Model Answer:
An Evaluation of Language in a Complex Argument

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In teaching reasoning, I always spend a significant amount of time on issues of language. My aim is to introduce students to the proper and improper, and effective and ineffective, uses of language in reasoning. Most recently, I focussed on (arranged here in alphabetical order) ambiguity, definitional problems, equivocation, euphemism, problematic evaluative language, and vagueness. Most of this set of material appears in some form in the course text, *Reasoning: A Practical Guide for Canadian Students* by Robert C. Pinto, J. Anthony Blair, and Katharine E. Parr. (This is the Canadian edition; the U.S. version is *Reasoning: A Practical Guide* by Pinto and Blair.) Some of this material also appears in *A Practical Study of Argument, 5th ed.* by Trudy Govier, while other lecture portions are my own invention.

The following comprises one task from an actual assignment and its corresponding model answer. The course involved three written assignments; this represents the second one. Assignment 1 required students to identify and categorize propositions, assess the credibility of sources who make claims, and offer a critique of a mass media account of an event. In particular, I see the ability to identify and categorize propositions as foundational, so Assignment 2 on language presupposed Assignment 1. Assignment 3 required students to analyze the logical structure of and evaluate several pieces of reasoning. In the case of all three assignments, I drew the stimulus items from popular sources (in several cases via the course text). In my experience, some students experience difficulty with structure and evaluation because they are attuned insufficiently to language. Thus, I think that students should be exposed to issues of language (Assignment 2) prior to an assignment on structure and evaluation (Assignment 3).

Students should be able to identify and explain critically the aforementioned technical problems or concerns with language, as well as demonstrate a general sensitivity to the realities of the language of reasoning (for example, they should be able to distinguish incidental sarcasm from a substantive point of reasoning that may merely look like an aside). While the following selection is an actual model answer, I do not expect from first-year students the same degree of sophistication.

Stimulus Passage

Concerning same-sex marriages, why is it OK if the church speaks out against murder, theft, rape, racism, drugs, etc., but if it speaks out against

sexual immorality, the church is intolerant? Those who cry for others to be tolerant are intolerant of those who don't hold the same view on same-sex marriages.

Tolerance means putting up with error, not "accepting all views." If disagreement didn't exist, tolerance wouldn't be necessary. It is because there are real differences between people that tolerance is necessary and virtuous.

The belief that both views cannot be right is an impetus to engage in dialogue where both sides can re-examine their presuppositions and clarify their positions. True tolerance grants people the right to dissent. It implies respect, not agreement. But some absolutists don't recognize their own absolution.

Having said that, the Bible gives a negative assessment of homosexuality. It is very hard to show otherwise. Most revisionists realize this, and so they revise passages of the Bible to fit their preconceived ideas of how they think it ought to read. This flies in the face of what the church has traditionally taught for hundreds of years.

Lastly, there is the slippery slope argument that redefining the family will not stop with same-sex couples.

Just as the gay rights movement is a platform for transsexuals and bisexuals, these same groups can be expected to jump on the marriage bandwagon. Logically, bisexual trios, a man and a transsexual, and adult and a child, and a "master" and his "sex slave" could clamour for family status.

It might not be what gays have in mind when they fight for same-sex marriages, but it could possibly be the inevitable result of tampering with the God-given model.

Response Focussing on Language

In the first half of the passage the writer relies heavily on a stipulative definition of tolerance. He begins his argument by noting that some criticize "the church" for its stand against "sexual immorality," and suggests that such critics are hypocritical because they do not criticize the church on other matters. In this case the alleged sexual immorality comprises homosexuality and (proposed) same-sex marriages, which the writer lists, with questionable connotation, along with actual crimes. The writer believes implicitly that the church has an obligation to speak out on all matters.

In the second paragraph the writer defines tolerance as "putting up with error." This is a stipulative definition. His particular formulation stands in conscious contrast to the putative view of the critics that tolerance means "accepting all views," including views which are favourable to homosexuality and same-sex marriages. The writer explains that tolerance as "putting up with error" is "necessary and

virtuous" precisely because (i) people do not always agree, (ii) people sometimes have erroneous beliefs, and (iii) we have an obligation to allow erroneous beliefs—within certain limits, presumably. (i) is obviously true, and almost everyone would agree that (ii) is true. While the writer and the critics may both agree with (iii) as stated generally, there is a crucial focus here on the part of the writer to which we must attend, namely, the view that certain beliefs or practices are truly wrong.

In the third paragraph the writer refers to situations in which "both views cannot be right." By this he means that a proposition about some matter—say, about the moral status of homosexuality—cannot be both true and not true at the same time in the same respect (the law of non-contradiction). One or the other view must be true. For example, it cannot be true that God approves of homosexuality and that God does not approve of homosexuality. The writer's solution to conceptual logjams is argumentative "dialogue." In the meantime, he says, adding a touch of persuasive definition, that "true tolerance" demands we "respect" others' views even if we do not agree with those views. On the writer's view, the church's critics allow homosexuality and favour same-sex marriages under the banner of "inclusiness" yet refuse inconsistently to accord the same tolerance to all perspectives. The critics might respond that the only thing we should not tolerate is intolerance—except that the writer would point us toward the substantive moral questions at issue here (homosexuality either is or is not wrong) and away from (in his view) a banal definition of tolerance. Finally, the writer's point about "absolutists not recognizing their own absolution" may be some kind of ironic religious joke, although we might wonder whether "absolution" is a typographical error that should read "absolutism."

In the fourth paragraph the writer uses the term "revisionism" to describe those who interpret the Bible disingenuously as permitting homosexuality. We need to be familiar with the Bible ourselves to know whether this term fits.

In the last few paragraphs the writer refers to a "slippery slope bandwagon" regarding who might "clamour" for family status. He fears deviations from the "God-given model" and suggests that allowing same-sex marriages, which he considers wrong intrinsically, may lead even to worse deviations. The term "slip-pery slope" connotes a downward spiral, and so it is a term of negative evaluation. Whether it fits depends on how one appraises the likelihood of such a series of events occurring. It is probably the case that most people who allow homosexual-ity and favour same-sex marriages do not condone or subscribe to the (apparent) inevitability of the writer's "slippery slope" series of developments. His claim is, at the very least, eminently debatable.

Overall, the writer's letter lacks evidence about alleged revisionism as well as a fuller defence of his strong claim about a slippery slope of developments. It is not clear, however, that the writer's stipulative and partially persuasive definition of tolerance is problematic. Many people would agree with it in general terms. The wrinkle is that the writer's definition of tolerance does not as such answer the

question of whether same-sex marriages constitute a worthy change. Instead, it points us to the task of providing a substantive answer to this question—an attempt that the writer himself undertakes in the latter half of his letter.