

PHILO 200.95 Reason and Argument:

Professor James Freeman – Spring 2016

This course presents a method of argument analysis, evaluation, and construction based on recent work in argumentation theory. When does an argument present a reasoned case for its conclusion? Answering that question is our goal. We first get a theoretical view of the nature of argument as dialectical—as involving an exchange between a proponent who advances some claim and a challenger who requests sufficient reason for that claim. By making a claim, the proponent incurs a burden of proof to be discharged by first building a prima facie adequate case. This involves giving reasons for the claim and then answering questions about whether those reasons rationally justify the conclusion. Specifically, the challenger may ask why she may be rationally justified in accepting those reasons, why they are relevant to the conclusion, and whether in combination they present a prima facie adequate case justifying accepting the conclusion.

Although a case may be prima facie adequate, it may still be open to further objections from the challenger based on considerations counting against the conclusion or against the reliability of the steps from premises to conclusion. These considerations prompt further questions the challenger may ask. The proponent's response to these questions constitutes a further dimension in argument. We reach our goal of understanding what is a reasoned case for a conclusion by developing what giving a reasoned answer to these questions involves. Besides readings in argumentation theory, we shall examine, analyze, and evaluate certain paradigm arguments—which need not always be rationally good arguments—and develop skills in constructing arguments through presenting reasoned critiques of these arguments and reasoned arguments which should avoid shortfalls in the arguments we examine.