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Book Review

Reason & Argument by Richard Feldman

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Feldman, Richard. (1993). ***Reason and Argument.*** Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Pp. xiv, 432. ISBN 0-13-767229-2.

Richard Feldman's *Reason and Argument* is an excellent introductory text for the serious student. In a systematic way it covers all the essentials to reasoning that can be taught in an informal logic course. Though errors in reasoning are discussed at various points and a useful chapter on causal arguments is included, the text offers neither a list of fallacies nor a discussion of Mill's Methods. So far from being a defect, this absence points to the text's originality and the systematic way it develops the topic of reasons and arguments. The text focuses on two central aspects of assessing arguments—one having to do with validity and a kindred notion and the other with such things as the rationality of accepting the premises. As such, the text usefully combines elements of logic and epistemology so that the student can actually determine whether the conclusion of an argumentative passage should be accepted.

Part I (Chapters 1-5) develops the basic machinery of the text. An argument is said to be *well-formed* if it is valid or cogent, an argument being *cogent* if it isn't valid and the premises assure that the truth of the conclusion is more likely than not. To help assess validity, 14 valid argument types of truth functional and quantificational logic are given. To aid assessment of cogency, three cogent argument types are offered, the simplest (which we'll call "M") being: Most As are Bs, x is an A / x is a B. An argument is *deductively strong* for a person P if it is valid and reasonable for P to believe all the premises. An argument is *inductively strong* for P if it is cogent, reasonable for P to believe all the premises, and nothing in P's total evidence defeats the conclusion (such as knowledge that x isn't B despite most As being Bs and x being an A). Though no set of rules is given for the rationality of accepting premises, various guides are offered throughout the text. Given a well-formed argument which is also strong, it is rational to believe the conclusion (at least in the sense of it being rational to be more inclined to accept the conclusion than not).

Part II (Chapters 6-8) is devoted to analyzing argumentative passages which is taken to involve reconstructing the argument and evaluating the argument. To reconstruct the argument, one is to use the Principle of Charity to elicit the most plausible argument, adding (when necessary) implicit or missing premises which are plausible and in line with the author's intent. The reconstruction should elicit a well-formed argument whenever possible. Evaluating the argument is a matter of assessing whether one is justified in believing the premises (and in the case of cogent arguments determining whether one's total evidence defeats the conclusion).

An exercise problem and the partial answer provided gives a good sense of the test. Consider:

> If you read a lot, then you will improve your vocabulary. If you improve your vocabulary, then you will have a good chance of getting the job you want. Since you are taking an English literature course, you will read a lot. (p. 204)

The student is asked to reconstruct the argument, evaluate the objection that some jobs don't require a good vocabulary, and to add one's own evaluation. The answer (provided on p.410) gives the following reconstruction:

1. Almost everyone who reads a lot improves his or her vocabulary. [Explicit Premise]
2. Almost everyone who takes an English literature course reads a lot. [Implicit Premise]
3. You are taking an English literature course. [Explicit Premise]
4. You will read a lot. [From (2) and (3) by M]
5. You will improve your vocabulary. [From (1) and (4) by M]
6. If you improve your vocabulary, then you will have a good chance to get the job you want. [Explicit Premise]

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7. You will have a good chance to get the job you want. [From (5) and (6) by Modus Ponens]

The answer (given on p.410) concerning the objection that some jobs don't need a good vocabulary is:

> The objection would work only if (6) were made into a universal generalization. But that would be an uncharitable reconstruction. It could be left, as it was here, as a specific claim about the particular job "you" want. Alternatively, it could be made into a less than universal generalization. In either case, the objection would be no good.

While the Answer Section is silent on what sort of student evaluation might be acceptable, the following considerations can be extrapolated from the text. Feldman would certainly reject the criticism that "a lot" is a vague term—that would be an "argument stopper," something Feldman goes to some lengths to discourage. Understanding 'improves' as 'improves to some extent', premises (1)-(3) are presumably justified, and (4) and (5) are thereby justified unless the student can produce peculiarities surrounding the "you" that would defeat (4) or (5). One is therefore led to analyze (6), and assuming that we do not know it to be false (because "you" aren't going to get the job in any case), the text offers three main possibilities for conditionals: (a) the consequent must be true if the antecedent is, (b) the consequent is probably true if the antecedent is, and (c) there is no connection between the antecedent and the consequent (in which case the text urges rejecting the premise). Since (b) is the relevant possibility for (6), we ask: Is (6)'s consequent probably true if its antecedent is? To answer this, the text suggests considering the related generalization

> (6*) Most people who improve their vocabulary have a good chance of getting the job they want.

Presumably the truth value of (6*) is unknown or false (especially if the vocabulary is improved only to some extent). Thus, (6) isn't justified (i.e., disbelief or suspension of judgment would be rational with respect to (6)) and the argument is not strong. The assessment would presumably be more delicate if (6) and the conclusion were rephrased to read "you will improve your chances of getting the job".

In the final Part III (Chapters 9-13) the basic machinery is applied to four types of arguments: (i) arguments for a claim based on testimony, (ii) statistical arguments for conclusions of the form 'Approximately n% of a population P has property F' and 'F and G are positively (or negatively) correlated in population P', (iii) causal arguments for the conclusion of the form 'C causes E in population P', and (iv) moral arguments for the conclusion 'Action x is right' or 'A should (should not) be done'. In each case a standard form is given which is valid or cogent and some premises are given blanket

justification. Thus, assessment of the conclusion becomes a matter of assessing the justification of the remaining premises (and the absence of defeat). For example, the standard form for causal arguments is the following valid argument:

1. C is positively correlated with E in P.
2. If C is positively correlated with E in P, then E causes C in P or some third factor causes both C and E but neither C nor E cause each other or C and E are causally unrelated or C causes E in P.
3. The causal factors are not reversed.
4. The correlation is not the result of a common cause.
5. The correlation is not accidental.

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6. C causes E in P [From (1)-(5)]

Premise (2) is blanketly justified, assessment of (1) would be based on arguments of type (i) or (ii), and assessment of premises (3)-(5) is discussed at some length.

It should be evident from the exercise example of Part II that this is not an easy text; the level of seriousness and intelligence demanded would approximate that of an elementary logic text. Given the time limitation of a school term, it may not be possible both to develop a general method (which a text in elementary logic can but the present text doesn't) and to explain its application to a wide variety of human concerns (which the present text does for its limited machinery). If one chooses to forego formal methods, one cannot do better than Feldman's *Reason and Argument.* The text has enough exercise problems (though not an abundance of them) and the partial answers provided are useful.

Needless to say reservations can be raised about this or that part of the text, and four of them may be mentioned: (I) If I were using the text, I would condense the discussion of the 50 pages that comprise Chapters 2 and 3 to a bare minimum. The long philosophical defense of the "Objective Theory of Truth" in Chapter 2 isn't useful for the practical concerns of the text and the discussion of rational belief in Chapter 3 seems to be contentious in its account of belief and unsatisfying in its account of rationality (since no general characterization of evidential support is offered.) (II) One could raise questions about Feldman's account of cogency: (a) According to Feldman (p.97), 'Stew Dent is a college student / Stew Dent graduated from high school' is not cogent and requires the additional premise 'Most college students are high school graduates'. While this requirement may seem innocuous, this is of course what Hume exploited to raise his skeptical doubts about (enumerative) induction by forcing the need to justify the uniformity principle. (b) It is not clear how (or whether) Feldman intends to prevent the cogency of the following clearly unsatisfactory argument: The F which isn't B is an A, Most As are B / The F which isn't B is B. (c) Since the total evidence can defeat a sound and cogent argument, one wonders what significant notion of inductive cogency can be defined independently of the total evidence. (III) According to Feldman's account 'Smoking causes cancer among humans' is true even if only 7% of the smokers get cancer and no tacit appeal is made to contributing factors which made smoking lethal to the 7% (or interfering factors which made smoking benign to the remaining 93%). The rejection of the covering law model of causal statements is at least contentious. (IV) The text's method of analysis presupposes the "Objective Theory of Truth". Feldman's nine page defense of the method's applicability to ethical statements will leave the skeptical reader unsatisfied since no mention is made of non-cognitivist views.

Yet, when all is said and done, these reservations are either a matter of pedagogical preferences (which at worst call for minor adjustments in lectures) or philosophical quibbles (which are best suppressed in an introductory course that is intended to be practical). The text is difficult but there are no quick and easy fixes to becoming a good reasoner. The fact remains that Feldman's *Reason and Argument* is a

superb text in informal logic. It apprises the student of precisely the kind of considerations that should be brought to bear on one's own thoughts or that of another.

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