

Forming a Persuasive Argument

By: Claire Yezer

One formula for proving the inexplicable is an amalgamation of logical reasoning and effective presentation. In most persuasive works, the author's sense of style plays a key role in winning over the readers. Whether they respond to intimidation, generalization, perseverance, or humility, the audience ultimately determines the validity of the claim. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher, accepts the challenge of proving the existence of an afterlife in part to appease his friends' sense of loss on the day of his execution. Although he employs different techniques, Charles Darwin, a scientist, also makes a convincing case, swaying the reader's feelings of hardened skepticism to thoughtfulness in his work, *The Descent of Man*. In order to control their audience's beliefs, each builds up his credentials, gains the audience's trust through his discursive techniques, and creates a persona appropriate for his argument.

Plato's *Phaedo* introduces Socrates on his day of execution by the state. Yet his detachment and complacent demeanor in the face of death astonish Socrates' friends who have come to pay their last respects. When his students question his apparent apathy toward his own life, Socrates scoffs at them, asserting, "...the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (12). Socrates treats his argument that the pursuit of true knowledge ends only in death as an apparent fact, not a theory. Although lacking concrete evidence proving his case beyond a doubt, Socrates' students are willing to trust in the afterlife theory because Socrates repeatedly states that his way of life is a testament to his faith in his beliefs. Confident, Socrates reassures his friends, "Those who are deemed to have lived an extremely pious life are freed and released from the regions of the earth as from a prison" (64). Socrates accepts his fate like a martyr, and his self-assuredness soothes his audience's fears for

his well-being. Phaedo, a witness at Socrates' death, recounts, "the man appeared happy both in manner and words as he died nobly and without fear...it struck me that even in going down to the underworld he was going with the gods' blessing..." (6). Even without Socrates' expostulations on death, his actions resonate with his audience, ascribing credit to his case.

Although he does not face the death penalty for his theory of evolution, Darwin does have a staunch adversary: tradition. In order to combat the Book of Genesis, Darwin reminds his audience that his assertions are the final product of a lifetime dedication. Backing up one of his claims, Darwin elaborates, "Whilst observing the barbarous inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, it struck me..." (247). Darwin must make visible his expertise because it acts as a shield from biased criticism. In addition to his own comments, Darwin constantly incorporates the names and works of other notable scientists into his discourse. By dispersing credit for his discovery, Darwin appears to concern himself with the circulation of the theory, not his name. When introducing his hypothesis of natural selection, Darwin cites, "This subject has been ably discussed by Mr. W.R. Greg...Mr. Wallace and Mr. Galton. Most of my remarks are taken from these three authors" (247). Realizing that there is strength in numbers, Darwin summons an army of intelligentsia to champion his cause.

Besides stating his sources, Darwin also narrates his own actions. He explains exactly what he will prove before he does so in order to gain the trust of the reader. When Darwin introduces his premise on the evolution of morality, he comments, "I was at first surprised that I could not recollect any recorded instances of this feeling in savages..." (245). Instead of utilizing scientific jargon that would alienate the reader, Darwin implements a conversational tone, thus personalizing the discourse. To further forge a bond between author and audience, Darwin flatters his readers. Realizing his propositions that man originates from a primitive beast

could be offensive to one's pride, Darwin reassures the readers of their current superiority. Explaining the effects of a moral evolution on natural selection, Darwin states, "We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination" (247). Darwin does not treat the modern man as a species to be studied, but as fellow scientists pursuing a quest for truth together.

Unlike Darwin, though, Socrates corners his audience into agreeing with his beliefs. Instead of stating his argument, he poses each step in his syllogism as a question to one of his students. He pulls his pupils down a long and twisted path of logic, hiding his destination until the end. In his principle of Opposites, Socrates leads one of his students into agreeing that each opposite comes from its opposite, by asking a series of straightforward questions. Yet the last point that he poses reveals his true purpose, "Then...living creatures and things come to be from the dead?" to which his pupil replies, "So it appears" (20). Ambushing his audience, the previous questions compel them to agree with Socrates' final statement.

In addition to trapping his audience in his deceptively simple syllogisms, Socrates also assumes the role of an intimidator. Throughout the discussion, Socrates does not descend from his pedestal and debase himself to the level of a student. As he puts forward each question, he cannot help but adopt a patronizing tone. Taking seemingly trivial steps toward his ultimate conclusion, Socrates inquires, "Then what do we say about the soul? Is it visible or not visible?" (30). Although his audience consists of intelligent men, Socrates treats them in a way similar to adolescent students. Socrates also utilizes a form of peer pressure to sway his audience. When he makes a leap in reasoning, Socrates patches the gaping hole with phrases such as, "The lovers of learning know..." (33), or "those who practice philosophy in the right way..." (16). Since his

audience consists of his pupils, each has a drive to appear intelligent in his professor's eyes. Therefore each man hesitates before contradicting his mentor.

Unlike Socrates, Darwin prostrates himself in front of his audience. Any other tone besides humble modesty would turn his already wary audience against him. Darwin acknowledges his own inability to discern the truth behind his theories, which he repeatedly reminds the reader. For instance, when he presents a diagram that demonstrates the process of natural selection, Darwin concedes, "Undoubtedly it would be interesting to have traced the development of each separate faculty...but neither my ability nor knowledge permit the attempt" (243). By pointing out the limits of his qualifications, he indirectly assures the reader that he would not make a claim he could not prove. In presenting his modest persona, Darwin admits his lack of skill as an author in presenting his ideas. He opens his hypothesis in *The Descent of Man* by writing, "The subjects to be discussed in this chapter are of the highest interest, but are treated by me in a most imperfect and fragmentary manner" (242). Darwin points out his flaws as a writer in order to reassure his audience that it is not his persuasive writing style that carries his argument, but his facts and research.

The two speakers, Darwin and Socrates, vary in their angle of attack primarily due to their distinctive audiences. Darwin, on the one hand, writes to the general educated world of the mid-1800s. His concept of evolution contradicts one of the dogmas of Christianity, which forces the reader to look past the veils of society that would label the writing as blasphemy. Even though religion is his greatest opposition, Darwin finds a way to manipulate Christianity as support for his argument. When explaining the advantages of morality to ancient tribes, Darwin quotes, "...to do unto others as ye would they should do unto you,--is the foundation-stone of morality" (246). Despite his reference to the Ten Commandments, Darwin still, for the most

part, ignores the teachings of the Bible. Darwin affords little attention to the opinions of religion because he wants to impress upon the reader the difference between science and faith.

Darwin's audience expects him to remain humble and unassuming, while Socrates' audience relies on him to assert himself. In contrast to Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, *Phaedo* is a documentation of a dialogue between Socrates and his audience. Since his spectators are a group of friends and students, they already offer Socrates the benefit of the doubt. He cannot afford to second-guess his hypothesis, because to admit that "There are, however, some checks to this...tendency" like Darwin, would instill a sense of doubt in Socrates' audience and thus destroy their faith in Socrates' peace after death (251). Also, it is imperative that Socrates sway his audience's opinions quickly, since he only has a few hours until execution. Darwin, on the other hand, has the luxury to be less aggressive and merely propose his theory.

Ultimately, Socrates presents himself as a theorist to his friends because a certainty in his own fate is necessary in order to assuage their sadness at his death. Yet he accomplishes this task by reasoning and proposing general statements, thus distinguishing him as a thinker. On the other hand, Darwin claims to be merely a thinker, humbly proposing a new way of looking at the world. Yet the overabundance of supporting examples and his citations of previously accepted scientific hypotheses prove that he is more than a thinker; he is a theorist.