Arguments

Man: Ah. I'd like to have an argument, please.

Receptionist: Certainly sir. Have you been here before?

Man: No, I haven't, this is my first time.

Receptionist: I see. Well, do you want to have just one argument, or were you thinking of taking a course?

Man: Well, what is the cost?

Receptionist: Well, It's one pound for a five minute argument, but only eight pounds for a course of ten.

Man: Well, I think it would be best if I perhaps started off with just the one and then see how it goes.

Receptionist: Fine. Well, I'll see who's free at the moment.

(Pause)

Receptionist: Mr. DeBakey's free, but he's a little bit conciliatory. Ahh yes, Try Mr. Barnard; room 12.

Man: Thank you.

(Walks down the hall. Opens door.)

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Man: Ah, Is this the right room for an argument?

Mr Vibrating: I told you once.

Man: No you haven't.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I have.

Man: When?

Mr Vibrating: Just now.

Man: No you didn't.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I did.

Man: You didn't

Mr Vibrating: I did!

Man: You didn't!

Mr Vibrating: I'm telling you I did!

Man: You did not!!

Mr Vibrating: Oh, I'm sorry, just one moment. Is this a five minute argument or the full half hour?

Man: Oh, just the five minutes.

Mr Vibrating: Ah, thank you. Anyway, I did.

Man: You most certainly did not.

Mr Vibrating: Look, let's get this thing clear; I quite definitely told you.

Man: No you did not.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I did.

Man: No you didn't.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I did.

Man: No you didn't.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I did.

Man: No you didn't.

Mr Vibrating: Yes I did.

Man: You didn't.

Mr Vibrating: Did.

Man: Oh look, this isn't an argument.

Mr Vibrating: Yes it is.

Man: No it isn't. It's just contradiction.

Mr Vibrating: No it isn't.

Man: It is!

Mr Vibrating: It is not.

Man: Look, you just contradicted me.

Mr Vibrating: I did not.

Man: Oh you did!!

Mr Vibrating: No, no, no.

Man: You did just then.

Mr Vibrating: Nonsense!

Man: Oh, this is futile!

Mr Vibrating: No it isn't.

Man: I came here for a good argument.

Mr Vibrating: No you didn't; no, you came here for an argument.

Man: An argument isn't just contradiction.

Mr Vibrating: It can be.

Man: No it can't. An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.

Mr Vibrating: No it isn't. (from Monty Python's "The Argument Clinic")

The Monty Python boys are right, or close to it. Michael Palin (who plays "Man") proposes a definition of "argument":

An **argument** is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.

This definition isn't perfect. First, it's not clear what distinguishes statements from propositions. Better to stick to statements all the way through. And second, why does he say "a connected series of statements"? Here are a couple of examples to think about. Someone who wants to convince you that Socrates is mortal might argue

1. Socrates is a man.

2. All men are mortal.

3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

That's a pretty good argument; and statements 1 and 2 certainly seem "connected" — though we do not yet have an explicit definition of this notion. But that's just one example. Someone else might want to convince you that the earth is flat, and argue

1. The moon is made of green cheese.

2. Tabitha Soren was the best thing about MTV in the early 90's.

3. Therefore, the earth is flat.

They urge statements 1 and 2 upon you as if they are excellent reasons to believe 3. Now, this person is certainly presenting an argument. (It is just a REALLY BAD argument.) But statements 1 and 2 are not connected at all.

What has happened, I think, is that Michael Palin is running together a definition of "argument" with a definition of "good argument." The statements in an argument need not be connected; but if they are not, the argument is unlikely to be any good.

Here, then, is our definition:

- An **argument** is a series of statements intended to establish another statement.

We say that the statement the argument is intended to establish the **conclusion.** The **premises** of an argument are the statements that are intended to establish its conclusion.

One of the central tasks in philosophy (and other discplines too) is the evaluation of arguments. Is a given argument any good? So we need to know what makes an argument good. All we need to do to figure this out is look again at the definition: if

an argument is a series of statements **intended** to establish a conclusion, then a **good** argument is one that **succeeds** in establishing its conclusion. Well, maybe "establish" is too strong a word. Let our official defintion be

- A **good** argument is one with the following two features: (1) the premises provide some reason to believe the conclusion; (2) there is good reason to believe the premises.

One virtue of this definition of "good argument" is that it leaves room for some arguments to be better than others: better arguments provide stronger reasons for believing their conclusions, either because there is more reason to believe their premises, or their premises do a better job of making their conclusions reasonable.

Now figuring out whether an argument is good can, in general, be tricky. How do you tell when a list of premises provides some reason to believe a conclusion? But in some cases it is much easier. That is when the argument is, or purports to be, **deductively valid.**

- An argument is **valid** if it is **logically impossible** for its premises to be true and its conclusion false.

If an argument is valid then it certainly has feature (1) that good arguments are supposed to have.[1] And deciding whether an argument is valid is, in general, easier than deciding whether an argument that is not valid has feature (1).

Logic classes are devoted to formally distinguishing valid arguments from invalid ones; in this class you shoud just rely on your intuitive judgments and whatever background knowledge you may have.

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[1]Ignoring certain degenerate cases: "Roses are red, therefore roses are red" is valid; but one might doubt that the statement "roses are red" provides a reason to believe that roses are red. Certainly it does not provide an "independent" reason to believe this.