CHAPTER 9 – DIAGRAMMING DEBATES

What You'll Learn in this Chapter

So far, we've learned how to analyze and evaluate arguments as they stand alone. Frequently, however, arguments are interrelated, with one individual offering an argument in support of a conclusion, another individual advancing an argument against that conclusion, the first individual responding to the second individual's argument, and so on. Frequently, in other words, we're faced with a *debate*, or a set of interrelated, opposing arguments for and against a given position. In this chapter, we'll learn how to diagram debates by employing a technique developed by David Kelley in *The Art of Reasoning*.[1] This will allow us to better understand how competing positions in a debate are related to each other.

Diagramming Debates

Example 1

Let's start our study of debates by eavesdropping on a conversation between Ann and Barbara, two philosophy majors.

> Ann: "Symbolic Logic is a useful course."
> Barbara: "Ethics is a useful course."

Can you see how we don't have an actual disagreement here? Symbolic Logic and Ethics can both be useful courses and so we aren't confronted with a real debate. In order for a real debate to arise, the competing sides must advance positions that are genuinely incompatible with each other. Let's represent this fact in the following table:

Ann		Barbara
"Symbolic Logic is a useful course."	These positions are not incompatible and so we don't have a debate.	"Ethics is a useful course."

The conversation continues as follows:

> Ann: "It's important to study the Ancient Greek philosophy because that's where Western Philosophy began."

Whether or not we end up with a debate, Ann is advancing an argument here. Let's diagram it, letting "AG1" refer to Ann's conclusion about Greek philosophy, "AG2" refer to Ann's premise about Greek philosophy. (We'll continue this convention, just to keep things straight. "A" will indicate that a position is being advanced by Ann and "G" will

[1] David Kelly, pages 172-183. (Kelly, *The Art of Reasoning* – Third Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, New York – London, 1998)

indicate that the position is about ancient Greek philosophy. When we represent Brenda's argument about Greek philosophy, we'll represent "Brenda" with "B.")

Ann		Barbara
"It's important to study the Ancient Greek philosophy because that's where Western Philosophy began." AG1. It's important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. AG2. That's where Western Philosophy began.	AG2 ↓ AG1	

At this point, Barbara sets forth the following argument of her own:

> Barbara: "It isn't important to study Ancient Greek philosophy because it's irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates."

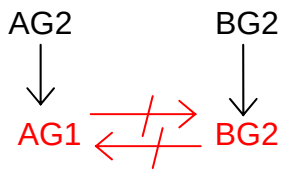
And *now* we have a debate because Ann and Barbara are defending genuinely incompatible positions. In fact, Barbara's conclusion is simply the *opposite* of Ann's.

We could, if we wished, diagram Barbara's argument separately, but this wouldn't allow us to represent the way in which Barbara's reasoning relates to Ann's. In order to diagram this inter-relationship, we simply need one piece of new notation. If position P1 is a reason to *reject* position P2, we'll draw an arrow with a strike through it going from P1 to P2, like this:

P1
↓ = P2 is a reason to *reject* P2.
P2

Let's call this an "outference arrow" instead of an "inference arrow."

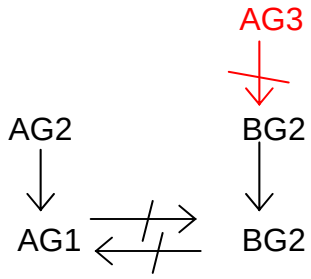
Because Ann's conclusion is a reason to reject Barbara's, we can draw an outference arrow from AG1 to BG1, and because Barbara's conclusion is a reason to reject Ann's, we can draw and outference arrow from BG1 to AG1. The debate would then be represented as follows:

Ann	Representing Rejections with Outference Arrows	Barbara
"It's important to study the Ancient Greek philosophy because that's where Western Philosophy began." AG1. It's important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. AG2. That's where Western Philosophy began.		"It isn't important to study Ancient Greek philosophy because it's irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates." BG1. It's not important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. BG2. Ancient Greek philosophy is irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates.

Not surprisingly, of course, Ann wants to respond to Barbara's argument. Here's what Ann says:

> Ann: "I don't agree with your reasoning. How can you say that Ancient Greek philosophy is irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates? If you don't understand the history of a philosophical debate then you can't really understand the debate."

Can you see what's going on here? Ann is criticizing Barbara's premise. We can represent this in our diagram by drawing an outference arrow from Ann's claim to Barbara's premise.

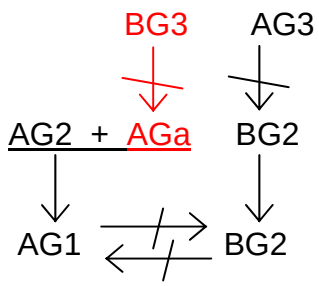
Ann	Challenging a Premise	Barbara
AG1. It's important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. AG2. That's where Western Philosophy began. AG3. If you don't understand the history of a philosophical debate then you can't really understand the debate.		BG1. It's not important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. BG2. Ancient Greek philosophy is irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates.

Barbara now respond's to Ann's original argument as follows:

> Barbara: "And I don't agree with *your* reasoning. Just because Western Philosophy began in ancient Greece, it doesn't follow that it's important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. In general, the fact that a discipline began with a certain body of knowledge doesn't make that body of knowledge important or relevant today. Chemists don't think it's important to study alchemy."

Do you see how Barbara is criticizing Ann's argument? She isn't disagreeing with a premise, but is rather challenging Ann's inference. Ann thinks that the importance of Ancient Greek philosophy stems from the fact that Western Philosophy began in ancient Greece. Barbara agrees that Western Philosophy began in ancient Greece but denies that this bestows any particular importance on Ancient Greek philosophy.

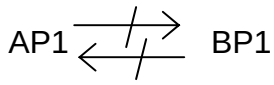
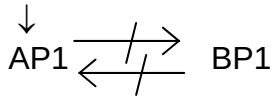
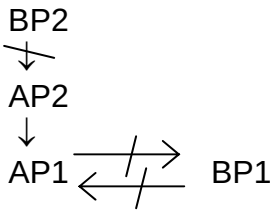
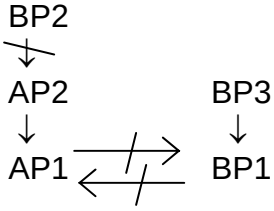
In order to represent the criticism of an inference, we supply the missing premise that's needed to perfect the challenged inference and we represent the criticism as challenging that missing premise. In this case, Ann is assuming that it's important to study the origins of a discipline, and Barbara is disagreeing with that.

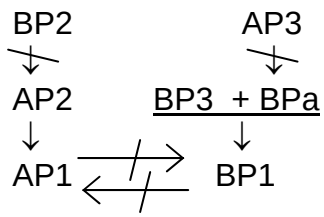
Ann	Challenging an Inference	Barbara
AG1. It's important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. AG2. That's where Western Philosophy began. AG3. If you don't understand the history of a philosophical debate then you can't really understand the debate. AGa. it's important to study the origins of a discipline		BG1. It's not important to study Ancient Greek philosophy. BG2. Ancient Greek philosophy is irrelevant to contemporary philosophical debates. BG3: The fact that a discipline began with a certain body of knowledge doesn't make that body of knowledge important or relevant today.

Now that we know how to represent the fact that conclusions are incompatible, how to show that a premise is being criticized, and how to indicate that an inference is being challenged, we have all the skills necessary to represent debates.

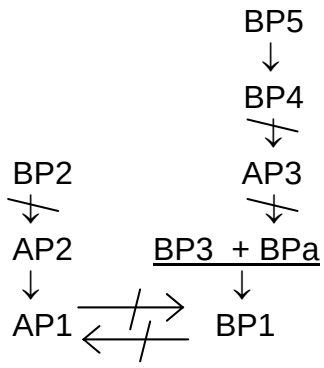
Example 2

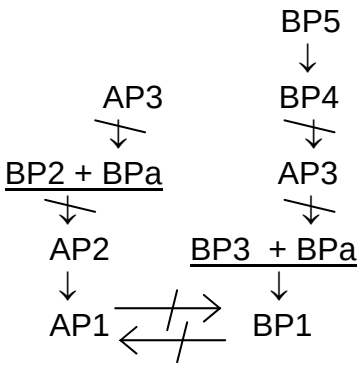
Let's see one more debate in action. This time, Ann and Barbara are disagreeing about who's the best professor in the philosophy department. Take a look at how their conversation evolves.

Ann		Barbara
"Dr. Jones is the best philosophy professor in the department." AP1. Jones is best professor.		"Dr. Smith is the best philosophy professor in the department." BP1. Smith is best professor.
"No, Jones is obviously the best. After all, students who take her courses learn how to write well." AP2. Students who take Jones' courses learn how to write well.		
		"Do they really learn how to write well? I've found that students who take Jones' courses don't get higher grades on papers in subsequent courses than any other students." BP2. Students who take Jones' courses don't get higher grades on papers in subsequent courses than any other students.
		"And besides, Smith has his students read recently published philosophy articles." BP3. Smith has students read recently published philosophy articles.

"I don't think that matters. It's more important for students to read the classic works of philosophy than it is for them to read contemporary articles." AP3. It's more important for students to read the classic works of philosophy than it is for them to read contemporary articles.		BPa. The best professors will have their students read recently published articles.

Can you see how Ann and Barbara are advancing incompatible conclusions, how Barbara has challenged Ann's premise, and how Ann has challenged Barbara's inference? So far, Ann and Barbara's debate about professors has been developed to the same extent as Ann and Barbara's earlier debate about Greek Philosophy. But of course debates can continue. Let's see how this conversation evolves.

		"No, I disagree. Contemporary philosophical work is more important than classic philosophical works because contemporary work deals with contemporary issues." BP4. Contemporary philosophical work is more important than classic philosophical works. BP5. Contemporary work deals with contemporary issues.

"Well, be that as it may, I still think that students who take Jones' courses learn how to write well. It doesn't matter that students who take Jones' courses don't get higher grades on papers in later courses than other students because most of the professors here are easy graders anyway." AP3. Most of the professors are easy graders.		BPa. Grades on papers accurately reflect writing ability.

Can you see how Brenda advanced an argument to challenge Ann's criticism of Brenda's inference, and how Ann challenged Brenda's challenge of Ann's premise? This sort of pattern, with a challenge that's met with a challenge that's met with a challenge and so on indefinitely, is typical of extended debates.

Summary

This chapter showed us how to diagram debates by using outference arrows to:

- indicate that two positions are incompatible,
- represent the criticism of a premise, and
- capture the criticism of an inference by framing it as a criticism of the assumed premise necessary to perfect the inference.