

GOOD Arguments

MAKING YOUR CASE
IN WRITING AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

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AND BENJAMIN K. FORREST


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To Larissa,
for your unending patience and love.

RAH

To Reagan, Hudson, and Graham,
with prayers that you spend your life sharing Christ
through your actions, love, and arguments.

BKF

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INTRODUCTION

Why Arguments Are Good

Argument is a word that is easily misunderstood. For many of us, hearing this word brings to mind something unpleasant or something we try to avoid. When a friend comes to you saying that she has recently been in an argument with an acquaintance, this is typically bad news. It involves dispute, conflict, disagreement, heightened emotions, and stress. This may be your initial reaction if you are reading this book as an assignment for a class. Thankfully, this book is not about verbal disputes, fights, emotional disagreements, or shouting matches. The word *argument*, as we are using it, simply refers to the process of giving reasons or evidence in support of a belief or claim. An argument is a series of statements: a claim and one or more additional statements given as reasons that we should think the claim is true. The main claim being made is usually called the *conclusion* (even though the conclusion often comes at the beginning of an argument, rather than at the end). Each statement that supports the conclusion is called a *premise*. While no set number of premises is required in an argument, there must be at least one. So, at a minimum, an argument is composed of at least two statements: the conclusion and at least one premise that supports the conclusion.

One can hardly pick up a textbook introducing philosophy or logic without hearing about the ancient Greek philosopher named

Socrates. These books often use Socrates in demonstrating what an argument looks like, as follows:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The first two statements are the premises of this particular argument; they are given as evidence supporting the truth of the last statement. The last statement is the conclusion. Of course,

An argument is not a fight
or dispute; it is a presentation
of reasons that support
a belief or claim.

when the statements are arranged and presented in this form, it is easy to identify the premises and the conclusion, but in everyday conversation, people rarely make their premises and conclusion this clear. Instead, someone might say, “Socrates is mortal. After all, he is only a man!” When the statements are arranged in this way, it might be more difficult for you to identify the premises and the conclusion, but it is an argument nonetheless.

You might be surprised to learn that even the Bible makes use of arguments. Consider this familiar story from Matthew 12:9–14:

[Jesus] went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

In this encounter between Jesus and his detractors, Jesus gives an argument in response to the question from the Pharisees. The main points of his argument can be summarized as follows:

It is lawful to help a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath.
 A man is much more valuable than a sheep.
 Therefore, it is lawful to heal a man on the Sabbath.¹

The Pharisees asked Jesus the simple question: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Jesus’s answer is obviously yes. But Jesus doesn’t simply answer the question. Instead, he presents an argument: he makes a claim and gives a logical, systematic account of the reasoning that supports his claim.

It is not very common to discuss reason and argument in the context of what are normally considered matters of faith. Sometimes those in Christian circles view belief and acceptance as good, virtuous responses to the things of God, while argument and reason are either bad responses or merely tools of those who lack faith. But this shouldn’t be the case. God created us as rational creatures; the laws of logic and the rules of good reasoning are what they are because of who God is. Human reason, though imperfect and fallen, is nevertheless something that is very good and God-ordained. Human reason has God as its author, and perhaps this is why the Bible contains so many appeals to reason. Since God endowed humans with reasoning capabilities, we are stewards of our reasoning abilities. God expects us to *reason well*, and presenting good arguments that support our beliefs is one way to do that. When we reason well and present good arguments, we reflect God’s character.

In addition to the fact that presenting good arguments honors God, another important motivation for providing reasons that support your beliefs is that you want to persuade your audience. In other words, you think your claim is true, so you want your audience to believe it as well. Dubious speakers will often use sophisticated rhetoric in order to trick someone into agreeing to something, but in these cases the audience almost always recants later and rejects what the speaker offered. Instead of tricking someone, the goal of a good argument

When we reason well
 and present good
 arguments, we reflect
 God’s character.

1. For a detailed discussion of this example and its hidden premises, with extended examination of logic in the Bible, see L. Russ Bush, *A Handbook for Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 56–66.

should be to persuade someone to adopt the new belief *because they believe it*, not because they were mesmerized by rhetorical skill. Those who craft good arguments want their audience not just to grant superficial agreement with the claim being made but to “own it” and adopt it as their own. When you think of it this way, you can probably see

People actually expect us to present good arguments. Doing so is a way to show them the respect they deserve.

that presenting arguments is essential for effective communication about the most important things in life.

When you want to persuade your audience, you will be motivated to present good arguments. In many cases your audience will want you to present good arguments as well. Indeed, it is obvious from everyday conversation

that people actually *expect* us to present arguments as a matter of routine. When someone asks you, “How do you know *that*?” or “Why *should* I?” or “What makes you think it is *true*?” they expect you to clearly articulate—in a logical and systematic way—the basis of your claim of knowledge, the reasons they should do something, or the evidence you have that indicates something is true. In other words, they expect you to provide a good argument. You must remember that the members of your audience—people made in the image of God—have the same reasoning abilities that you do. Because they intuitively understand the basic principles of reasoning and logic, you owe it to them to present good arguments, and doing so is a way to show them the respect they deserve.

Because people expect arguments, there are many situations in various contexts in which the best thing you can do is present a good argument. One obvious situation is preaching. Delivering a sermon is the kind of task that calls for good arguments. The preacher will no doubt call on listeners to believe something or do something (or both). Quite naturally, then, it makes sense for the preacher to clearly articulate, in a systematic way, the reasons why listeners should adopt the belief or take the action they are called to take. Some people hold many negative connotations about preachers and sermons. This negativity does not arise from preachers presenting arguments; it arises from preachers *not* presenting *good* arguments. If the preacher

simply tells listeners what to do or believe without giving good reasons or evidence or supporting claims with logical, rational support, the listeners are not likely to respond as the preacher may have hoped.

Engaging in apologetics is another situation in which arguments are essential. Apologetics is the practice of defending a particular position, belief, or viewpoint, and such a defense will almost always need arguments if it is going to be successful. If someone has presented a challenge and suggested that Christianity is irrational, Christians must present a rational argument—or a series of arguments—in response to that challenge that clearly demonstrates the logic, reasoning, and evidence supporting Christian belief. And when the apologist is not busy responding to challenges, she will certainly want to develop other positive arguments for Christianity that can stand on their own and serve to demonstrate that Christianity is true, reasonable, or rational.

Beyond these, countless situations arise in which presenting a good argument is the best thing you can do. In the course of everyday life, when someone asks why you voted for one candidate and not the other, why you believe in God, or why you took a particular course of action, you should be able to answer with a well-reasoned argument. Real answers to these kinds of questions call for you to give clear, logical support for your position, which means you will need to develop and present arguments. Sometimes the questions asked or the issues addressed are complex enough that extended arguments are necessary. In situations like this, many shorter arguments can work together to make a larger case. Like the various small mechanisms that fit together to make one machine, many short arguments can work together to form one extended argument.

Being able to develop and employ successful arguments is a skill that can provide many benefits. As suggested above, arguments can help you defend your beliefs against challenges to them, and arguments can help you persuade others to adopt a belief, accept a conclusion, or take a particular course of action. Being able to develop good arguments can also result in great personal benefit. When you are not quite sure what you believe,

There are countless situations in which presenting a good argument is the best thing you can do.

thinking in terms of an argument can help clarify your belief. This will also help define (for yourself and for others) precisely why you believe what you believe. Making good arguments can increase your confidence in your beliefs because arguments enable you to think carefully about the good reasons supporting your beliefs. When you are confronted with a new claim and want to know whether you should believe that it is true, developing an argument can help you think carefully about the claim and decide to accept or reject it. Developing an argument is also helpful when you want to take the right course of action. It can help you rule out competing alternatives and decide on the best way forward. All of these reasons for understanding and employing good arguments motivated us to write this book.

In the chapters that follow, you will find a series of explanations and guidelines designed to help you understand what goes into making good arguments. You will also find some practical tips and some warnings about potential pitfalls. It is our hope that after reading this book you will understand how arguments can be good and know how to develop good arguments of your own.

1

The Basics of Good Arguments

People often have a misconception about arguments. The arguments of everyday conversation are quite different from what we have in mind for this book. When Ben was a doctoral student engaged to his wonderful wife-to-be, Lerisa, he had one of those classic arguments that often take place as two people prepare for marriage. They were sitting in a parking lot arguing, and the more they argued, the louder Ben’s voice grew. As his voice rose, Lerisa looked at him and said, “Arguments aren’t about winning!” It stopped him in the middle of his sentence—not because he suddenly agreed with her side of the argument but because what she said went against everything he believed based on his experience. Growing up in an opinionated family, Ben was conditioned to think that arguing was about winning and that the loudest person always won. What Lerisa revealed to Ben that day stood in sharp contrast to everything he knew about arguing. She pointed out that an argument is not a battle to be fought and won but rather a means for communicating a message.

Rich’s family background is similar. He also grew up in the context of a family dynamic in which the loudest, most forceful person “won” the argument. Perhaps your experience is similar and you too have

ingrained in your thinking the idea that arguments are like battles to be fought and won, and the loudest, most aggressive combatants win.

An argument is the process of giving a systematic account of reasons in support of a claim or belief.

Perhaps because of experiences like this, you now recoil at the thought of engaging in an argument.

It is vital to understand that the conception of argumentation we just described is a misconception. Some people do indeed argue that way, but that isn't what an argument is all about. Our definition of an argument is *the process of giving a systematic account of reasons in support of a claim or belief*. Instead of thinking about “winning” an argument, we would do better to think about “winning someone over to our side”—that is, we want to persuade someone that the position we are defending really is true, to convince them so that they genuinely change their mind and come to agree with the position we are defending. We aim to persuade, encourage, and prepare, not to win. And if we can't thoroughly convince someone that our position is true, we can, at the very least, use effective argumentation to defend our position as a reasonable option among various choices. An argument should never be a shouting match, and the loudest participant doesn't automatically win. In fact, if our main goal is to bring about genuine persuasion, then shouting is the least likely tactic to bring about this goal. Instead, skillful arguers will learn to give clear, straightforward, easy-to-understand reasons that support a claim, without getting into a rhetorical competition or shouting match.

Claims and Beliefs

As we consider this perspective on what an argument is, we must recognize at the outset that claims and beliefs go hand in hand. For anything you believe, you can state that belief in the form of a claim. For example, you may believe that a portion of the film *The Hunger Games* was filmed in North Carolina. It is easy to recognize that belief when you communicate it in the form of a claim. If you are sitting with friends watching the film, you may say

something like, “Part of this movie was filmed in North Carolina.” This statement is a claim and communicates what you believe—in this case, what you believe about *The Hunger Games* being filmed (in part) in North Carolina. We’ll return to the concept of beliefs in a later chapter; for now it is sufficient to recognize that when we communicate our beliefs to others, we state them in the form of claims. So for most of our discussion, we will use the words *claim* and *belief* interchangeably.

Stating a claim by itself is almost never good enough if we want others to understand why we believe what we believe, or if we want to persuade them that we have good reasons supporting our beliefs. Considering the example above, in some contexts it will probably be insufficient to simply make the claim about where *The Hunger Games* was filmed. Instead of merely stating the claim, we must provide good reasons that help show why we think that claim is true. Sometimes claims don’t need much in the way of supporting reasons. If you are watching *The Hunger Games* with a group of friends who don’t think your claim is all that important, they might just accept it without any supporting reasons, so you probably don’t need to say much else. This is similar to many everyday claims we make. For example, a claim like “It’s raining” doesn’t need much of an argument for support. We can just point out the window and say, “Look! It’s raining.” But for complicated or contentious claims, or claims made to an audience that is inclined to disagree, an argument is needed to justify and support the claim. The more contentious or divisive the claim, the more careful, well-thought-out, and intentional the argument must be. We don’t need to support unimportant or uninteresting claims with good arguments, but for the important questions of life—such as questions about the morality of capital punishment, the existence of God, and the nature of marriage—being able to argue well becomes an indispensable skill. Claims about important questions will always require good arguments to support them.

Arguments are beneficial not just for others but for yourself as well; they help you communicate and support your personal beliefs.

Essential Features of a Good Argument

Good arguments are necessary not just for supporting your claims for the benefit of those who are reading or listening to your argument; they are also important as you begin grappling with your own beliefs. In order to argue well, you must first learn how to develop good arguments by yourself, independent of a discussion with someone else; and if you are able to present a rational defense of a claim palatable enough to quench your own skepticism, it is likely that you will be able to present it to others for their edification as well.

But what makes a *good* argument? At this point it is tempting for us to present an extended discussion of bad arguments and the bad reasoning that goes along with them—because bad reasoning is so common and is often disguised as good reasoning—but we’ll save that for a later chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the essential features of good arguments. This is because good reasoning will form the fundamental building blocks of good arguments.

In this book’s introduction, we briefly described the basic components of a short argument: an argument contains a series of statements (*premises*) that are intended to support another statement (the

conclusion). An argument’s conclusion is the claim or belief that is being defended or supported by the premises, and the premises are the reasons that attempt to prove that the claim is true. When arguments are written out formally (as they might appear in textbooks on logic), they start by

An argument’s conclusion is the claim or belief that is being defended or supported by the premises.

giving the premises and end by stating the conclusion. Written out in sequence, an argument might appear like this:

Premise (Reason) 1

Premise (Reason) 2

∴ Conclusion (i.e., the claim or belief that is being defended by these two premises)¹

1. The ∴ sign is used in logic and mathematics and means *therefore*, indicating that a conclusion is being drawn.

However, when arguments are written in ordinary prose or stated orally, they don't always proceed in such a linear order. Sometimes the conclusion is stated first, and sometimes it is stated in the middle of the premises, so it can be difficult to identify the various parts. When arguments are long and complex, it can be even more difficult to identify the parts and see how they fit together. Long arguments often contain arguments inside other arguments, which further complicates the situation. But no matter how short or long, and no matter what order the various items are presented in, all arguments share the same basic components: claims and reasons that support those claims.

Good Arguments State Clearly All of Their Essential Elements

As we have said, when short arguments are written formally, they often begin with premises and end with the conclusion. Recall the famous example we mentioned in the introduction:

All men are mortal. (Premise)

Socrates is a man. (Premise)

Therefore, Socrates is mortal. (Conclusion)

Writing arguments in this form can indeed be quite helpful when we are engaged in analyzing an argument that someone else has given. That is why introductory textbooks on philosophy and logic are full of example arguments written out just like this. In most cases the purpose is to help the student identify the key parts of the arguments and to differentiate good arguments from bad ones. However, many arguments—indeed most arguments—that we encounter are presented outside the context of the logic textbook. They might be given orally as a part of a public policy speech or a sermon. Or they might be written in ordinary prose in newspaper articles, journals, academic papers, or blog entries. In these varied contexts, it is rather uncommon to have a simple, short argument written out like the one above about Socrates, with two or three premises leading to a simple conclusion. For each argument we encounter, what really matters is whether the essential elements in the argument are stated clearly. No matter the form or the context in which they are presented, good

arguments will always clearly state their claims and all relevant supporting reasons. As you learn to develop your own arguments, one of the most important skills to develop is the skill of clearly stating every element that is important to the argument.

Some arguments do not state their premises clearly; this is a characteristic of weak arguments that cannot do what they are intended to do. Premises are designed to be declarative statements that convey some meaningful fact in support of the claim. Sometimes, however, a meaningful fact essential to the argument is not stated at all. Such unstated elements are called *hidden premises*. Consider again our example argument about Socrates. Someone might put it this way: “Socrates is mortal. After all, he is only a man!” When the argument is stated this way, there is one hidden premise: *All men are mortal*. Many people will be able to grasp this premise intuitively, so the fact that it is hidden in this particular argument may not do too much harm. However, when a hidden premise is controversial, or when the audience is simply ignorant of the hidden premise, the argument is likely to fail at its intended mission of supporting the claim or persuading the audience. Consider this one: “Of course God exists. Just look at the wonderfully intricate beauty in nature.” In this example, there are several hidden premises, most of which are likely to be controversial or unknown to an audience who does not already believe the claim “God exists.” Some of the hidden premises might be:

- Intricate beauty is objective and recognizable.
- Intricate beauty indicates design.
- Design requires a designer.
- Given the extent of the intricate beauty in nature, the designer must be very powerful.

Hopefully you can see these aren't the only hidden premises essential to this example argument. Many other premises would need to be stated for this kind of argument to get off the ground. Moreover, most of the hidden premises in this case are so controversial that each would require a persuasive argument of its own for support, which means that almost no one in an objective audience would think that this example argument is good enough when several premises

remain unstated and unsupported. Obvious or uncontroversial hidden premises might not make too much of a difference, but failing to state essential premises that are controversial or not obvious to your audience makes for a weak argument. A good argument will not have this weakness. A good argument will clearly state each premise that supports the claim and will not let any other essential premise remain hidden.

While some arguments have hidden premises, other arguments fail to clearly state the main claim. Having a hidden claim is probably a bit rarer than having a hidden premise, but it does happen. Consider this example: Perhaps you have overheard a conversation between friends in response to one friend harming the other or committing some fault against the other. The one who is in the wrong might say, “Well, I’m only human!” It might not look like it at first, but this is a kind of argument. The person who says this is asserting that the other person ought to forgive the wrong that has been committed. This is the main claim that went unstated: “You ought to forgive this wrong that I have committed.” So the argument “I’m only human!” is a weak argument, mainly because the main claim is unstated. Of course there are also at least two hidden premises: “all humans commit these kinds of wrongs” and “one ought to forgive faults that are common to all humans.” Good arguments state the main claim clearly, along with all the essential supporting premises. This should be a fairly easy task to accomplish because, when making an argument, we are all aware of our beliefs and claims. Therefore, stating our beliefs and claims clearly is the easiest part of making a good argument.

Good Arguments State the Claim Up Front

Another factor to consider is the location of the main claim in the argument—the where and how of stating the claim. Put simply, good arguments state their claim up front, before supporting reasons are given. As we pointed out above, when short arguments are written out formally (as they appear in an introductory logic textbook), they typically state the claim last, as the conclusion. In the context of the logic textbook, the order of elements in the

argument is almost always presented solely for the purpose of analyzing the argument. Presenting the premises first and the conclusion last is a convenient way to help students understand what goes into an argument and how to properly identify all the parts. However, when it comes to actually crafting and delivering a good argument to an audience you want to persuade, this linear order is almost always unhelpful. Instead, stating the main claim at the start is more likely to bring about the desired result. In the course of normal conversation, presenting an effective short argument might go something like this:

Me: Socrates is mortal.

You: Oh, really? How do we know that?

Me: Well, Socrates is a man, right?

You: Sure.

Me: And all men are mortal, aren't they?

You: Yes.

Me: Well if Socrates is a man and all men are mortal, Socrates must be mortal.

You: Oh! I see! Yes, you are right.

Stating the main claim at the very beginning sets the context so that the audience knows where you are headed and understands why the supporting premises are given and how they are connected to the claim. If the claim is not stated clearly at the beginning, the audience is likely to be confused. Imagine if the first part of the argument given was "All men are mortal." In that case the audience might assume that this is your main point and miss the fact that you are really trying to prove that Socrates is mortal. Consider this alternative discussion:

Me: All men are mortal.

You: Probably, but how would we know?

Me: Hold on a second, let me finish. Socrates was a man.

You: Who?

Me: Socrates. He was a man.

You: Wasn't he a great philosopher? And what does that have to do with our mortality?

Me: You are missing my point! I'm trying to show you that Socrates is mortal.

You: Well, why didn't you just say so?

Good arguments eliminate this possible confusion by clearly stating the main claim up front before the supporting ideas are offered.

Stating the claim at the very beginning of an argument is especially important for long arguments. We will return to this in a later chapter, but for now it is important to mention two common contexts for making a long, extended argument: the academic research paper and the speech or sermon. In an academic context, the research paper is a work of scholarship in which the author

(typically a student) advances an original thesis and supports that thesis with good arguments. The *thesis* is just the main claim that the author wants to make, and the entire paper is a series of connected arguments that are intended to support the claim (to persuade the reader that the thesis

is true). To say it another way, the thesis is the *conclusion* of the argument. Too often students who do not know how to make good arguments do not even mention the thesis until the conclusion paragraph of the paper. Unfortunately, this means that the professor will have to read the entire paper to know what the main point is and then will need to read it again to evaluate whether the arguments presented adequately support the thesis. Here is a paper writer's rule of thumb: don't save the conclusion for the conclusion! A good research paper (like any good argument) will always state the thesis up front—in the introduction to the paper—so that the professor (or any other reader) knows where the paper is going. The same holds true for a speech or sermon. Your audience will appreciate your argument if you clearly state at the outset what belief you are defending or what claim you are attempting to demonstrate is true. It gives your listener the context necessary to follow and understand your argument, which means your argument is more likely to be successful.

Don't save the
conclusion for
the conclusion!

Good Arguments Properly Connect Premises to the Claim

Good arguments require good premises—premises that appropriately support the main claim of the argument and can therefore help persuade an audience that the claim is true. There are two ways that a premise can fail to support the claim well: (1) the premise is false, or (2) the premise does not adequately support the conclusion. Obviously, a false premise can never do a good job supporting the main claim of an argument, but perhaps you haven't given much consideration to how a true premise is connected to the claim and whether that connection provides adequate support. Consider this example:

Capital punishment is immoral. Studies show that a shockingly high number of those convicted of capital offenses are actually innocent. Moreover, a disproportionate number of minorities are sentenced to death, indicating racial bias in the court system and possibly in policing policies and tactics.

In this example the main claim is that capital punishment is immoral. Two premises are offered to support this claim: a high number of convicts are actually innocent, and a disproportionate number of minorities are sentenced to death. Let's just say for the sake of discussion that those two premises are true. Even though these premises are true, they still do not do a good job in supporting the main claim because they are not properly connected to it. Whether some convicts are innocent and whether minorities are disproportionately sentenced to death are not directly relevant to the question of whether capital punishment itself is immoral. These premises can support other kinds of claims, such as claims about the need to reform the civil justice system in the United States or about racial inequality. But if we want to support the claim that capital punishment itself is immoral, we will need to offer premises that are related to how we determine whether capital punishment is moral or immoral.

Arguments like the example above aren't good arguments because they make mistakes in reasoning. In the example, the argument's mistake is in presenting premises that are not relevant to the conclusion (and therefore cannot possibly support the claim). Good arguments

do not make this kind of mistake in reasoning. In some cases it might *appear* as if the premise supports the claim, and this calls for careful evaluation of the argument and of whether the premises are relevant. A special term is used to describe good arguments, arguments in which the premises are properly connected to the conclusion. We say that such arguments are *valid* arguments. When arguments are valid, the premises are relevant to the conclusion and actually give us good reasons to think that the conclusion is true. Sometimes people use the word *valid* to describe something that is true, but it is important to recognize that when we are analyzing arguments, we do not use the word *valid* as a synonym for *true*. A valid argument is simply one that does not make a mistake in reasoning, and therefore the premises are properly connected to the main claim. In fact, an argument can still be valid even if it has false premises and a false conclusion. To say an argument is valid is not to say that it is true. Rather, to say an argument is valid is to say that *if* the premises are true, they constitute good reasons to think that the conclusion is true because they are properly connected to the conclusion. A valid argument is one that does not make any mistakes in reasoning.

The word fallacy or fallacious never means “false.”

A bad argument, on the other hand, does contain a mistake in reasoning (or perhaps many mistakes in reasoning). *Fallacy* is the word logicians use to refer to a mistake in reasoning, and an argument that contains one or more fallacies is called a *fallacious* argument. Whether the premises of a fallacious argument are true or false, they do not constitute good grounds for thinking that the conclusion is true because they do not have the proper logical relationship to the conclusion. Sometimes people will use the word *fallacy* to describe something that is false. However, in the analysis of arguments, the word *fallacy* or *fallacious* never means false. In fact, a fallacious argument can have all true premises and a true conclusion. The reason for this is simply that *fallacy* is only intended to point out a logical mistake in reasoning. Consider this example:

I’m sure that God exists. After all, the vast majority of the people in the world believe in God.

The claim being made in this argument is that God exists, and the premise being offered is that most people believe in God. Let's assume for the sake of discussion that both the main claim (God exists)

Fallacious arguments are those that make mistakes in reasoning; valid arguments are those that do not make mistakes in reasoning.

and the supporting premise (most people believe in God) are indeed true. Even though every element in the argument is true, this is still a fallacious argument. No matter how popular it is to believe in God, this can't help us determine whether God actually exists (as if God's existence depends on a popularity

contest). To say that an argument is fallacious is not to say that any part of it is false. Instead, it is simply to say that the premises of the argument do not have the proper relationship to the conclusion—that it makes some kind of mistake in reasoning. We will return to the discussion of fallacies in a later chapter. There we will describe some of the more common fallacies that appear in arguments, show why they are fallacies, and give some tips on how to avoid them. Hopefully this process will help you learn the skill of properly connecting the premises in your argument to the claim you want to make so that you can avoid the more common mistakes in reasoning. Meanwhile, it is sufficient to recognize that fallacious arguments are those that make mistakes in reasoning (their premises are not properly connected to their main claims), and valid arguments are those that do not make mistakes in reasoning.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid the foundations for the remainder of the book. We have defined the two main parts of an argument: the main claim (which is called the *conclusion* of an argument) and the reasons that support the conclusion (called the *premises*). We pointed out that good arguments will always state their premises and claims clearly, and they will almost always state the main claim at the beginning of the argument so that the audience knows where the argument is

headed. We also highlighted the importance of having premises that are properly connected to the claim. We pointed out that valid arguments have premises that are properly connected to the claim, while fallacious arguments do not. In the next chapter we will explore two kinds of reasoning, inductive and deductive, and we will give a brief overview of what are sometimes called “the laws of logic.”