IN DEFENSE OF INFORMAL LOGIC

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IN DEFENSE OF INFORMAL LOGIC

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For Katherine
Who lights my way

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PREFACE

My impulse when I decided to collect into a single volume the essays on topics in logical theory and related subjects that I have written in the last fifteen years was to borrow from the title of a work by Sextus Empiricus, and call my collection "Against the Logicians." Although the essays address a variety of problems that interest me, the thread that runs through them is a scepticism about how logicians see things. So, the title appealed to me.

However, I had second thoughts and chose instead a title of one of my own essays, "In Defense of Informal Logic", which emphasizes my support for other approaches. Although my criticisms of logical theory are designed to cut deeply, I do not want to be unresponsive to the needs that it is supposed to satisfy. However, my position that we have adequate resources for critically analyzing a particular argument and do not need a theory of argumentation, will not completely satisfy those who think that there is a need for it. So, I want them to know that I am taking their concerns seriously.

My wanting to do so is based on my thinking that argument analysis should be a vehicle for mediation or conflict resolution. The object of the analysis, I believe, is to try to help the different sides of the conflict understand one another and find ways to respond to each other's concerns without loss of integrity. The assumption is that those in conflict should find ways of living together, and so the best analysis is one that acknowledges the insights of the arguers and validates their concerns, while it considers how each party to the dispute may have failed to understand the concerns of the other side. My commitment to this way of thinking explains my reluctance to use a title for the book which is bound to alienate the very audience whose problems I am discussing.

That audience is not sufficiently aware of just how specialized a discourse formal logic is. This is one of the main themes of this book, the development and significance of which is the subject of several of essays, including those on the difficulties illiterates and students have with logic problems (essays eight and nine), whether the calculi of formal logic logic have any applicability to actual rhetoric (essay ten), the Gettier problem (essay eleven), the essay on the Sorites Paradoxes (essay twelve), and even the essay on how the ancient Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi, reacted to the demand by logicians of his day that what is said be 'fixed' (essay thirteen). Because it is specialized, some people can become very proficient in the discourse of formal logic, and so think of themselves as having a valuable skill. Others can be intimidated or alienated because they are not proficient in it, and wonder whether they are missing out on something.

I was determined to become one of the proficient ones because of the influence of a teacher of philosophy whom I admired. He once encouraged me to become a logician by saying, "I would be a logician myself instead of a historian, if I was smart enough." When I developed some interests in philosophy and did some teaching of

logic, I began to have my doubts about the value of formal logical techniques in philosophy or outside of the classroom. Nevertheless, I still found myself a hostage to the belief I had acquired as a beginning philosophy student, that proficiency in formal or symbolic logic is what distinguishes the good philosophers from the others.

This book is my attempt at winning my release. I adopt a number of strategies for doing so. One involves choosing what seem to be losing sides. I side with informal logic in its dispute with formal logic (essay one), and with rhetoric against (formal) logic (essay four). I also take the side of the illiterate subjects who seemed to do so badly with the logic problems that they were asked to solve by cognitive psychologists (essay eight) and the side of students when they struggle with certain lessons in formal logic or with all of us when we do badly on certain exercises (essay nine).

Another strategy is to try to show how what is right about formal logic is a function of the context in which the logician is operating. If its claims are supported by the examples devised by logicians in defense of these claims, this does not create a presumption that these claims are applicable outside of the classroom or study (essay ten). The issue of how analyses that apply to the context in which logicians are operating apply to actual discourse also arises in connection with the logic problems field anthropologists give illiterates to solve (essay eight), or the Wason selection task cognitive psychologists give experimental subjects to solve (essay nine), and with the Gettier counterexamples (essay eleven).

Still another strategy is to question some of the articles of faith of traditional logical theory. Most notable among them is the operating assumption that it must be possible to translate an argument into premise-conclusion form, where everything about the rhetorical context that is relevant for determining what is being argued is incorporated into its restated premise-conclusion sequence. That logical theory has such a requirement and that it cannot be fulfilled is suggested in "In Defense of Informal Logic" (essay one) and discussed and argued more fully in "The Case of the Missing Premise" (essay six).

The insight that informs all of these essays is that anything we want to say about argumentation should be based on samples taken from actual discourse, and not on samples the devised by logicians. Logicians do not seem to appreciate the significance of the fact that only the former have a rhetorical context. I think that this is because they do not ask themselves about the point of view they are adopting when they think critically about an argument, because they do not think that they have a point of view when they do so.

This negligence in asking what they are doing when they identify something as an 'argument' is criticized in the first essay and then considered at length in the fifth essay, "Towards a More Dynamic Conception of Argument." Both essays make the point that whether or not an argument has been given cannot be determined independently of a consideration of how the arguer is addressing what is at issue, and

the latter essay also relies on a distinction between the argument of a sample of rhetoric and the argument that may be given for or against what is at issue.

That argument analysis should be done as a participant is argued in this fifth essay, as well as several others, most notably "The Limits of Critical Thinking" (essay seven), which examines the idea that because the parties to a controversy may have different conceptual frameworks, there are limits to what can be achieved by critical thinking. The traditional approach to critical thinking encourages us to sit in judgement over an argument without considering why it matters whether we do so. This approach is criticized in several papers, most notably the ones on begging the question (essay two) and the ad baculum (essay three).

Most of the essays in this book emphasize the essential role that a knowledge of the rhetorical context plays in the determination of what is being argued and in the critical evaluation of that argument. This approach is introduced in the first essay, "In Defense of Informal Logic," and continued in almost all of the essays which follow. Two of the essays also anticipate criticisms of the approach. "The Fallacy in the Treatment of the Ad Baculum as a Fallacy" (essay three) discusses the objection that what the speaker is doing is not relevant to the logic of the argument being given, and "In Defense of Rhetoric" (essay four) discusses the objection that Rhetoric, because it concentrates on the persuasiveness of an argumentation, is not competent to rule on its correctness.

An occupational hazard for logicians is an interest in paradoxes. I, too, have long been intrigued by them, and have included a discussion of one of them, the Sorites, in this collection. Although I have been caught up in trying to resolve the puzzle the paradox presents, my interest has been in showing that there really is no paradox to solve. Although the essay explores the implications of the fact that the paradox is stated in the terms of a specialized discourse, "The Unbearable Vagueness of Being" (essay fourteen) also looks critically at the implications of operating with the concept of a 'predicate'.

The perspective that informs several of the essays in this collection is that of a teacher of logic and critical thinking. Early in my teaching career I was struck by how intrigued some students were by the various calculi I was teaching, and how convinced other students were of their own stupidity because they had so much trouble learning what came so quickly to the other students. Although I was quick to admire the students who did well or to blame the students who did not, after a number of years I came to wonder whether there might be something wrong with the lessons. If I was trying to teach students to think for themselves, the lessons seemed to designed to do the thinking for the students when I was trying to teach them to think for themselves.

Several of the essays in this book are devoted to issues that arise when considering the value of lessons in critical thinking. The first essay ("In Defense of Informal Logic") argues that certain fallacies of oversimplification are occupational hazards of argumentation, a point that ironically applies even to the attempts by some logicians to show that such fallacies rarely if ever occur. The second essay ("Begging what is at Issue in an Argument") argues that one of these fallacies of oversimplification,

begging the question, is defined incorrectly because those doing the defining ignore the rhetorical context of an argument. That logical analysis is incapable of taking into account significant features of the rhetorical context of an argument is the theme developed in the fourth essay ("In Defense of Rhetoric") which defends rhetoric against the argument that it is concerned with persuasiveness and not correctness. The subject of the sixth essay ("The Limits of Critical Thinking") is what seems to be the fall out from a lack of faith in the technology of logic, namely, the belief that there may be no way to assess certain arguments. Each of these essays touches on the question of whether and how critical thinking should be taught.

The last, and most recently written essay in this collection, "Zhuangzi: Philosophical Disputation as Transformative," applies many of the themes of this collection to the work of Zhuangzi. His focus is on spiritual transformation, which, when applied to philosophizing, involves becoming non-attached to the positions or arguments one is advancing. Zhuangzi's interest seems to be that of mediation or conflict resolution. He advocates trying to get the different sides to appreciate how much they have in common, and a major insight of his is that the strengths of each side over the other also are its weaknesses because of how dependent each side is on the other for its identity. Most interpreters prefer to base their readings of Zhuangzi not on what he could be saying about disputation and transformation, but on what they take to be the metaphysical basis his mysticism. This essay objects to attributing metaphysical views to him because of the problems with the views and because of the questionable attribution to him of the assumptions behind these views.

There are a number of themes, including some already touched upon, which are sounded in these essays: logic is a specialized discourse, with problematic applications outside of the contexts in which logicians are operating; logical analysis faces insurmountable obstacles when it tries to acknowledge the relevant features of an argument's rhetorical context; many of the problems addressed by logic or logical theory are problems that are generated by some of its unwarranted assumptions about the nature of argumentation and discourse; logical theory confuses a proof or demonstration with an argument; that a theory of argument is needed is an insupportable prejudice, based, in part, on a failure to appreciate the available resources for thinking clearly about an argument; argument analysis is itself a contribution to a controversy, and needs to be approached with an understanding of the interests and concerns of the analyzer. Perhaps the discovery about logic that interests me most is that logicians suffer from the illusion that they do not have to base their theorizing on specimens of actual rhetoric, but can confine their theorizing to samples of their own devising that do not have to be understood by supposing anyone to actually say the words in question.

As I have stated these themes, they do sound antagonistic to logic or logical theory. My object, however, has been to convey how much I feel its power and authority. These essays are a kind of ransom I am paying to free myself from the influence of my teacher's counsel to be what he said *he* was not clever enough to be.

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Although it has been a dozen or more years since some of them were written, only a few of the published papers have been rewritten to refer to more recent discussions of the topics of these papers. However, none of the papers that have previously been published is reprinted here exactly as it appeared earlier. When I reread them I found certain annoying stylistic mannerisms which I have tried to correct, and I have made changes when passages or arguments seemed obscure or poorly written. I also found that I seemed to be repeating myself from paper to paper. Some times I have

contented myself with drawing attention to these repetitions by remarking on the fact that the same point is made in other papers; in other instances, I kept discussions which seemed to go over the same ground in the hope that the reader might benefit from another attempt at making the same point. Some of the published essays had section headings. To be consistent, and to help the reader, I have included section headings in all of the essays.

Several people have been especially helpful with one or more of the essays in this book. Arthur Cody, even when he has not agreed with what I have said or done, has convinced me of the value of my work because of the attention he has paid to it; there are many places in the notes and in the body of the text where I have expressed my indebtedness to him. Henry Alexander and John Powell have been very encouraging and supportive of my work, and even when they have found problems with it, they have managed to express their criticisms in a way that made it easy for me to make the changes that they thought necessary. I have also profited from the suggestions and criticisms of Henry Rosemont, John Schroeder, Steve Shankman, Robert Gould, William Davie, John Stuhr, Catherine Wilson, Richard Manning, Moira Gutteridge and Lars Hertzberg. I am indebted to the work of the referees for essays in this collection, many of whom were anonymous. The ones who were helpful and not anonymous include Trudy Govier, Andrew Lugg, H.O. Mounce, Richard Feldman, Ralph Johnson and Anthony Blair. I also have been greatly aided in the preparation of this manuscript by Timothy Adamson.