Optional Stops, Foregone Conclusions, and the Value of Argument*

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If the point of argument is to produce conviction, an argument for a foregone conclusion is pointless. I maintain, however, that an argument makes a variety of cognitive contributions, even when its conclusion is already believed. It exhibits warrant. It affords reasons that we can impart to others. It identifies bases for agreement among parties who otherwise disagree. It underwrites confidence, by showing how vulnerable warrant is under changes in background assumptions. Multiple arguments for the same conclusion show how our beliefs hang together.

Analytic philosophers place enormous stock in arguments. We strive mightily to construct compelling arguments for our own positions and to devise objections showing that our opponents' arguments are flawed. This is rather strange. Apart from Bertrand Russell and Hilary Putnam, few philosophers abandon their positions on the strength of the arguments offered against them. The rest of us tend to respond to counterarguments by attempting to defeat or deflect them, or by shoring up our positions to defend against them.

In point of fact, no argument is compelling. If an argument, even an apparently impeccable argument, has objectionable consequences, we are always within our rights to conclude that it has undetected flaws. If, on the other hand, an argument satisfies our epistemic standards and leads to a conclusion we like, we can and typically do endorse the argument and accept the conclusion. We do not consider ourselves remiss for failing to search for undetected flaws that would call it into doubt. This is what Robert Nozick calls the Optional Stop Rule.[1] We get to decide when to stop looking for defects in our arguments.

[1] Robert Nozick, 'Introduction,' *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1–24.

On the face of it, this stance appears problematic. If Optional Stops are the norm and rejecting unpalatable conclusions is permissible, it is not clear what the force or even the point of argument is. As Nozick describes it, the Optional Stop Rule makes the pretensions of argument seem intellectually dishonest. It is rather like a rule mandating that a game will end after nine innings unless the home team is losing, in which case it will continue until the home team has the higher score. Such a game would not be fair. Shouldn't we be required to be fair to opposing arguments, just as we are required to be fair to opposing teams? Such is the gist of Nozick's worry.

Nozick casts the problem in terms of likes and dislikes. But the issue really turns on the plausibility, not the palatability, of a conclusion. Sometimes, of course, the palatability of a conclusion seems to affect our assessments of its plausibility. As Nozick notes, philosophers do not generally endorse conclusions they dislike.[2] When we find a conclusion sufficiently distasteful, we convince ourselves that there must be something wrong with the argument for it, even if we cannot say what. Many people reject the conclusion that life is meaningless, although they have no idea how life (or indeed anything lacking semantic content) could have meaning. Still, the problem seems more pervasive than it would be if it concerned only unpalatable conclusions. Although we might strongly regret it if human life turns out to be inherently meaningless, we would have a hard time convincing ourselves that it is a matter for significant regret if functionalism turns out to be false. Nonetheless, functionalists too exercise their prerogatives under the Optional Stop Rule.

We might, of course be unduly fond of a position simply because it is ours. So even if there is nothing inherently dislikable about the conclusion that functionalism is false, being a functionalist, Fred may dislike that conclusion. This is surely true, but it does not have any obvious epistemological significance. If we are prone to overestimate the strength of our positions simply because they are ours, then we are guilty of (and victims of) self–deception. Since self–deception is clearly a cognitive failing, epistemology should give its deliverances no weight. But the fact that we hold a position may confer some epistemic status on it. Then our disliking the conclusion of an argument is a reason, even if not an overriding reason, to consider that conclusion false and the argument that yields it defective. The asymmetry exhibited in the Optional Stop Rule thus deserves further investigation. Whether or not palatability underlies plausibility, the epistemological worry is that antecedent assessments of plausibility unduly affect responses to arguments. So I will consider the issue in terms of the plausibility of conclusions rather than their palatability.

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[2] Quine provides a counterexample. He admits sets into his ontology because he considers sets required for mathematics and mathematics required for natural science, but he his not at all happy about it. See his 'Ontological Relativity' in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia, 1969), 26–69. There are also vegetarians who gave up eating meat when they concluded that animals have moral standing, but regret having come to that conclusion since they still like the taste of meat.

To avoid complications, I will focus exclusively on seemingly solid arguments—that is, arguments whose premises and inference patterns are deemed acceptable. A solid argument is one whose premises and inference patterns are rightly deemed acceptable. A reason, as I use the term, is a consideration that bears epistemically on an hypothesis. I say nothing about the criteria for being a solid argument or a reason. These are controversial questions. But what I say about argument is sufficiently general that it should pass muster on any plausible account of these matters.

Nozick's worry is grounded in two assumptions: that the sole function of an argument A is to establish that its conclusion p is true, and that without A the thinker would have insufficient grounds for believing that p. If these are correct, then it seems that (1) believing that p in the absence of A is gullible, (2) refusing to repudiate p when confronted with an undefeated argument A^* for $\sim p$ is dogmatic, and (3) insisting, despite the propensity to engage in (1) and (2), that we believe on the basis of argument is intellectually dishonest. I contend, however, that arguments make a variety of contributions to our cognitive economy and that some of these contributions are not undermined, and indeed may be enhanced, by the Optional Stop Rule. This enriched understanding of the cognitive contributions of argument makes the charges of gullibility, dogmatism, and intellectual dishonesty harder to sustain. Nozick would, I think, welcome this. In discussing the Optional Stop Rule, his point is to suggest that too narrow a conception of the role of argument unduly limits philosophy's self–understanding.

Stereotypically, a good argument is a series of premises so linked as to provide someone who believes them with sufficient reason to believe the conclusion, which is a contention that she did not previously believe. Arguments thus have the capacity to convey information and engender new beliefs. If the thinker believes the conclusion prior to and independent of the argument, the conclusion is a *foregone conclusion*. Since she considers the conclusion maximally plausible already, the argument has no role in convincing her of it. In such cases we are apt to think that believing the conclusion is question begging, and argument is idle. Neither need be so.

No proposition in and of itself is a foregone conclusion. To classify a contention as a foregone conclusion is to relate it to a thinker, for the very same contention may be a foregone conclusion for one person and stand in need of argument for another.

(*m*)   Mondrian painted *Broadway Boogie Woogie*

might be a foregone conclusion for Fred, while Ron requires an argument before he will believe it. Nor in such a case can we immediately conclude that Fred is gullible or otherwise epistemically remiss. For beliefs can be multiply–tethered. A proposition may be a foregone conclusion of argument C because it has already been firmly established by argument B. Suppose two arguments yield *m*. B establishes that Mondrian painted *Broadway Boogie Woogie* on the basis of an impeccable provenance. C establishes it on the basis of a detailed study of the painting's stylistic properties. Having already accepted B, Fred comes to C with a foregone

conclusion. He is hardly to be faulted though, for he is knowledgeable, not gullible.

Nor do the tethers for a belief always coalesce into an argument. Sometimes multiple, relatively independent considerations supply backing for a claim. George grounds his belief that m in a variety of considerations, each of which provides some measure of support for it. He believes that m is the opinion of the experts, that the painting is sort of thing Mondrian was apt to paint, and that his aesthetically refined friends think that m. He realizes that he has long believed that m and dimly recalls having learned it in school. And so on. Although such considerations do not constitute anything like a linear argument for m, they show that it is not unreasonable for George to believe that m. Even though the conclusion of C is a foregone conclusion for George, he is not epistemically irresponsible in believing it.

This suggests that p is a *foregone conclusion* of argument A for thinker S just in case S believes that p independent of and prior to A. In that case, A does not cause and need not sustain S's belief that p. But from the fact that A is not S's reason for believing that p, it plainly does not follow that S believes that p for no reason. So establishing that conclusion p of A is a foregone conclusion for S does not impugn p's epistemic acceptability for S or S's standing as an epistemic agent. That would require establishing that independent of A, S has no (or inadequate) reason to believe that p.

The worry raised by the Optional Stop Rule is not just that people have foregone conclusions, though. It is that we dismiss or reject or otherwise fail to give epistemic due to arguments that tell against our foregone conclusions. Perhaps believing that p in advance of A can be unproblematic. But believing that p in the face of an argument that $\sim p$ looks harder to defend. Again, however, it pays to consider the matter more closely. Suppose that rather than being confronted with argument C which establishes his foregone conclusion that m, Fred is presented with C^*, an argument, based on considerations of style, whose conclusion is that

$(\sim m)$ Mondrian did not paint *Broadway Boogie Woogie.*

Fred's foregone conclusion that m derives from B, a seemingly solid argument based on provenance. Given his acceptance of B, he can not only consistently but responsibly continue to believe that m in the face of C^* if he reasonably believes (or even if he not unreasonably believes) that an impeccable provenance outweighs considerations of style. In that case, his continuing to believe that m is not dogmatic, even if in the absence of a strong provenance, he would credit an argument based on style. George's foregone conclusion is grounded, not in a particular argument, but in a cluster of loosely connected beliefs. C^* might provide an incentive to reassess the bearing or strength of his grounds for m. But at the end of the reassessment, George might conclude that to believe that $\sim m$ would require him to give up too many other things he has ample reason to believe, and no other pressing reason not to believe. In that case the most reasonable option in his epistemic circumstances is to reject C^* and continue to believe that m.

This is not to say that either Fred or George can dismiss C^* or $\sim m$ just because he wants to. The point is rather that each may have in his corpus ample reasons for retaining his foregone conclusion and rejecting an argument against it. Moreover, since those reasons may be due to the grounds for m rather than any discernible weakness in C^*, each may be in the uncomfortable position of rejecting C^* without knowing what is wrong with it.

There might seem to be an obvious way to avoid the discomfort. Given the clash between the undefeated argument that $\sim m$ and their antecedent reasons for believing that m, maybe Fred and George should just suspend judgment. Perhaps they should concede that in their epistemic circumstances they simply cannot tell whether m is so. Suspending judgment in the face of conflicting reasons is surely sometimes called for. But to require it in every case is not. Such a requirement would result in a sparse and spotty doxastic system, for we are often privy to seemingly well-founded considerations that tell against otherwise warranted beliefs.

Testimony is a common source of contravening considerations. Suppose a stranger asserts that $\sim m$. His testimony weighs with Bill who has no prior beliefs about the matter. Bill assumes that the stranger is complying with the Gricean maxim of quality, 'Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence'.[3] He therefore assumes that the stranger has adequate evidence, and takes the stranger's word for it that $\sim m$. George hears the same remark and likewise assumes that the stranger is complying with the Gricean maxim. But, having independent reason to believe that m, he nonetheless thinks that the stranger is wrong. It does not seem that George is required to pinpoint the defect in the stranger's grounds in order to be justified in continuing to believe that m, so long as weight of evidence remains on his side.

If the conclusion that $\sim m$ is backed by an argument, the case for suspending judgment may be stronger. But even here it is not always decisive. If the argument supporting $\sim m$ is tortuous, or the reasons it adduces are subtle and difficult to assess, or the evidence it appeals to relies on delicate discriminations, or its result diverges sharply from the results of other seemingly solid arguments, Fred might reasonably lack confidence in it, even though he cannot identify any particular flaw. If the argument that convinces him that m is far less precarious, it may be reasonable for him to retain his confidence in it and retain his belief that m, despite the availability of C^*, an argument in which he can find no flaws.

Even if the argument for $\sim m$ seems straightforward, Fred may be within his rights to reject it. It is sometimes reasonable to reject an argument, even if we do not see where it goes wrong. One of the best reasons for doing so is that it yields an unacceptable conclusion. An argument that entails a contradiction turns out to be a reductio, whether or not it was proffered as such. An argument that yields a preposterous, albeit self-consistent, conclusion is likewise reasonably rejected. Just where the

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[3] Paul Grice, 'Logic and Conversation,' *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989), 27.

boundary between unanticipated and preposterous conclusions lies is a difficult question, which I will not try to resolve here. My point is only that it is not intellectually irresponsible to construe a seemingly solid argument as flawed for no better reason than that it yields a conclusion such as 'pigs fly'. What better reason could one have?

Since Fred is committed to there being a flaw in C^*, his inability to identify it may constitute a defect in his doxastic system. Perhaps he owes it to himself as an epistemic agent to figure out where the error lies, for his inability to discern the error marks an inadequacy in his understanding. Clearly he would be in a better epistemic position if he could locate the flaw in C^*. But being a responsible epistemic agent does not require being an ideal epistemic agent. So even if ideally he ought to be able to tell what is wrong with C^*, he is not intellectually irresponsible for rejecting C^* without knowing where it goes wrong, given that he has a sufficiently strong argument for m, and given that the utility of believing that m rather than suspending judgment is sufficiently great.[4]

That p is a foregone conclusion of A for S then does not demonstrate that S is intellectually irresponsible in believing that p. But the defense of foregone conclusions leaves the cognitive function of argument unexplained. The charge of idleness remains unrebutted. If it is permissible to exercise the Optional Stop Rule before entertaining an argument, why isn't that argument epistemically idle? If the sole function of argument were to convince a thinker of the truth of a conclusion that he did not previously believe, an argument for a foregone conclusion would be idle. But arguments perform other functions as well.

One such function is to increase confidence. In everyday discourse, we often identify believing with being confident. 'Joe believes that Omaha is in Nebraska' and 'Joe is confident that Omaha is in Nebraska' amount to pretty much the same thing, or at least to points along the same scale. But in epistemology it pays to distinguish the two. Belief is a function of what one takes to be the force of one's reasons. Confidence is a function of what one takes to be the weight of one's reasons. As the paradox of ideal evidence brings out, the force and weight of reasons are distinct. Max initially believes that

(j)   The probability that a flip of a given coin will come up heads is .5.

He then subjects the coin to thousands of flips in carefully controlled conditions and duly records his results. At the end of exhaustive testing, he concludes that the probability of the coin coming up heads is .5, which is what he believed all along. If the point of the tests were to produce a belief in him, they would be idle. They are not. For although they neither cause nor sustain his belief that j, they strengthen his confidence in it. They increase the weight of reasons supporting his claim.[5] At the outset, Max believed that j and had adequate reasons for his belief. He believed that the probability of a toss of a fair coin coming up heads is .5, that the

[4] Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton, 1993), 85–86.

[5] Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 250–254.

vast majority of coins are fair, that there was no particular reason to think that this coin is an exception, and so forth. The tests afford evidence that the reasons that he thought were adequate are in fact adequate. They thus augment his confidence in his belief.

Confidence is multifaceted, involving security, stability, and robustness. All are matters of degree. A belief is secure to the extent that its grounds are epistemically unlikely to shift. Fred's belief that the Pythagorean theorem is true is secure, since he correctly believes that mathematicians are unlikely to revise their views about Euclidean geometry in ways that would undermine the theorem's proof. George's belief that the briefly seen bird was a tree pipit is far less secure, since it is based on the testimony of a single witness whose trustworthiness on ornithological matters has yet to be established. Stability is a different matter. Grounds can shift. A belief is stable to the extent that it can survive repudiation of considerations that ground it.[6] It is precarious to the extent that repudiation of grounds undermines it. Being backed by a multitude of reasons, Fred's belief that Franklin D. Roosevelt was a great president is relatively stable. The discovery that some of his reasons are unfounded would leave the belief with ample support. George has only one reason for thinking that James K. Polk was a great president. His belief is precarious, since without that reason the belief would have no support. A third dimension is robustness. A belief is robust to the extent that it can survive revisions in its grounds. Often changes in belief are not matters of outright adoption or repudiation. Rather they involve relatively small revisions. If even small revisions in reasons would undermine its support, a belief is fragile. If only significant revisions would do so, it is robust. Joe's belief that Felix is a good student is grounded in his belief that Felix never got a grade lower than an A. The news that Felix received an A– or two would not undermine Joe's belief. To do that would require finding out that Felix's grades are generally much lower or much more uneven than Joe thinks they are. Joe's belief is fairly robust. Flo's belief that she has just enough gas to drive to work is fragile, since it is grounded in a single complicated calculation with a minuscule margin of error, backed by the assumption that the gas gauge is precisely calibrated and the measurements registering on her car's odometer are precise. If any one of these grounds is even slightly optimistic, her belief is false.

An insecure, precarious, and fragile belief may be true and justified. If its grounds are in fact accurate and adequate, they justify the belief. But recognizing our fallibility, we are not unreasonable in wanting to know which beliefs to have confidence in. To assess a belief's security, stability and robustness requires identifying and evaluating the reasons that bear on it. By regimenting our reasons into arguments, we can do this.

Each of us harbors a wide and motley collection of beliefs that intertwine in a tangled skein many of whose connections to one another are less than obvious. Some of these beliefs are sharply defined, readily en-

[6] Robert Nozick, 'Socratic Puzzles,' *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1997), 149.

tertained, and well thought out; others are vague, inchoate, and difficult to bring to mind. Some are explicit; others tacit. Some are well founded; others, ill founded; yet others, utterly unfounded. Moreover, a thinker often has no clear sense of how well founded a given belief is. Even if she is aware of the cluster of cognitive commitments that bear on her belief, she may be unclear about the strength of support those commitments provide. In that case, she does not know how much confidence to place in it.

One worry is unfounded beliefs. We saw that p's being a foregone conclusion of A for S does not show that S is intellectually irresponsible in believing that p, since S could have independent grounds for her belief. But there is no assurance that she does. Pretty much everyone believes some things for inadequate reasons. Moreover, given the complicated tangle of beliefs, a thinker does not always realize that her reasons are inadequate. By articulating those reasons and the relations among them, she can find out whether they are. She can assess how much confidence she should place in her belief and whether, given her epistemic resources, she ought to believe it.

The contention that arguments with foregone conclusions are idle ignores the distinction between what is believed and what is creditable. Belief is a matter of brute psychological fact. Creditability is a normative matter. A proposition is creditable only if it is epistemically worthy of belief—only if, that is, believing it would not be epistemically irresponsible. Exactly what makes something creditable is a complicated and controversial issue, having to do with the thinker's reasons, grounds, or other sources of epistemic support. I do not intend to enter into the debate about the matter here. What is crucial for our purposes is that the believed and the creditable diverge. We believe some propositions that are not creditable and fail to believe some that are creditable. One function of argument is to cause someone to believe a proposition. Another is to demonstrate that a proposition is creditable. Plainly, an argument could do either without doing the other. If the proposition is a foregone conclusion for a thinker, an argument does not perform the causal function of generating her belief. But it may still perform the normative one. In that case, it discloses that a believed proposition is creditable. The argument thus demonstrates that the thinker is epistemically entitled to that belief.

Suppose Pat believes that

(*k*)   Vast disparities in wealth undermine democracy.

Since k is a foregone conclusion for her, she needs no argument to convince her of it. But she is neither an economist nor a political theorist. Her grounds for this belief may be shaky. Her views about campaign finance, influence peddling, the role of advertising in elections, and so forth are somewhat naïve. Like everyone, she harbors some beliefs for inadequate reasons. The question is whether her belief that k is one of them. A solid argument for k would show that it is not.[7] It would demonstrate

⁷ Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 2–3.

that she is epistemically entitled to this belief. Where p is a foregone conclusion for S, A does not account for S's believing that p, but if it is a solid argument, it demonstrates p's creditability for S.

With beliefs like Pat's, which are loosely tethered, the issue is whether the thinker has sufficient reason for them. A different problem arises for beliefs that are tightly and intricately woven into a thinker's doxastic system. Here the issue is an overabundance of reasons. Suppose Jen's belief that

(*w*)   Collective bargaining is good for the economy

is such a tightly woven belief. She has a variety of reasons for it. Some are articulate, others tacit. Some bear directly on w, others more indirectly. Some are intimately related to w, others are more distant. Not all of them are wrongheaded. But as they stand, they are not a particularly estimable lot. Some are vague; some are but weakly justified; some, such as her views about the evils of unadulterated capitalism or the moral superiority of the proletariat, may just be false. Moreover, even the ones that are not flawed are so scattered that their bearing on each other and on w is obscure. They do not constitute anything like an argument for w. But there are enough of them, and w fits well enough with the rest of her relevant beliefs, that w is for her a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, despite the fact that she harbors no doubts about it, she would be better off with an argument for w.

One reason is to marshal and regiment her reasons. When dealing with a multiply–tethered belief, it is useful to spell out just what the reasons are and how they relate to one another. Initially, although Jen has lots of reasons to believe that w, she has no clear sense what her reasons are, or how they support her belief. If all she cared about was whether w is true, this might be unobjectionable. But cognitive life is not a true/false test. The epistemic value and practical utility of believing that w would be enhanced if she understood what makes w true, how its truth bears on other matters both within and beyond her ken, and so on. By identifying and regimenting her reasons, Jen begins to map out a neighborhood in her web of belief. This enables her to begin to get a purchase on such matters. There is no question of exhaustively mapping the neighborhood; it is far too densely populated. But to the extent that she can understand the place of the belief that w in her doxastic system, she gains insight into its sources, strength, consequences, and normative status. Indeed, the unfeasibility of exhaustively mapping the area underscores the value of having an argument. If Jen has a solid argument for w, she need not worry about what other reasons she might (or might not) be able to dredge up.

Merely mapping the doxastic neighborhood takes her only so far. We may imagine the plot as a multidimensional spider web with lines connecting w to other nodes in the web that bear on it. It discloses Jen's reasons, their connections to her belief, and their connections to each other. By imagining the web extending outward, we gain a sense of how

more distant components of her comprehensive belief system bear on her belief that w. But no matter how extensive or detailed the web, it still does not put us or her in a position to assess her reasons. It locates her belief that w in a network of other things she believes. But in itself it reveals nothing about w's creditability. If enough of the connected nodes are unfounded, her belief that w is too.

Moreover, if the entire unregimented collection of even vaguely relevant considerations constitutes Jen's support for w, any defect in any member of that collection weakens her support. Probably some members of the collection are epistemically unfounded. Perhaps the collection includes dubious political commitments or naïve views about economics that would not withstand scrutiny. If her belief that w requires their support, it is unfounded. But the fact that Jen believes them, and that if they were true and warranted they would support w, does not show that Jen's belief that w requires their support. She may have plenty of good reasons without them. If she has a solid argument that is independent of the precarious convictions, her belief is stable. The critical question is whether her belief that w depends for its creditability on unfounded commitments. So long as her reasons remain unregimented, she does not know how stable it is or what its sources of stability are. She has no basis for confidence in it. But if regimentation yields a solid argument for w that does not rely on unfounded supports, her belief that w is warranted, even if the argument is surrounded by a motley collection of shaky claims that also bear on her belief. In that case, Jen's belief that w is not hostage to the adequacy of all the considerations she takes to support it. She need not be right about everything that she thinks supports her belief that w to be epistemically entitled to believe that w.

Regimenting her reasons puts her in a better position to assess w. She is apt to find that some of the connections among her beliefs are tenuous, and some of her reasons weak or precarious. Such a discovery may undermine her belief, or her confidence in it. It may convince her that she needs more evidence or better reasons. If her belief that w depends mainly on shaky reasons, it is problematic. But she may find that although she harbors such precarious beliefs, she does not strictly need them, for she has the resources to generate solid arguments for w that do not appeal to them. Even if her believing that w is caused by vaguely leftish biases that do not stand up to scrutiny, w's creditability may be underwritten by a solid economic analysis. Her belief then is stable enough to withstand the loss of the precarious supports and/or robust enough to survive their revision.

Jen has a wide collection of beliefs that bear on w. An argument selects some of them and shows that they alone suffice. It thus reveals that the epistemic status of the others is irrelevant. By demonstrating that a, b, c, and d are sufficient for w, it shows that when all she is concerned about is whether w, she can afford to ignore the rest of her reasons. An argument is thus a device for compartmentalization, a stay against the negative effects of holism. Doxastic holism is, roughly, the view that the

justification for a belief derives from its place in the entire belief system. There is something right about this, but it seems to have the unwelcome consequence that an error anywhere in the belief system undermines the justification for every belief. This is implausible. Jen's false and unfounded beliefs about Renaissance poetry probably do not tell against her belief that w. Even her false and unfounded beliefs about collective bargaining are epistemically inert, if she has a solid argument that does not depend on them. The effect of the argument is to identify a subset of her beliefs that suffices for w, and demonstrate that the beliefs in that subset suffice.

Arguments are not just clusters of considerations that support conclusions, they are clusters of considerations that *can be adduced* to support conclusions. Reasons, as Scanlon argues, are public.[8] So arguments can be offered to answer challenges or to attempt to convince others. For both of these endeavors, a sequence of untendentious considerations that manifestly support a conclusion is desirable. Jen's entire doxastic system is too vast and unwieldy to convey to Ben why he should believe that w. What is wanted is a small set of considerations that plainly afford adequate support for the conclusion, and do so on terms that Ben cannot reasonably reject. Even if Jen's belief nestles neatly in a network of liberal political commitments, she may have the resources for a solid economic argument that a conservative like Ben can endorse. Such an argument would show Ben that although he does not agree with many of her surrounding opinions, he does agree with a cluster of considerations that establish that w. Because an argument consists of a relatively small set of commitments that support a conclusion, it provides a relatively small set of considerations that, if shared, afford a basis of agreement among people with otherwise diverse points of view. It is, in Rawls's terms, a mechanism for generating overlapping consensus among parties whose views about other matters diverge. To the extent that achieving consensus is a value, opposing parties have an incentive to analyze and perhaps recast premises to ferret out a basis for agreement. This process advances argument since it sharpens core commitments and differentiates them from peripheral issues.[9]

Jen's disparate collection of reasons may contain the resources for several arguments for w. Were the sole function of argument to demonstrate that a conclusion is justified, such a surfeit of arguments would be redundant. But an argument shows not just that the conclusion is justified, but also what justifies it. It therefore locates the conclusion in a space of reasons. It shows how the conclusion relates to other things the thinker believes. It also affords insight into the way (a portion of) the world is. Multiple arguments for the same conclusion reveal more of the texture of the doxastic system and the domain. They foreground and rely

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on different aspects of the conclusion. Suppose Jen's belief that w can be justified by both a political argument and an economic argument. By generating both, she sees how w marks an intersection between the political and economic realms, both in her thinking and (if the arguments are solid) in reality. The availability of the two arguments also provides her with resources for appealing to different audiences. The economic argument resonates with those who share her economic views; the political argument resonates with those who share her political views.

Arguments enrich our understanding of their premises as well as of their conclusions. We learn something significant about the premises when we discover that they yield a particular result, especially if either the conclusion or its following from a given set of premises is surprising. Even if a political argument establishes that w, our understanding of w is enhanced when we discover that an economic argument justifies it too. The discovery that we need not rely on the political argument is worth making.

We have seen that foregone conclusions need not be question begging and that arguments supporting foregone conclusions need not be superfluous. It might seem then that the Optional Stop Rule has been vindicated. But the rule is Janus–faced. And the vindication of the right to reject a conclusion threatens to undermine the right to endorse one. The worry is this: If it is always open to us to conclude that an argument has an undetected flaw, what justifies us in refraining from exercising that option? What justifies us in assuming that an argument has no undetected flaw? If it is all a matter of taste—a matter of endorsing conclusions and arguments that we like, and repudiating conclusions and arguments that we dislike—any hope of epistemic objectivity seems doomed. What is needed then is a feature that distinguishes between the arguments we endorse and those we repudiate.

A skeptic would urge that however solid an argument seems, it still could have an undetected flaw. This is surely so. But it is utterly general and affords no specific reason to suspect that any particular argument is defective. If we set skeptical worries aside,[10] we can ask whether there is any specific difference between the seemingly solid arguments we repudiate and those we endorse. The answer is obvious: The arguments we repudiate are arguments whose conclusions we consider implausible; the ones we endorse are arguments whose conclusions we consider plausible (or at least not implausible). We do not assess arguments in isolation, but test them against background beliefs.

Earlier I said that in the absence of argument, we do not understand a conclusion or its place in our doxastic system as well as we should. This suggests that a seemingly solid argument for a plausible conclusion is a reasonable stopping point, precisely because it affords such an understanding. The conclusion of such an argument makes sense to us, being

[10] For an argument that we can and must set skeptical worries aside see my 'Skepticism Aside', *Knowledge and Skepticism: Topics in Contemporary Philosophy 5* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, forthcoming).

in reflective equilibrium with our other relevant beliefs.[11] We justifiably exercise our option to stop looking when we have found what we seek. This of course makes the stopping point a moving target. We may raise our standards, revise our interests, or focus our attention on different aspects of the domain, thereby requiring arguments with different premises or satisfying different standards. Questions that have been considered settled can always be reopened.

Such an account not only explains why we exercise the Optional Stop Rule where we do, but also why we think others should endorse the arguments and conclusions that are our stopping points. The arguments we stop with are not just accepted, but acceptable. They satisfy our current epistemic standards and their results are not implausible in light of our other beliefs. Such acceptability is publicly transmissible. The arguer adduces reasons that she considers adequate, and thinks that her interlocutor, who does not share all her views, should consider adequate. She takes her argument to consist of reasons her interlocutor can not reasonably reject.[12] So even though the argument relies on background assumptions for plausibility, such publicity insures that these assumptions are not idiosyncratic or unduly tendentious. We exercise our option to stop looking for flaws in an argument when we have no specific grounds for epistemic concern about the argument or its conclusion and are convinced that our interlocutors (real or virtual) can have no legitimate grounds either.

This does not of course show that the arguments we and our interlocutors endorse are flawless. As the skeptic repeatedly reminds us, we are never in a position to show that. But by reasoning carefully and rigorously, we may generate conclusions that stand up to scrutiny, satisfy our epistemic standards, and accommodate the relevant evidence. There is no guarantee that they are correct, but they are reasonable in the epistemic circumstances, and subject to reassessment should those circumstances change. This is the best that Nozick's Socratic reasoner can hope for, and all that such a reasoner needs.[13]

[11] See my *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton, 1996).

[12] See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*.

[13] Nozick, 'Socratic Puzzles', 145–155.