3.5: Two Sides to an Argument

There are two sides to every argument. The two sides are called the pro-side and the con-side. The pro-side will speak in favor of the topic of the argument or what we call the claim being made, while the con-side will be speaking against the claim being made in the argument. There is no third position of an argument like, “I don’t know.” You are either for or against the claim. When you clash against an argument you are taking the con side of the argument.

A discussion is different. In a discussion, you can have a variety of different opinions on a topic. But when you get to the point of deciding on a particular answer, you have an argument. To better understand this, we need to look at the structure of the argument. And to do that we need to go back 2500 years to the Greek foundation for argumentation.

Enthymemes and Syllogisms

We often argue in what the Greeks referred to as an enthymeme. There are two parts to this type of argument, an observation that leads to a conclusion. Examples of an enthymeme could include:

- Ernie is going to be a violent person because he plays violent video games.
- If Terri exercises often she will be healthy.
- Vote for John Doe, he won’t raise taxes.
- Bill Gates is brilliant because he started Microsoft.

This list of arguments contains an implicit assumption. For example: “Ernie is going to be a violent person because he plays violent video games” implies that “people who play violent video games become violent people.” These general assumptions are left out in many, many arguments. The person making the argument assumes that you will just accept the general assumption. The Greeks decided to add this assumption as the third part of their argumentative analysis.
To expand the argument the Greeks used a format called the **syllogism**. This format is a form of deductive reasoning that starts with two initial propositions that lead to a conclusion. The initial proposition is the assumption implied in the enthymeme.

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\begin{align*}
\text{All professors are brilliant.} \\
\text{Jim Marteney is a professor.} \\
\text{Jim Marteney is brilliant.}
\end{align*}
\]

First note that the name of any professor could be placed here.

As accurate as we might like the conclusion to be in this argument, what if we found one college professor that was not brilliant? This Greek style of argumentation was an all or nothing approach. The argument was either 100% valid, or 0% valid. Classical Greek argumentation would suggest the entire argument is invalid and we could never make any conclusions.

But, in critical thinking we would argue that if there is just one example of a professor who is not brilliant there is still a high degree of validity, or probability, that the conclusion is still accurate. The argument may still be valid enough to reach the threshold of the target audience to accept the claim. In critical thinking, we make decisions when an argument reaches our threshold. The threshold does not have to be absolute 100%. Even in a court case that threshold is "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt" and not "Beyond any Doubt" which is less than 100% certainty.

This realization was the basis for Dr. Toulmin’s approach to analyzing arguments.