

Review of *A Guide to Good Reasoning: Cultivating Intellectual Virtues*

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A mature society understands that at the heart of democracy is argument. Salman Rushdie (2012)

He who establishes his argument by noise and command shows that his reason is weak. Michele de Montaigne (1588)

Taken together, the epigrams above suggest our democracy is weak and immature, that the noise and command we hear so often in today's polarized political climate happened because somewhere along the way we lost the capacity to reason. David C. Wilson's (2020) *A Guide to Good Reasoning: Cultivating Intellectual Virtues* steps into the breach to save democracy by equipping its readers with a "unified system of explicating and evaluating arguments of all sorts" (p. xiii). Students will appreciate that this Open Educational Resource (OER) is freely accessible, both during the course and in the future. Those best served by this textbook would be those in semester- or year-long courses in argumentation and debate or in advanced public speaking, perhaps even informal logic, but the subject matter goes well beyond the skills of argumentation developed in basic public speaking classes. Wilson promises practicality by "[l]ooking most closely at arguments as they are found in the language of daily life," the kind of reasoning "designed to persuade" (p. 9). An ideally useful textbook should offer hands-on features like examples, guidelines, and exercises, and Wilson's does. But today's future-focused students demand efficient training, and here is a tome of just under 400 pages. We live in a world today of uncontrolled inflation and unpredictable world events, where steadily rising costs foment an

increased questioning of the value of higher education. Therefore, it is imperative that faculty play their part in removing access-barriers to vital skills like argumentation. Some universities are mission-driven to keep costs low for students, and OERs like Wilson's are an optimal way to deliver both student equity and self-preservation.

According to Wilson, what distinguishes his treatment of argumentation from similar texts is an emphasis on the "intellectual virtues" of intellectual honesty, critical reflection, and empirical inquiry. He also promises the inclusion of topics not found in other treatments, including judgmental heuristics and conversational relevance. Symbolic logic and truth tables are not here, since, Wilson argues, the former "belongs in a different course," and the latter "do not reliably describe language as we ordinarily use it" (p. 1). And fallacies, often reserved for one chapter toward the end of argumentation textbooks, appear gradually throughout the book as they become relevant. All these differences sound like pedagogically valuable choices, but the proof of the pudding, of course, is in the eating.

The 16-chapter book comprises six parts, each chapter following the same basic arrangement: well-wrought epigrams, a list of chapter topics, bold-font terms throughout the content, and three kinds of call-out boxes: Chapter Summaries, Guidelines for students to "use," "look for," "cultivate," "be wary of," "consider," "count," "don't count," or "identify", and Exercises that range from the mundane ("You've broken out in hives," "Jesus loves me, this I know") to the erudite. Throughout the body of each chapter, Wilson incorporates hundreds of carefully curated example arguments, rich quotations from novelists, NASA, professors, scientists, the *Los Angeles Times*, Diderot, the Bible, Napoleon, crime statistics, *Forbes*, Woody Allen, an astronaut, Charlie Parker, Mark Twain, Gerald Ford, a musicologist, an NFL Hall of Fame Coach, David Hume, Mary Shelly, NBA star Charles Barkley, and Otter from *Animal*

House, to cite only a few. These real-world examples are undoubtedly the best feature of the book, and they alone make this text an excellent supplementary workbook for in-class lessons on argument forms.

Part 1, “Reasoning and Arguments,” spans two chapters and makes the case that good reasoning entails good arguments, which are true, logical, conversationally relevant, and clear (p. 8). Chapter 2 brings forward the building blocks of arguments—premises, statements, conclusions, and inference indicators—as found in simple arguments, complex arguments, and enthymemes. Beyond learning terms like these, developing skills in good reasoning depends upon and fosters what Wilson calls the “intellectual virtues” of critical reflection, empirical inquiry, and intellectual honesty. Unfortunately, he returns to these virtues only once in the book.

Part 2, “Clarifying Arguments,” comprises the next four chapters, a sometimes-laborious training in taming the variety of ordinary language arguments into one clear structure that can then be more loyally and charitably evaluated. After illustrating the “Standard Clarifying Format” in Chapter 3, the chapters which follow dig deeper into the process of clarifying arguments by *streamlining* (paraphrasing only with declarative statements, eliminating unnecessary words, and neutralizing slanted language), *specifying* (eliminating ambiguity and avoiding excessive generality, vagueness, or emptiness), and *structuring* (placing the names, predicates, constants, and variables of an argument in the proper form, namely

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{If } P, \text{ then } Q. \\ \text{Not } Q. \\ \therefore \text{Not } P. \end{array}$$

Wilson uses this form for the remainder of the book, a move that seems to betray his intention to simplify argumentation from the rigor of symbolic logic toward ordinary language.

In Part 3, “Evaluating Arguments,” Wilson introduces another “Standard Format” for evaluating arguments by the criteria of Truth, Logic, Soundness, and Conversational Relevance. The growing formality continues when Wilson abandons his style of occasionally introducing fallacies in favor of a standalone chapter on fallacies. He distinguishes argument-based and motive-based fallacies, before advising students, “it is best to skip the unhelpful step of accusing a premise of committing a fallacy. Instead, go straight to the explanation of why you believe it to be false” (p. 193). Here he appears to undercut the need to even understand fallacies.

Part 4, “Evaluating the Truth of Premises,” takes up one chapter, “How to Think about Truth,” and includes discussions on objectivity and truth, probability and evidence, self-evidence, and experiential evidence. The chapter is thorough, covering two laws of truth, two kinds of probability, and two types of non-inferential evidence (self-evidence and experiential evidence), along with evaluative questions to ask of each kind of evidence. It is, as Wilson himself puts it, a short course on “applied epistemology” (p. 1).

Part 5 addresses “Evaluating Deductive Arguments,” and here Wilson introduces a distinction between two types of argument—deductive, wherein “the premises are intended to guarantee, or make certain, the conclusion,” and inductive, whose “premises are intended merely to count toward, or make probable, the conclusion” (p. 200). This distinction between certain and probable conclusions parts company from the Aristotelian distinction of movements between the general and the particular, and Wilson promptly dismisses that tradition as “common but mistaken,” whereas his own fresh take “aims to provide the best mix of accuracy, practicability, and common usage” (p. 201). Following that is a discussion of what counts as deductive validity and how to counter that with validity counterexamples, before turning to an explication of the variety of deductive forms.

Part 6, finally, follows this same structure for the field of inductive arguments—definition, variations, and tests for truth or, in this case, probabilistic measures of “strength.” Wilson portrays induction as the weaker of the two forms, with lower standards for logical success, but more of them, as inductive conclusions must not only—as in deductive arguments—“fit the premises,” or take the correct form, but also satisfy the Total Evidence Condition, or “fit the total available evidence” (p. 282). The last four chapters of the book unpack how to structure inductive arguments in the correct forms and a consideration of the special characteristics of each of the four most common forms of inductive arguments.

After so much weighty content, Wilson abruptly ends with a one-page epilogue, returning to the intellectual virtues of critical reflection, empirical inquiry, and intellectual honesty, the last of which will always guide the others. Unfortunately, these virtues are only tacitly cultivated throughout the book. Going forward, students are still advised to incorporate their new understanding of good reasoning into their lives by “consistently car[ing] about the quality of arguments” (p. 381).

As with any book, flaws exist. For one, the non-indented “1.1.2” format makes it difficult to keep track of the embedded sub-structures of each chapter. More importantly, scholars of communication might understand, but still be troubled by, Wilson’s Ramus-like dismissal of rhetoric as counter to the aims of logic or his Platonic judgment of opinion as counter to knowledge. In his view, rhetoric at its best can help the cause of truth, but only when “it is used to make good arguments easy to accept on their own merits” (p. 59). At its worst, the goals of persuasion and truth are utterly incompatible, the former undermining the latter’s clarity. A case in point is his discussion of arguments from analogy, of which he cautions, “Analogies are often used merely for rhetorical effect,” a feat of language only achieved by “exploit[ing] our

dependence on the vividness shortcut,” and “tak[ing] advantage of our dependence on the similarity shortcut” that makes us “especially susceptible” to their use (p. 325).

For sure, Plato and Ramus are part of our rhetorical inheritance and options for the teaching and learning of argumentation. It is not clear, however, that divorcing logic from rhetoric and opinion from truth (in the desire for a perfect language) serves Wilson’s interest in practical argument and ordinary language use. Similarly, it seems impractical that he comes down decidedly against any relativistic notion of truth, arguing “Truth has to do with whether a belief fits with the world. It is not relative to the believer. . . . Evidence, however, is relative to the believer” (p. 194). Even the appearance of relative truth in an argument should be taken as an ambiguity that needs to be eliminated before evaluating the argument’s truth. In the end, it is not clear that his emphasis on objectivity benefits his goal of “equip[ping] you with the tools for handling arguments that you are likely to encounter in your own experience” (p. 267).

All told, while instructors will appreciate Wilson’s depth and breadth, exhaustive might become exhausting to students working through 400 increasingly complex pages. As to the reading level, here again a strength becomes a weakness. As the book proceeds, what begins as a thoughtful but simple treatment ends up overthought and too thorough. What begins with “a clear and inviting style...written for college freshmen” (p. 1) ends up sounding almost as opaque as other textbooks on logic. And with only three pictures, the book is almost entirely text-based, offering only one modality of understanding (leaving out, for example, visual learners).

It is hard to imagine any caliber of student covering one chapter of this book per week in a single semester course. Instead, instructors and students might, for the sake of time, pass over certain chapters or sections without regretting an exorbitant cost, or again, use the book as a supplementary casebook of examples. To be fair, argumentation is a vast and verbal subject, so a

single new book can hardly be expected to revolutionize the field. Notwithstanding its acute limitations, because Wilson's text largely delivers on his promise of application, his is a fresh, free take on an ancient subject as much as a welcome munition to the arsenal of democracy.