

to prove their claims, rather than merely to assert them.

LIMITATIONS OF FORMAL LOGIC

There was a time when debaters were encouraged to use formal logical structures to support their arguments. The classic example of formal logic is the syllogism. The example Aristotle provides of the syllogism in *The Organon* (350 B.C.) is as follows:

All men are mortal ($A = B$)

Socrates is a man. ($C = A$)

Therefore, Socrates is mortal. ($C = B$)

The syllogism uses the mathematical law of transitivity, creating an illusion that the claim (“Socrates is mortal”) has been proven absolutely. There are, however, weaknesses in the syllogism. Aristotle himself was well aware of these weaknesses. He referred to the first statement in the syllogism as the *major premise* and the second statement as the *minor premise*. A *premise* is an assumption, so the conclusion is true *only if* the two premises are true. The problem is that the “major premise” is such a huge assumption that it makes the conclusion trivial. Suppose I phrase the logic chain this way: “Look, folks, if you will grant me the assumption that *every man* who has ever lived is mortal, then, using my mathematical skill,

I will prove to you that *one man* is mortal!” If you grant me that all men are mortal, isn’t it child’s play to draw the conclusion that one man is mortal? The careful mathematical movement becomes, therefore, little more than a distraction. It certainly doesn’t merit a claim that I have proved something to you absolutely!

Must I always begin from a premise (or an assumption)? Consider the problem of proving that international terrorism is wrong. To prove anything, I must first have “where to stand”—I have to begin somewhere. I might try to anchor my “terrorism is wrong” argument to a beginning statement that “killing is wrong.” Yet careful questioning might uncover problems with my premise. An opposing debater might ask whether it was wrong for our Revolutionary War forefathers to fight for independence in 1776—was killing wrong in that instance? I might have to refine my beginning statement to say that “killing innocent people is wrong.” Some critics, pointing to examples such as the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, might still find fault with my premise. The point of this discussion is that argument must begin from assumption; the challenge comes in finding an assumption that a listener (or debate judge) is willing to *believe* is true.