

Argument

There is a distinction between '*assertion*' and '*argument*'. This is the distinction between simply *saying* that something is so and offering *reasons* for thinking that it is so. If I utter the words 'It is raining', 'Paris is the capital of France', 'Abortion is always wrong' or 'The foetus is not a person' I have simply made an assertion. What I say may (or may not) be true or reasonable; but I have given no *reason* to suppose that it is true. I have simply asserted it. Now what is required in a philosophy essay is *argument*, not mere assertion: what is required is that you offer *reasons* for thinking that a particular view is true.

In daily life we often make assertions without giving any reason for thinking them true; and, in many cases, nobody complains about our failure to give reasons. This is just as well. If every time I asserted something I were required to give a reason for believing it, I would never get going:

Me: 'Smoking is bad for you'

Sceptic: 'Why should I believe that?'

Me: 'Numerous studies have shown that people who smoke are more liable to get lung cancer and heart disease.'

Sceptic: 'Why should I believe that?'

Me: 'An article in last week's *Scientific American* says so.'

Sceptic: 'Why should I believe that?'

At which point I may – if I am exceptionally patient – stick a copy of last week's *Scientific American* under the sceptic's nose. But suppose he then says 'Why should I believe that this is a copy of last week's *Scientific American* (as opposed to a good imitation produced by the anti-smoking lobby)?' or 'Why should I believe what it says in *Scientific American*?' Well, there may be particular contexts in which these would be appropriate questions: for example, the first question might be in order if the anti-smoking lobby has recently engaged in unscrupulous behaviour of this form. But the process of demanding reasons must stop *somewhere* – even if the point at which it stops varies from case to case. If we demanded reasons for *everything* we could never have any reasons for believing *anything*.

The same point applies in philosophy. You can't argue for *everything*. Suppose that in an essay in which you are arguing for the total abolition of the death penalty you offer as one reason: 'In some cases the death penalty involves miscarriages of justice for which the victim cannot be compensated later', or 'The death penalty often involves massive suffering for the family of the executed man'. These are simply assertions. Now someone might ask whether either of them is strong grounds for the conclusion that the death penalty is always morally unacceptable. But that is another matter. Considered simply as assertions, they are so obviously true that you would not be expected to offer reasons for believing them.

A piece of philosophical writing is an attempt to give reasons for – arguments for – a claim that is *not* obviously true. Or perhaps I should say: a claim that some reasonable people do not regard as obviously true. You can, as we have seen, only do that if you take *some* things for granted. What you take for granted are the '*premises*' of your argument. What you are trying to prove is the '*conclusion*' of your argument. An argument has the form: 'Given that you accept *this* (the premises), you must accept *this* (the conclusion)'.

And what if somebody does not accept your premises? Well, if he is like the man I called a 'sceptic' – if, *whatever* you say, he asks 'Why should I believe that?' – you are never going to get anywhere with him. (And, if he is serious, he is never going to get anywhere with himself either. Are we to imagine that he does not take a step until he has an answer to the question: 'Why should I believe that with the next step I take a cavern will not open up beneath my foot?') Your aim need only be to produce arguments that will convince a 'reasonable' reader. Now there is no sharp line separating what a reasonable reader might demand reasons for and what no reasonable reader could ask reasons for. You will sometimes have to form a judgement on that yourself. But if one of the premises of your argument involves a claim that a reasonable person might doubt, you need to try to offer a further argument for thinking that that claim is true.