

Claims, Arguments, Subjectivism, and Value Judgments

- Claim: Any *statement* of fact, belief, opinion, etc.

Examples: “It’s raining in Montreal right now.”
“You should major in agriculture.”
“Fabio is a robust stallion of a man.”

- Argument: A set of statements providing *reasons* for believing that a claim is true.
 - All arguments have 2 components:
 - Premises
 - Conclusion

Examples: “It’s raining outside, so you should bring an umbrella to work.”
“I desire to be a robust stallion of a man, so I shall emulate Fabio.”

Argument or Not?

“Everybody is saying the president has made us the laughingstock of the world. What a stupid idea! He hasn’t made us a laughingstock at all. There’s not a bit of truth in that notion.”

Not an argument: This is a group of redundant claims. Nothing here provides any reason for believing one way or another.

“Yes, I charge a little more than other dentists. But I feel I give better service. So I think my billing practices are justified.”

This is an argument: The conclusion of this argument is that the dentist’s billing practices are justified. This conclusion is supported by the claim that she gives better service than other dentists.

In groups: Exercise 1-2, #s 1-10

- Subjectivism: The view that “one opinion is as good as the next, or that what is true is what you think is true.”

- There are a few significant problems with subjectivism.
 - It seems highly implausible that *every* opinion is as good as every other.
 - “I am of the opinion that my skeleton is composed of titanium and moondust!”
 - Subjectivism is *self-effacing*.
 - If subjectivism is true, then it is also true that subjectivism is false!

- Some opinions, however, *do* seem to be subjective. These might include matters of taste or aesthetic preference.
 - “Buttered-popcorn jellybeans are the best candy in the world.”

- A very rough rule for telling the difference between subjective and non-subjective claims:
 - Imagine two people disagreeing about a particular claim. If you can *only* coherently describe *one* of them as being correct, then the claim is not subjective.
 - “Mad Dog 20/20 is a fantastic accompaniment to any gourmet feast.”
 - We can imagine 2 people disagreeing about the truth of this statement, but it’s not clear that one of them must be wrong. So this statement is subjective.
 - “The molecular structure of water is H₂O.”
 - We can imagine 2 people disagreeing about the truth of this statement, but it would seem that only one of them can be correct. This statement is not subjective.

In groups: Exercise 1-9, #s 1-11

Value Judgments

Value judgments are comprised of claims including an evaluative component. They include claims of the following forms:

- X is good.
- Y is delicious!
- Z is beautiful.
- You ought to q.
- You should never λ.

Value judgments express beliefs about aesthetics, morals, and general preferences.

The subjectivity of these statements is a matter of some philosophical interest. Notice, however, that at least *some* of our value judgments seem not to be subjective.

- The best kinds of people kick cats for fun!
- It's wise to eat petroleum.

In groups: Exercise 1-12, #s 1-10.

Identifying Arguments

Words that will help us to identify *conclusions* include the following:

- Therefore...
- Thus...
- Hence...
- So...
- As a consequence...

These words don't *always* indicate the conclusion of an argument, but they are useful guidelines when we're trying to find a conclusion.

Words that will help us to identify *premises* include the following:

- Since...
- Because...
- In the light of the fact that...

These words/phrases indicate that the following information will *support* the conclusion of the argument.

Identifying Main Issues

When attempting to evaluate arguments (especially in informal discourse), it can be difficult to determine what they are primarily *about*. Identifying the conclusion of an argument enables us to determine the central claim in question. We'll call these claims *issues*.

Consider the following passage:

“The movie *Pulp Fiction* might have been a pretty good movie without the profanity that occurred all the way through it. But without the profanity, it would not have been a believable movie. The people this movie was about just talk that way, you see. If you have them speaking Shakespearean English or middle-class suburban English, then nobody is going to pay any attention to the message of the movie because nobody will see it as realistic. It's true, of course, that, like many other movies with some offensive feature—whether it's bad language, sex, or whatever—it will never appeal to a mass audience.”

What is the main point in this passage?
What is the primary claim in question here?

In groups: 1-5, #s 1, 2, 3
 1-6, #s 2, 3

Why Identifying Issues Matters

A common obstacle to clear critical thinking and discourse arises when people *appear* to be addressing the same issue, but are in fact talking about *separate* issues.

Sometimes this is easy to recognize:

Joe: “I think that education is the most important political issue of the coming election.”

Jim: “I want a cheeseburger.”

Sometimes it’s much harder to spot:

Joe: “I think that education is a fundamental human right.”

Jim: “Your political interests are so predictable. You always follow the liberal agenda.”

We can’t expect our discourse to be productive if we’re not talking about the same thing!

In groups: 1-7, #s 7-10

Recommended for tomorrow: Exercise 1-8 in book, #s 1-5

Quiz tomorrow