ON REASONING

Schubert M. Ogden

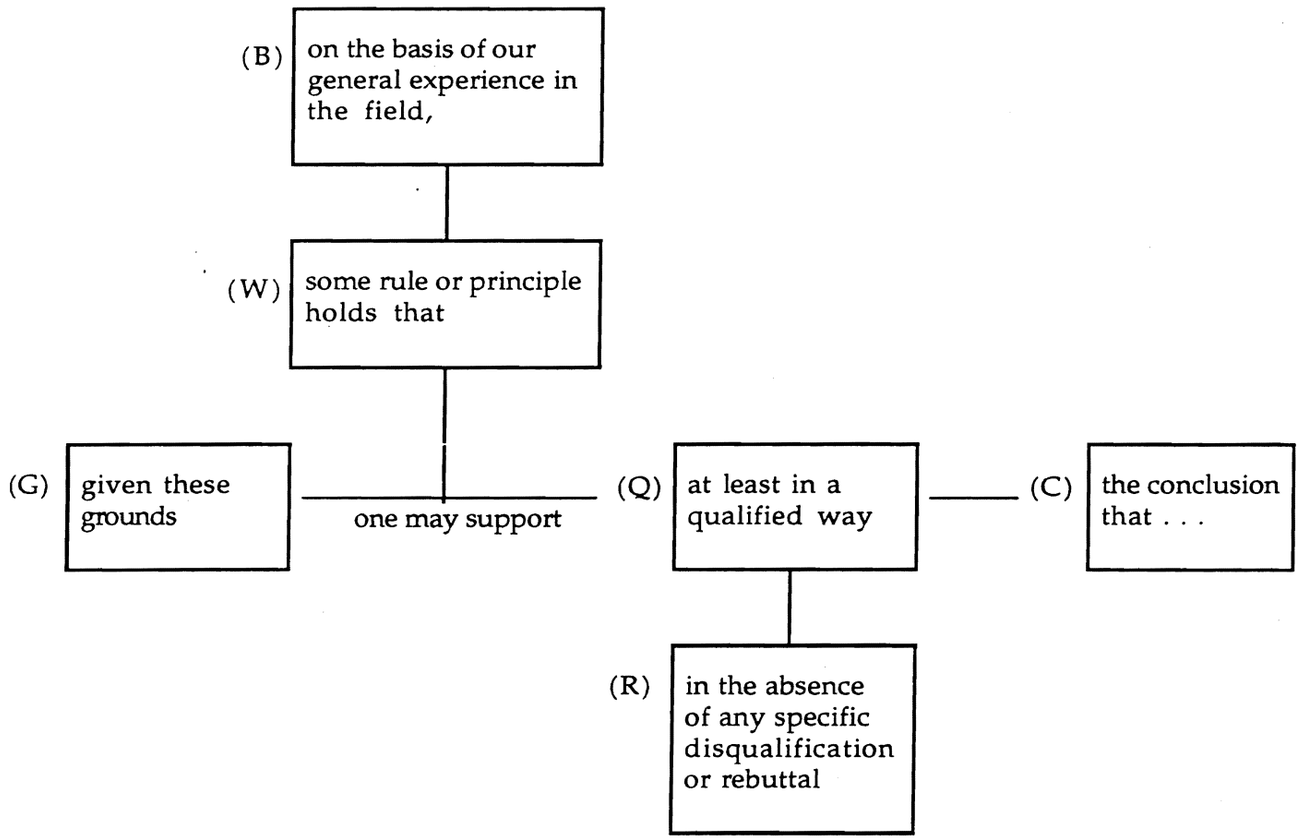
There are various human activities or forms of life-praxis that provide the contexts of communication and reasoning. Thus there are also various corresponding fields of reasoning or argument.

Any such field is like all the others, however, in providing a public, interpersonal, or social forum for rationally criticizing claims to validity arising within the context constituted by the corresponding activity or form of life-praxis. Whatever the activity or form of praxis in which our claims may originate, reasoning is the critical activity in the larger process of communication whereby our claims are opened up to public, collective criticism by reference to shared standards. By "*reasoning,*" then, is properly meant, simply, the activity of giving reasons to support one's claims; and this is the activity or procedure that is critical to "communication," in the sense of the larger activity or procedure of making or implying claims to validity, challenging them, supporting them with reasons, criticizing these reasons, rebutting the criticisms, etc. Reasoning in this sense, then, does not originate ideas or claims, nor does it answer the question once and for all whether they are valid. The task of reasoning in this sense, rather, is always more limited—namely, in each situation to enable one to make the best decision possible about a particular issue, in particular circumstances, in just that particular context.

But since this task of reasoning always is essentially the same regardless of the particular context, situation, circumstances, or issue, it is possible to analyze the process or procedure of reasoning as such, so as to understand its various elements. The results of one such analysis, which is typical of those carried out by contemporary philosophers, are summarized in the following diagram.

THE STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENTS*

General formula: Given certain *grounds* (G), one may appeal to some *warrant* (W), which rests on some *backing* (B), to justify a certain *conclusion* (C)—at least with some *qualification* (Q)—in the absence of any specific disqualification or *rebuttal* (R).



*Following Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, Allan Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning*. 2d ed.; New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1984.

Specific illustrations:

C = The Washington Redskins are a shoe-in for this year's Super Bowl.

G = Washington has the strongest and best-balanced combination of both offensive and defensive squads in the NFL, while all of their chief rivals are relatively weak in one squad or the other.

W = Only a team that is really strong in both offense and defense can be tipped for the Super Bowl.

B = The past records of form in the field of pro football indicate that . . .

Q = So, presumably,

R = Unless Washington is plagued by injuries or the other teams do some quick and costly talent buying or there is a general upset of the form book.

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C = The weather will be clearing and cooler by this evening.

G = This morning the wind has veered around from SW toward NW; the rain has nearly stopped; there are local breaks in the clouds—all signs indicating the passage of a cold front.

W = In these latitudes, passage of a cold front is normally followed after a few hours by clearing, cooler weather.

B = The accumulated experience of metereologists in the North Temperate Zone indicates that . . .

Q = So, chances are,

R = Unless some unusually complex frontal system is involved.

• • • • • •

C = Penicillin is the right medicine to prescribe for this patient.

G = Penicillin is the most effective cure for this kind of respiratory infection.

W = The most effective medicine is normally the one to prescribe.

B = The general goals of medicine being what they are, . . .

Q = So, presumably,

R = Unless this patient is sensitive to penicillin.

C = Jim treats Betty pretty unfairly and inconsiderately.

G = Jim habitaully leaves Betty at home baby-sitting while he goes drinking with his buddies, and he never bothers to ask her if this is o.k.

W = These days, a husband has no business leaving his wife to spend all her evenings tied to the house, while he goes out without her.

B = Given the present-day understanding of what the demands of equity in marital relations are, . . .

Q = So, on the face of it,

R = Unless they have some generally, mutually accepted understanding that nobody else has heard about.

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C = There's nothing morally objectionable about Martha's having a D and C.

G = Having a D and C is a routine part of gynecological health care.

W = Routine health care is morally unobjectionable.

B = Given the basic importance of health care to human well being, . . .

Q = So, presumably,

R = Unless the bare possibility of a three-week embryo's being destroyed is a compelling moral objection justly labeled "murdering an unborn child."

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C = Christians are responsible for creating and maintaining just social and cultural structures.

G = Creating and maintaining just social and cultural structures are integral to doing justice.

W = Christians are responsible for doing justice.

B = Given the fact that, according to normative Christian witness, Christian faith works through love, and love, in turn, does justice, . . .

Q = So, presumably,

R = Unless under the conditions of existence as we actually live it, creating and maintaining just social and cultural structures cannot be done without engaging in violence.

This brief analysis and these few illustrations barely open up the question of what reasoning is. Thus, for example, nothing at all has been said about the fallacies of reasoning or how arguments typically go wrong—whether because they are missing in grounds, because their grounds are irrelevant or defective, because they rest on unwarranted assumptions, or because of ambiguities. But perhaps enough has been said to clarify, in principle, why an argument is sound and how much strength it can fairly be supposed to have. Whether or not an argument is sound depends on whether or not the four main elements of the argument—conclusion, grounds, warrant, and backing—are properly connected. Thus a conclusion which is groundless is not a sound conclusion, and the same is true of an inference from grounds to conclusion that is unwarranted, or, of a warrant that cannot be backed up. But even if these connections, which are required for the soundness of an argument, are all properly made, there remains the question as to the strength of these connections and as to the conditions under which the conclusion can be inferred from the grounds on the basis of the warrant and backing. This is where the other two elements—the qualifier and the rebuttal—also have to be taken into account.