3.8: No Absolute Certainties

In argumentation, we don’t deal with absolute certainty of a claim. The skeptic and scientist both have the attitude that there are no absolute certainties. In other words, there are doubts on each claim that is argued. One scientist, R. A. Lyttleton, has described this process as the “Bead Model of Truth.” It is important to note here that Lyttleton does not use the word “Truth” as the absolute “Truth” but instead uses the word “Truth” to represent the validity of a claim.¹

To understand his model Dr. Lyttleton imagines a bead on a horizontal wire. The bead can move left or right on that wire. On the far-left side of the wire is the number which corresponds to total disbelief. On the far-right hand side of the wire is the number 1 which is related to a position of total belief or where you would believe the claim with absolute certainty.


Dr. Lyttleton would argue that the bead should never reach the far left or right end. As additional evidence is presented the belief is true the closer the bead moves to the number 1. The more unlikely the belief is to be accepted the closer the bead moves to 0.

According to Toulmin,

“Any claim is presented with certain strengths or weakness, conditions, and/or limitations. We possess a familiar set of colloquial adverbs and adverbial phrases that are customarily used to mark these qualifications. Such
adverbs are: presumably, in all probability, so far as the evidence goes, all things being equal, for all that we can tell, very likely, very possibly, maybe, apparently, plausibly, almost certainly, so it seems, etc. All of these phrases can be directly inserted into the claim being advanced, and as a result, would modify the claim indicating what sort of reliance the supporting evidence entitles us to place on the claim."

Let’s go back to the “Jim Marteney is brilliant” syllogism. Below is how Dr. Toulmin would analyze the argument. Now you can ask questions about the parts of the argument that are blank, the backing, reservations and qualifier.

3.8.2: "Second Sample Toulmin Model" (CC BY 4.0; J. Marteney)

The argument as presented is 100% valid because there are no Reservations leading to a Qualifier. There is also no Backing presented for the Grounds and Warrant, so at this point they are just assertions.

- Now you begin your analysis by asking questions, or as we will be calling them, Issues. What is the Backing for the idea that all professors are brilliant? Poor backing would create doubt with the Warrant and its ability to be an absolute, general rule.
- Are there any professors who are not brilliant? If so, that could be part of the Reservation? This is where you show your skepticism.

The answers to these questions could damage the argument. If there are Reservations there is a Qualifier. The more reservations, the weaker the Qualifier becomes the Claim becomes less valid. If there are no exceptions the Qualifier is 100% and you would be 100% certain that the Claim is correct. But with a couple of Reservations your Qualifier could be reduced to maybe 80% sure. Now, does that reach your threshold? There is still a degree of validity, but it may not be enough for you to accept the claim.

Examining the quality of the backing of the Grounds and Warrant might lead us to question the accuracy of those statements. With questionable backing the accuracy of the argument is challenged. The weaker the accuracy the less valid is the Claim.

This is what a completed Toulmin might look like.
With this completed Toulmin analysis of the argument we can immediately see two weaknesses in the argument.

- The publication, *National Education* which supports the Warrant that “All professors are brilliant,” might be prejudiced in favor of professors. This weakens the accuracy of the warrant.
- Since there are two Reservations to the Warrant, the Claim cannot be 100% valid. There then has to be a Qualifier that suggests a lower level of validity.

Notice that the Qualifier is now, “There’s a chance.” This would lead me to reject the Claim that Jim Marteney is brilliant.

This is what defense attorneys attempt to do in a courtroom. They don’t have to prove that their client is innocent. They have to attack the prosecution case to reduce the validity of the Claim that their client is guilty. They want the Qualifier to reflect a low number by questioning the backing and adding more and more examples to the Reservations. If in a criminal case they can reduce the validity to below reasonable doubt, the jury should find their client “not guilty.” Notice they don’t say the accused is “innocent.” They can only say that the prosecution did not have a valid enough case for them to find the accused guilty.

Stephen Toulmin developed this model for analyzing the kind of argument you read and hear every day—in newspapers and on television, at work, in classrooms, and in conversation. The Toulmin Model is not meant to judge the success or failure of an attempt to prove an argument; instead it helps break an argument down to its most basic pieces. The Toulmin Model helps to show how tightly constructed arguments are, and how each part of an argument relates to the overall validity or reasonableness of that argument.

**Reference**