual approaches to problems or issues.

There are no other standards of good arguments outside the issues in which particular arguments exist and work. There are no criteria for good arguments. There’s only the worry method, and it is ironic to call it a method. There is nevertheless no danger from relativism or anarchy, because the issues to which arguments are addressed make other particular arguments relevant, and those can be arranged beside each other in perspicuous ways which help us follow the arguments where they lead. Particular proposals of criteria are to be appraised by comparing the results they give with the results we get by thinking issues through. Our nonphilosophical practices and philosophical practices alike reveal that we treat issues as packages, whose relevant arguments serve for each issue as the measure or test of other arguments on that issue. The unit of discourse when we argue and when we evaluate arguments is not the argument but the issue. We can describe what happens when we do our work of thinking well. This description is easy to recognize, easy to give, and is not the property of philosophers. The worry method, then, is as close as we’ve got to the criteria of good arguments in that it is the standard for appraising standards of good arguments. Though the lack of an absolute or context-free standard might be thought to raise issues about relativism, the worry method dissolves grounds both for absolutisms and for relativism. Cultural beliefs to the extent they are relevant can be interrogated and can enter the debate as arguments, their force finally dependent on their support and whether they are answered by other arguments. Our culture’s consensus can be questioned and attacked, as can social constructions, as can my own sincere beliefs and intuitions and values, and attacked using arguments. Those issues are easily raised, and their showing up helps persuade us that in those cases there is a possibility of thinking for real stakes.

John W. Powell
Philosophy
Humboldt State University
1 Harpst St.
Arcata CA 95521 USA
jwp2@humboldt.edu

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