

### III

## Arguments by Analogy

There is an exception to rule 8 (“Use more than one example”). *Arguments by analogy*, rather than multiplying examples to support a generalization, argue from *one* specific case or example to another example, reasoning that because the two examples are alike in many ways they are also alike in one further specific way.

George Bush once argued that the Vice-President’s role is to support the President’s policies, whether or not he or she agrees with them, because “You don’t tackle your own quarterback.”

Bush is suggesting that being part of an Administration is like being part of a football team. When you join a football team, you agree to abide by the decisions of the quarterback, because the team’s success depends on obedience. Similarly, Bush suggests, joining the Administration is a commitment to abide by the decisions of the President, because the success of the Administration also depends on obedience. Distinguishing premises and conclusion:

When you join a football team, you agree to abide by the decisions of the quarterback (because the team’s success depends on the obedience of its members).

Presidential Administration is *like* a football team (its success too depends on the obedience of its members).

Therefore when you join a Presidential Administration, you agree to abide by the decisions of the President.

Notice the italicized word “like” in the second premise. When an argument stresses the likeness between two cases, it is very probably an argument from analogy. Here is a more complex example.

An interesting switch was pulled in Rome yesterday by Adam Nordwell, an American Chippewa chief. As he descended his plane from California dressed in full tribal regalia, Nordwell announced in the name of the American Indian People that he was taking possession of Italy “by right of discovery” in the same way that Christopher Columbus did in America. “I proclaim this day the day of the discovery of Italy,” said Nordwell. “What right did Columbus have to discover America when it had already been inhabited for thousands of years? The same right I now have to come to Italy and proclaim the discovery of your country.”<sup>7</sup>

Nordwell is suggesting that his discovery of Italy is *like* Columbus’s “discovery” of America in at least one important way: both Nordwell and Columbus claimed a country which had already been inhabited by its own people for centuries. Thus Nordwell insists that he has as much “right” to claim Italy as Columbus had to claim America. But, of course, Nordwell has no right at all to claim Italy. Therefore Columbus had no right at all to claim America.

Nordwell has no right to claim Italy for another people, let alone “by right of discovery” (since Italy has been inhabited by its own people for centuries).

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<sup>7</sup> *Miami News* 9/23/73.

Columbus's claim to America "by right of discovery" is *like* Nordwell's claim to Italy (America too had been inhabited by its own people for centuries).

Therefore Columbus had no right to claim America for another people, let alone "by right of discovery."

How do we evaluate arguments by analogy?

The first premise of an argument by analogy makes a claim about the example used as analogy. Remember rule 3: make sure that this premise is true. Is it true that Nordwell has no right to claim Italy for the Chippewa Indians? (Yes.) Is it true that when you join a football team you agree to abide by the decisions of the quarterback? (More or less: but you might *want* to take your own quarterback if he is running toward the wrong goal!)

The second premise in arguments by analogy claims that the example in the first premise is like the example about which the argument draws a conclusion. Evaluating this premise is harder, and needs a rule of its own.

## (12) Analogy requires a relevantly similar example

Analogies do not require that the example used as an analogy be just like the example in the conclusion. A Presidential Administration is not just like a football team. The Administration is made up of thousands of people for instance, while a football team involves thirty or forty. Analogies require only relevant similarities. The size of the team is irrelevant to Bush's point: the point is about what teamwork requires.

One *relevant* difference between a football team and a Presidential Administration is that in a football game everything depends on thinking and acting quickly, whereas normally the decisions of an Administration should be taken with care and deliberation. This difference is relevant because when there is time for deliberation it may be important for the Vice-President to speak up if he or she disagrees with the President. Bush's analogy, then, is only partly successful.

Likewise, twentieth-century Italy is not just like fifteenth-century America. Italy is known to every twentieth-century schoolchild, for instance, whereas in the fifteenth century America was unknown to much of the world. Nordwell is not an explorer, and a commercial jet is not the *Santa Maria*. Nordwell suggests, however that those differences are not relevant to the analogy. Nordwell simply means to remind us that it is senseless to claim a country that is already inhabited by its own people. Whether that land is known to the world's schoolchildren, or how the "discoverer" arrived there, is not important. The more appropriate reaction might be to try to establish a diplomatic relations, as we would try to do today if somehow the land and people of Italy had just been discovered. *That's* Nordwell's point, and taken in that way his analogy makes a good argument.

One famous argument uses an analogy to try to establish the existence of a Creator of the world. We can infer the existence of a Creator from the order and beauty of the world, this argument claims, just as we can infer the existence of an architect or carpenter when we see a beautiful and well-built house. Spelled out in premise-and-conclusion form:

Beautiful and well-built houses must have "makers": intelligent designers and builders.

The world is like a beautiful and well-built house.

Therefore, the world must also have a “maker”: an intelligent Designer and Builder, God.

Again, more examples are not needed here; it is the similarity of the world to *one* example, a house, which the argument wishes to stress.

Whether the world really *is* relevantly similar to a house, though, is not so clear. We know quite a bit about the causes of houses. But houses are *parts* of nature. We know very little, actually, about the structure of nature as a *whole*, or about what sort of causes it might be expected to have. David Hume discusses this argument in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and asks:

Is *part* of nature a rule for the whole? ...Think [of how] wide a step you have taken when you compared houses... to the universe, and from their similarity in some circumstances inferred a similarity in their causes... Does not the great disproportion bar all comparison and inference?<sup>8</sup>

The world is different from a house in at least this: a house is part of a larger whole, the world, while the world itself (the universe) is the largest of wholes. Thus Hume suggests that the universe is *not* relevantly similar to a house. Houses indeed imply “Makers” beyond themselves, but –as far as we know- the universe as a whole may contain its causes within itself. This analogy, then, makes a poor argument.

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<sup>8</sup> *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), Part II.