

Argument - looking for assumptions

Using animals to test medicines

Developing Argument Skills

This activity is one of a set written to improve SPU students' argument skills. There is more information on this project and on how teachers can contribute on the following web page: <http://www.scpub.org/resources/argument,1292,NA.html>.

Method

Students can discuss the arguments in pairs and attempt to answer the questions. Follow this with a general class discussion of each argument.

The points made below illustrate some of the ways in which these arguments might be criticised. Your students may well see others.

Suggested Answers

- A. We should not use animals to test human medicines. I think it is cruel.
An assumption that cruelty to animals is wrong and overrides all other possible grounds. Very weak evidence too.
- B. We should not use animals to test human medicines. Animals can feel pain and suffer.
A much better version of A but includes same assumption. Would need further grounds to be a good argument.
- C. To ensure that medicines are safe for humans it is essential that we test them in animals.
- D. We test medicines in animals because the law requires that we do so.
An assumption that obeying the law overrides other considerations
- E. It is right to test medicines in animals even though it causes suffering because the suffering of humans would be even greater if we did not ensure that they are safe.
This is a better version of C but it still can be criticised on the basis of the assumption that human suffering is more important than that of animals.
- F. There is no difference between testing medicines in animals and using animals for food. If we accept one we should accept the other.
This argument is more easily criticised for the grounds used, 'there is no difference.....' which is of course a claim itself. This claim though used as evidence still needs further evidence to support it.
- G. In some cases animals react to drugs in a different way from humans. Therefore there is no point in testing medicines on animals. The results will be worthless.
The assumption is that the fact that 'in some cases animals react to drugs in a different way ...' can be generalised to all tests.

Terminology

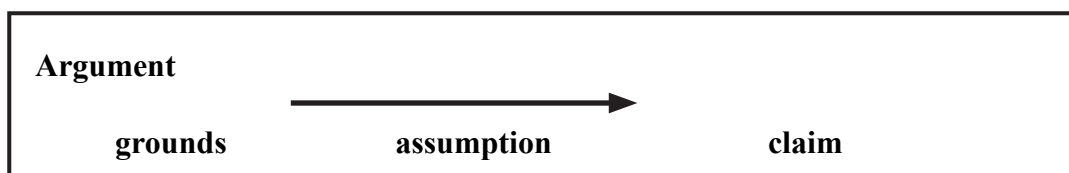
The support for a claim goes by a variety of names. We have used the general term **grounds** here in the text but the terms **evidence**, **reason**, **data** are also used and are examples of the grounds which might be used to support a claim. The term **assumption** used here is similar in meaning to the term **warrant** used in the Toulmin model of argument. It may or may not be actually expressed in an argument.

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The following are all arguments. The minimum requirement for an argument is that there should be a claim and some evidence or reason to give us grounds to accept the claim. Because a text can be described as an argument does not mean that we should accept the claim. We may not believe that the evidence is true.

There will usually also be an assumption linking the grounds and the claim. This assumption is often unspoken. It can still give us reasons for criticising the argument. For example in C there is an assumption that human's need takes precedence over animals' needs. If we do not accept this then we do not accept the argument.



Questions

1. For each argument
 - (a) Underline the claim with a solid line
 - (b) Underline the grounds which support the claim with a dotted line.
2. For each argument, decide whether there is a hidden assumption that is crucial to the claim.
3. Evaluate each argument. Remember to consider both the grounds for the claim and the assumptions.
 - A. We should not use animals to test human medicines. I think it is cruel.
 - B. We should not use animals to test human medicines. Animals can feel pain and suffer.
 - C. To ensure that medicines are safe for humans it is essential that we test them in animals.
 - D. We test medicines in animals because the law requires that we do so.
 - E. It is right to test medicines in animals even though it causes suffering because the suffering of humans would be even greater if we did not ensure that they are safe.
 - F. There is no difference between testing medicines in animals and using animals for food. If we accept one we should accept the other.
 - G. In some cases animals react to drugs in a different way from humans. Therefore there is no point in testing medicines on animals. The results will be worthless.