

sition may be more effective than it would be in its own form.

The way for argument is often prepared by exposition. Some words of the assertion in dispute may need to be defined and their relations to one another made clear. If the subject is novel or complex, the assertion as a whole may need to be explained before the argument is begun. It is useless to try to convince a man of the truth of anything that he does not understand.

Argument prepared for by exposition.

### SECTION I.

#### PROPOSITION AND PROOF.

The body of every composition in which reasoning plays an important part consists of the PROPOSITION in dispute, — the assertion which is to be proved or disproved, — and the PROOF, which includes whatever tends to show either that this proposition is true or that it is false. The aim of argument is to convince the persons addressed that the proof is sufficient to establish, or to overthrow, the proposition.

For exposition a word may serve as subject, since one form of exposition is the definition of a word; but for argument a word cannot so serve. "Honesty," for example, is in no just sense a subject for argument; for, though many propositions about honesty can be framed, the word by itself suggests no one of them rather than another: but "Honesty is the best policy" is a subject; for it makes a definite assertion, an assertion that can be reasoned about.

Nothing can free a writer or a speaker from the obligation of having the proposition distinctly fixed in his own

Proposition and proof defined.

A word not a subject for argument.

mind before he begins his argument; for he cannot safely take the first step toward proving a proposition until he knows exactly what proposition is to be proved. The process of investigation, by which a man arrives at certain conclusions, should be completed before the argumentative process, by which he endeavors to convince others of the correctness of those conclusions, can advantageously be begun.

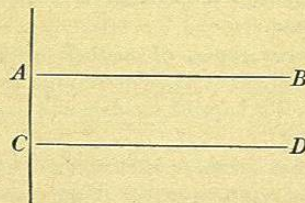
Importance of having a distinct proposition in mind.

Proof may be either direct or indirect. Direct proof goes straight to the desired conclusion. Indirect proof demonstrates the truth of a proposition by showing that the opposite conclusion is absurd; it is, therefore, called *reductio ad absurdum*.

Proof, direct and indirect.

A familiar example of *reductio ad absurdum* may be taken from a treatise on geometry: —

"Two perpendiculars to the same straight line are parallel.



"Let the lines  $AB$  and  $CD$  be perpendicular to  $AC$ .

"To prove  $AB$  and  $CD$  parallel.

"If  $AB$  and  $CD$  are not parallel, they will meet in some point if sufficiently produced.

"We should then have two perpendiculars from the same point to  $AC$ , which is impossible.

"[From a given point without a straight line but one perpendicular can be drawn to the line.]

"Therefore,  $AB$  and  $CD$  cannot meet, and are parallel." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Webster Wells: The Elements of Geometry, book i.



An argument which can be answered by *reductio ad absurdum* is said to prove too much,—that is, too much for its force as an argument; since, if the conclusion is true, a general proposition which lies behind it and includes it is also true. To show this general proposition in its absurdity is to overthrow the conclusion. The argument carries in itself the means of its own destruction. For example:—

(1) Skill in public speaking is liable to great abuse; it should, therefore, not be cultivated.

(2) Skill in public speaking is liable to great abuse; but so are the best things in the world,—as health, wealth, power, military skill;<sup>1</sup> the best things in the world should, therefore, not be cultivated.

In this example, the indirect argument under (2) overthrows the direct argument under (1) by bringing into view the general proposition omitted from (1) but implied in it,—namely, that nothing which is liable to great abuse should be cultivated. The absurdity of this general proposition is made apparent by the specific instances cited.

The argument that games of football should be given up because players sometimes sustain severe injuries may be disposed of in a similar way; for horseback-riders and boating-men are not exempt from danger.

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often applies *reductio ad absurdum* to the argument of an opponent. Thus, in "The Republic," Thrasymachus lays down the principle that justice is the interest of the stronger. This principle he explains by saying that the power in each State is vested in the rulers, and that, therefore, justice demands that which is for the interest of the rulers. Whereupon Socrates makes him admit that it is just for subjects to obey their rulers, and also that rulers, not being infallible, may unintentionally command that which is to their own injury. "Then justice, according to your argument," concludes Socrates, "is not only the interest of the stronger but the reverse."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle: Rhetoric, book i. chap. i.

<sup>2</sup> See Jowett's Plato, vol. ii. pp. 159-161.

Another example of *reductio ad absurdum* is furnished by the reply to the arguments which attempt to prove by means of an alleged cipher that Bacon wrote the plays attributed to Shakspeare. All the arguments adduced in favor of this proposition may, as its opponents contend, be used to prove that anybody wrote anything.

In a direct argument, a reasoner openly seeks to establish, or to refute, a proposition. In an indirect argument, he often masks his purpose in order the more surely to prove the falsity of his opponent's arguments: he pretends to agree with them; he maintains with mock seriousness—irony—the opposite of that which he himself believes.

Well-known instances of ironical argument are Burke's "Vindication of Natural Society," in which Bolingbroke's arguments against religious institutions are applied to civil society; Defoe's "Shortest Way with Dissenters," in which the author personates a "High-flier" (that is, a Tory with extreme High-church views) in order to prove that the doctrines of such a man would justify the burning of dissenters; Swift's "Argument against the Abolishment of Christianity," and his "Modest Proposal" for relieving Ireland from famine by having the children cooked and eaten; Whately's "Historic Doubts," in which Hume's arguments against Christianity are used to prove that Napoleon Bonaparte never lived.

Before beginning to argue, a reasoner not only should have clearly in mind the proposition in dispute, but should know on which side rests the *burden of proof*. The general rule in this matter is embodied in the legal maxim that "he who affirms must prove." Burden of proof and presumption.

"The burden of proof as to any particular fact lies on that person who wishes the Court to believe in its existence, unless it is



provided by any law that the burden of proving that fact shall lie on any particular person. . . .

"A prosecutes B for theft, and wishes the Court to believe that B admitted the theft to C. A must prove the admission.

"B wishes the Court to believe that, at the time in question, he was elsewhere. He must prove it."<sup>1</sup>

The burden of proof rests upon those who advocate any change in the established order of things,—upon those, for instance, who maintain that the Anglican Church should be disestablished, that the House of Lords or the Senate of the United States should be abolished, that the right of suffrage should be extended to a class of persons who do not now enjoy it, that free-trade should be substituted (in the United States) for protection, cremation for burial, "faith cure" for medical treatment.

A reasoner upon whom the burden of proof does not rest has, usually, the *presumption*<sup>2</sup> in his favor; that is to say, the proposition he maintains is assumed to be true in the absence of proof to the contrary.

He upon whom the burden of proof rests, and against whom the presumption lies, must overcome the presumption against him by throwing enough evidence into the opposite scale to raise a counter-presumption. The amount of evidence required will vary according as the presumption to be rebutted is weak or strong. The presumption in favor of an established institution may be rebutted by evidence tending to show that the institution in question is an obstacle to the successful working of some other established institution the superior value of which is admitted. There is a presumption in

<sup>1</sup> Sir James Fitzjames Stephen: A Digest of the Law of Evidence, chap. xiii. art. xcvi.

<sup>2</sup> From *prae*, before, and *sumere*, to take.

favor of a system of laws under which a country has flourished; but if another country, similarly situated, has been still more prosperous under a different system of laws, there is a counter-presumption that the prosperity of the first country is due to other causes than her laws. A counter-presumption which rebuts the original presumption may in its turn be rebutted by additional evidence; and thus, in the course of a long discussion, each side may several times enjoy the advantage of the presumption.

A reasoner should always avail himself of a presumption in his favor, if one exists, and should never unnecessarily assume the burden of proof. In criminal cases, the question upon whom rests the burden of proof may be a question of life or death.<sup>1</sup>

"A moderate portion of common-sense," says Whately, "will enable any one to perceive, and to show, on which side the presumption lies, when once his attention is called to this question; though, for want of attention, it is often overlooked: and on the determination of this question the whole character of a discussion will often very much depend. A body of troops may be perfectly adequate to the defence of a fortress against any attack that may be made on it; and yet, if, ignorant of the advantage they possess, they sally forth into the open field to encounter the enemy, they may suffer a repulse. At any rate, even if strong enough to act on the offensive, they ought still to keep possession of their fortress. In like manner, if you have the 'presumption' on your side, and can but *refute* all the arguments brought against you, you have, for the present at least, gained a victory: but if you abandon this position, by suffering this 'presumption' to be forgotten, which is in fact *leaving out one of, perhaps, your strongest arguments*, you may appear to be making a feeble attack, instead of a triumphant defence."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See York's Case, 9 Metcalf's (Massachusetts) Rep. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Whately: Elements of Rhetoric, part i. chap. iii. sect. ii.