

\$300 PRIZE

A COMPETITION TO FIND THE WORST ARGUMENT IN THE WORLD

I know of an argument which, although it is almost-unbelievably bad, has not only escaped criticism by philosophers, but has received the endorsement of countless philosophers. I think it is the worst argument in the world. But I may be wrong: I therefore seek to learn of some argument even worse, if there is one.

Entries will be given a mark made up as follows: a mark, out of 50, for degree of badness of the argument; plus a mark, out of 50, for the degree of endorsement which the argument has met with from philosophers; = a total mark out of 100. Thus to win, an argument will need to be either worse, or more influential, than the one I have in mind.

Entries should not exceed half a page in length, and should simply set out the candidate-argument. Entries close 31st December 1985, and should be submitted to me, with your name and address. The prize will not necessarily be awarded. I am the sole judge of the entries, (and the sole donor of the prize-money).

D.C. Stove

D.C. Stove

Traditional & Modern Philosophy
University of Sydney.

Judge's Report on the Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World

Ten candidate-arguments were submitted. All of them had some merit, and some of them were very interesting indeed. But none of them is worse than the argument I had in mind when I started the competition. Consequently none of them wins the prize.

Three dimensions, it will be recalled, entered into overall degree -of-badness as here understood: (a) the intrinsic awfulness of the argument; (b) its degree of acceptance among philosophers; (c) the degree to which it has escaped criticism.

The argument - really a family of arguments - which I had in mind as the worst, was the following :

"We can know things only { as they are related to us
under our forms of perception & understanding
in so far as they fall under our conceptual schemes etc.

So

"We cannot know things as they are in themselves."

If there is a worse argument than this, I am still to learn of it. This argument has imposed on countless philosophers, from Kant to the present hour, yet is very hard to beat for awfulness. (Cf. my forthcoming essay, "Idealism: a Victorian Horror Story".) Certainly none of the arguments submitted for the competition was either clearly more awful, or more widely-accepted, than this one. I probably erred in implying, in the information-sheet, that the above argument has entirely escaped criticism, but it has certainly led a charmed life. Contrast, for example, the very similar argument for psychological hedonism. It met with classic criticism, from Bishop Butler: whereas there is no classic criticism of the above argument.

The 'warmest' entry was that of Michael Devitt, viz. the argument:

"People speaking different natural/scientific languages have different theories of the world, (or perceive the world differently),

So

People speaking different natural/scientific languages live in different worlds".

I concede that this argument too has been virtually exempt from criticism, i.e. that the two arguments are about equal on dimension (c). It may even slightly exceed my favourite on dimension (a), awfulness. But it falls much below my favourite on dimension (b), inasmuch as 'linguistic idealists' (as we might call them), although indeed numerous enough, form only a small proper sub-set of idealists. Still, it is interesting, and gratifying, that Devitt's candidate and mine are such close cousins.

I thank everyone who took part. I certainly learnt some things through putting the competition on, and I have the impression that some other people did too.

D.C. Stove
Traditional and Modern Philosophy,
University of Sydney
1st January 1986

Jim, your first entry was almost certainly early the mildest of all - & certainly too milde for me. But it made us laugh.

D.