2.E: the ***Philosophyldeas*** overview of

Argument

An argument is a means of persuading a rational person to believe something by giving a reason. You can't have a rational argument with a tiger, and threatening someone with violence is not an argument. People talk of 'having an argument', but for philosophers arguments are the rational ingredients of a discussion. An argument is a reason to believe something, and so arguments are as varied as the sources of our beliefs. We can divide the reasons into two groups, those that concern the implications of a statement that has been accepted, and those concerning evidence. We can then divide the arguments from evidence into those concerning actual evidence, and those concerning imagined evidence. Somewhere between the two we also have analogies, which only become reasons when their implications are pointed out.

If we are trying to reason with people by drawing attention to the implications of something, then the best argument can be described as a 'proof'. Even better is a simple proof, because a complex proof might be watertight, but too difficult to follow. Formal logic was developed in order to make proofs perfectly watertight, but a proof in ordinary words can still be logically conclusive. The reality, of course, is that someone might judge that a proof is good, but cling so strongly to the belief which the proof destroys that they doubt their own judgement of the proof. The four ways to challenge a proof are to say that the conclusion is ridiculous so it must be wrong, or deny the initial assumptions in the proof, or point to dubious hidden assumptions, or challenge a step in the proof. If a rational person can't spot any of these four faults, then they should (presumably) accept the conclusion of the proof. The standard way of proving something is to assume that is not true, and then show that this will imply a contradiction. So if you don't accept contradictions (and you shouldn't!), then you should accept good proofs.

An interesting oddity concerning arguments by proof is the phenomenon of 'paradox'. In such cases the conclusion seems in some way ridiculous, and yet there seems to be nothing wrong with the proof. Important paradoxes have forced logicians to go back and re-examine what they meant by a 'proof'. If the proof of a paradox really does seem reliable, you may be forced to accept a very unlikely truth (such as that the class cannot have a surprise test this week, or that a conscientious author cannot sincerely say that their book contains mistakes).

Other arguments about the implications between statements are too imprecise to count as proofs. If we say 'you call yourself a "democracy", yet you don't allow prisoners to vote', this seems to be an argument centring on the concept of 'prisoners' (are they full citizens?) and 'democracy' (does it apply to *everyone*?). We can call these 'conceptual arguments', and no strict proof will be possible, because they just invite us to be clearer about what our concepts mean. They might be persuasive if we prefer to hang on to some concept, and accept its surprising implications. A syllogism is a formal argument which (in practice) also relies on meanings of concepts (as when we try to argue 'birds fly and penguins don't, so penguins aren't birds', which is fine as 'x is F and y is not F, so x is not y', but not when the concept of 'bird' is introduced).

The commonest way to persuade a rational person of something is to offer them good evidence. A good model for what is involved is the process of a criminal investigation and trial. We can distinguish evidence by its force, its quantity and its coherence. Many cases are solved by a single piece of evidence, such as DNA traces or a reliable photograph, so that nothing further is required. Other cases rest on the fact that there is a great deal of evidence implying guilt, or consistent with guilt ('circumstantial evidence'), but none of it is conclusive (though it may greatly increase the probability of guilt). The most interesting case is where no one piece of evidence is conclusive, but the accumulation of evidence hangs together so persuasively (it is so 'coherent') that the result is fully persuasive. How arguments that are inconclusive can combine to become conclusive is an interesting puzzle for philosophical analysis, involving the concepts of coherence, justification and explanation. We all recognise that no evidence is ever quite conclusive, because even the strongest case can be overthrown at a late stage (perhaps by discovering that the suspect has a twin).

While actual evidence is needed in law courts, philosophers are free to invent their evidence – in the sense that they can imagine unreal examples, in order to test out interesting principles, or show that persuasive evidence could very easily turn up. An argument can take the form of 'what if…?', and may be conclusive if we recognise a real possibility which would ruin everything, but the less likely the example is the less persuasive it becomes. Philosophy is full of delightfully fanciful examples, but their role is usually to illuminate the issues, or our intuitions, rather than actually persuade anyone.

An interesting form of argument is the use of analogy. This may actually be most effective when it is most absurd, because if you defend some grand position and I show you that it is just like some other position which you see is ridiculous, you may back down. Careful and more serious analogies are treated cautiously in philosophy, and some reject the whole approach. A classic analogy is that to say if you found a watch you would infer a designer, and the world is analogous to a watch (in its rational structure), and so the world must have a Great Designer. That is, 'like effects have like causes'. The weakness is that (by definition) the two cases are not the same, and so the appropriateness of the resemblance, in the effects or in the causes, can always be challenged. Analogies can throw light on things, but they don't often persuade.

A wide range of patterns or strategies have been observed in actual argument, and some are worth noting. A common (and often effective) move is to 'turn the tables' on an opponent. If you claim that a connection to experience is essential for meaningful statements, I can ask what makes your claim meaningful. If you say you believe in determinism, I can ask if your belief was also determined. Another move is to invoke 'contraposition', where I say your view A implies B, but B is not the case, so you are in trouble. We can also point out that an explanation implies a 'regress' of further explanations or puzzles, and so fails to achieve its aim.