

David Vancil, Rhetoric + ARGUMENTATION
(Allan + Bacon, 1993),

Stock Issues Model

Stock issues are generalized forms of the vital questions that are inherent in any dispute over a policy question. While these generalized questions conform to all of the elements in our technical definition of *issue*, they are the generic models or archetypal forms for the issues in all policy questions. Like the stasis categories, the stock questions outline the vital substance of the actual issues in any dispute over a proposed course of action. In addition, stock issues suggest patterns or forms for phrasing the specific issues for any policy question, and they alert us to what will be important as we begin research.

If you surveyed some of the current textbooks in argumentation and debate, you would find that stock issues models are organized and phrased in several ways by various authors, suggesting that stock issues are more akin to an analytical concept than to any sort of precise mathematical formula. There is nothing harmful in this variety of models. The variety of "generic questions" merely indicates that analysis of policy questions is, like all arts, a matter of applying principles; it should not be approached as if it were a set of recipes or the rote application of a formula.

As an analytical concept, stock issues will never be truly understood or mastered merely by memorizing a set of generic questions. Experience is the key. Initially, of course, you will need the experience of memorizing the stock issue questions, and you need to study the application of the stock issues that follows. But, to advance beyond mere memorizing, you need to move quickly to the second stage of experience, which involves applying the stock issues to a policy question of your own and evaluating the efforts of others as they use this model.

The stock issues model presented here has two components: (1) four *principal* stock issues and (2) two *subordinate* stock issues. We begin with an exploration of the four principal stock issues, so called because they outline the questions that are vital in any proposed

new course of action. Next, we will examine two subordinate stock issues. They are subordinate because of their dependency on the way argument develops or on the rules for conducting a dispute. The subordinate stock issues seem to be less universal in their occurrence, especially when policy disputes are not contained in an institutionalized setting, like a legislative body. But it is useful to be aware of their existence.

The following version of the principal stock issues reflects the work of a number of argumentation theorists over the centuries, and it includes some modifications that I have found useful.⁵ Study it carefully. Notice that there are alternative ways of phrasing the stock questions within the four categories. These variations in phrasing often help us to adapt the statement of issues to the needs or peculiarities of each policy question.

The Principal Stock Issues

Forms of the Questions

Motive: Are the problems (or harms) of _____ significant enough to warrant action?

Alternative: Are the unmet needs (goals, desires) of _____ important enough to warrant action?

Obstacle: Is the present policy (or system) of _____ incapable of solving the problem (or meeting the needs, desires, goals) of _____?

Alternative: Is the present policy of _____ responsible for (or the cause of) the problem of _____?

Cure: Will the proposed new policy (course of action) of _____ solve the problem of _____?

Alternative: Will the proposed policy significantly reduce the problem of _____?

Alternative: Will the proposed policy produce the advantage of _____?

Cost: Will the benefits of solving the problem of _____ justify the costs of the proposed solution of _____?

Alternative: Will the advantages of _____ outweigh the disadvantages of the proposed change of _____?

Understanding the **Logos** of the Model

"Logos" =
logic,
rationale,
reason

The first thing you need to understand about this or any other stock issues model is its assumption that the issues for *all* policy questions—regardless of their subject—always derive from the same set of persistent topics: motive, obstacle, cure, and cost. This means that there is an underlying logos of the model. The questions on the motive and the other stock issues are inherent in any policy question and they are vital in any decision to adopt or reject a proposed new action.

Motive Issue

To say that a new course of action should be adopted necessarily includes the idea that someone, at least, is dissatisfied with something at present. I refer to the potential range of dissatisfactions as the *motive* for change because this term includes all of the things that can move us to take action. Motive thus includes a problem or harm to be solved, a need or desire to be met, a goal or objective to be reached, or an advantage or benefit to be gained. At least one of these conceptions of motive is an inherent element in any decision to change from present policy, law, action, or whatever.

In a sense, this is simply a way of saying that a new course of action is a means to an end—and "end" is what we mean by "motive." But even if we think a new course of action is desirable in and of itself (i.e., the new action is the end) the idea of motive would still be important. Thus, for example, an action that we might consider an end in itself, such as the pleasure of a trip to Tahiti, is merely a kind of recasting of either the desire or goal dimension of *motive*.

The idea behind the motive issue is that we do not change our laws, policies, way of life, or whatever is being proposed unless there is either something unsatisfactory at present, like an unmet need, or

some advantage to be gained that would be desirable to us. If there is no motive, there is no reason to consider any sort of change. So, the advocates of change must be able to say yes to the motive question; an answer of no, if judged to be correct, would defeat the proposed change.

Does this seem terribly abstract? Yes, of course! But we need only examine any of the relatively simple policy questions to clarify the idea here. Suppose Ralph is considering a central policy question for himself: Should I buy myself this new mountain bike? The stock issues model suggests that we cannot have a complete analysis of this proposed new action (purchase of the bike) unless we begin by considering the motive for doing anything at all.

The potential motive, in this case, would feature Ralph's present dissatisfactions that are relevant to the bicycle. What was it that led him to consider doing *anything*? Suppose, for this case, that Ralph's primary concern is his problem of transportation around campus. Accordingly, the motive issue would be: Are Ralph's transportation problems around campus significant enough to warrant action? Do you see why this question is vital? Even if Ralph is deliberating this question only with himself (meaning he is not asking his parents to buy the bike), the part of him that is advocating the new purchase would *have to* say yes to this motive question. If Ralph decided that his transportation problems are annoying but *not significant enough* to warrant action at the present time, then the potential new bike purchase is defeated.

Obstacle Issue

Even if it is clear that the motive question must be answered yes (Ralph's transportation problems are significant), the next vital question in any policy question is always the *obstacle* issue, in one or another of its guises. In this case, since Ralph already has an old bicycle, the obstacle question would be phrased: Is Ralph's present bicycle incapable of solving his transportation problems on campus? Notice, again, that the part of Ralph advocating the new bike *must* say yes to this question. If the old bike can handle his transportation problem, there is no need to make any change, including the purchase of a new bike.

Ordinarily, Ralph would not have said yes to the motive question unless there was some sort of problem connected to his present bicycle. However, it is possible to say yes to the motive and no to the obstacle. In part, this is because there are two closely related elements in the obstacle issue: (1) the inherent abilities or capabilities of the present system and (2) the causes of the problem. Suppose that Ralph's inability to get to classes or the library has been "caused" by two flat tires on his present bike. In this case, the

causes of the transportation problems (which are serious) are not "inherent" because the present bicycle can solve the problems if its tires are repaired.

Of course, it may very well be that transportation is only part of the reason Ralph wanted the new bike; perhaps he also coveted its 18 speeds, its ultra-light frame, and its "campy" styling. But if these latter items are really an important part of Ralph's present dissatisfaction, they should be included in the analysis of his motive. In order to have a solid analysis of obstacle, we need to consider all facets of the motive.

Cure Issue

If Ralph decides that the old bike cannot solve his transportation problems, even with repairs, yet another vital question comes from the stock issue of *cure*: Will the proposed new bicycle solve Ralph's transportation problems on campus? Ordinarily, I suppose, we would not expect this question to be argued on a topic of this sort. We would think that only a nitwit would pick out a potential new bicycle, go through all of this analysis, and then discover that the bike would not solve his problem.

However, we should never assume that an issue will be uncontroversial or uncontested prior to our investigation. The cure issue is always a potentially vital question in any policy question—even in our simple bike proposal. People do, in fact, sometimes ignore whether the problems they have defined can be solved by their proposed solutions. Suppose Ralph goes to school in an area with icy roads or heavy snowfall throughout most of the school year. Ralph might find that his ability to get to classes has not been improved with the new bicycle—that he really needs an automobile or four-wheel drive vehicle to solve his transportation problems.

Cost Issue

The final stock issue, *cost*, is also a vital basis for decision, at least potentially, in any policy question that calls for a new course of action. The cost issue compares the value of the benefits we might get from solving our problem, plus any side benefits, to the cost (or disadvantages) of the new course of action. In our example, the primary cost element would be the purchase price of the new bicycle, but it is important to realize that the idea of cost includes any disadvantages of the proposed action. Likewise, benefits include any sort of advantage.

Although financial gain is certainly a kind of benefit, the primary advantages in our example have little to do with money. At least, it would be difficult to estimate the dollar value of solving Ralph's transportation problem, and even more difficult to place a dollar

value on the aesthetic pleasure of owning and riding an 18-speed, ultra-light frame, "campy" marvel. Nevertheless, it is crucial to any rational analysis to ask: How much is all of this worth? More precisely, the cost issue for this topic would be: Will the benefits from solving Ralph's transportation problem (plus the aesthetic pleasures of ownership) justify the cost (or disadvantages) of the new bicycle?

Financial cost is the easiest to gauge at first. If the purchase price of the new bicycle is, say, \$1,200, the cost issue asks whether it is worth that much to solve the transportation problem and to gain the pleasures of ownership. In effect, the cost issue suggests a kind of balance sheet, comparing benefits to costs, or advantages to disadvantages. It may be true, as the adage goes, that a cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, but the price of a thing (including all disadvantages) needs to be related to its alleged value if we are to make wise policy decisions.

The idea of cost, as noted above, includes any disadvantage from the proposed new purchase. There is always an *opportunity* cost (i.e., if Ralph spends his money on the bicycle, he loses the opportunity to buy an automobile with it). In addition, there can be perverse disadvantages in riding a beautiful and expensive bicycle around campus. Ralph may be concerned that his new bike, unlike the old one, will be coveted by thieves and that he will worry about leaving it parked outside. Moreover, if it takes more time and trouble to lock it up, he may once again be late for class.

Simple policy questions, such as our bike example, are useful in several ways. First, these simple questions should help you to understand the logos, or the rationale, of the stock issues model, and why these four principal stock issues apply to all policy questions, regardless of subject matter or complexity. Second, this sort of example illustrates how the stock questions guide us in phrasing the specific issues for a particular policy question. Finally, I hope this example suggests how you can use the stock issues model in your personal decision making. You probably will not want to argue with yourself about every purchase you make (who would?), but it can be helpful to have a sense of all the potentially *vital* questions whenever you are making a major purchase or deciding anything of importance. As you become more adept at using it, the stock issues model also helps to expose weaknesses in the persuasive efforts of the unethical professional persuaders we discussed in Chapter 1.

Subordinate Stock Issues

The four principal stock issues apply to *all* policy questions, and they provide a more or less complete analytical tool for the initial investigation of most policy disputes. However, my studies of the

Procedural Issue

The final stock issue is perhaps a bit more difficult in relation to our bicycle example, but it could emerge if Ralph were having a serious dispute over what we call *rules of fairness* or *correct dealing* between merchant and customer. What sort of dispute? Suppose there is only one shop in town that carries the proposed mountain bike that has elicited a judgment of yes on all of the other five issues. Ordinarily, we would expect that Ralph would purchase the bike at this point. But what if Ralph decides that the merchant is being manipulative or unethical in his methods of persuading college students or that he has an insulting and arrogant attitude? This decision, by itself, might be enough to cancel Ralph's proposed purchase.

Procedural issues seem to be most important when argumentation takes place within a rule-governed institution, such as Congress. At least, that is where they seem to be most important in the outcome of a policy debate. In the U.S. House of Representatives, procedural issues seem to surface with every bill that is debated, and members frequently begin their speeches with arguments on whether the sponsors of a bill have followed House rules, including the appropriate deference to committee jurisdiction, unwritten standards of decorum, and a host of other procedural items.

A bill can be defeated if its sponsors are found to be in violation of House rules of parliamentary procedure. Conversely, although it seems bizarre, some members of Congress apparently decide to vote for a bill merely on the grounds that it has followed all the correct or appropriate channels and has received the blessings of particular committees. One congressman told me of an incident in which a member of his own party was threatening to block an important bill granting "wild and scenic" status to a river in the West. He later relented and even voted for the bill when he was informed that the "appropriate committee" had spent about 1,000 hours on the bill—which was merely to say the bill had been considered according to standard House procedures!

Pop quiz question (if any):

What are the four vital questions in any policy issue? (The four stock issues)