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IDEAS | ESSAY

# To Get Along Better, We Need Better Arguments

Our polarized politics keeps us from learning anything from our opponents. Here's how to fix that.



ILLUSTRATION: RYAN GARCIA

By *Walter Sinnott-Armstrong*

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Both parties complain about the polarization of American politics, but what can individual citizens do about it? We can't singlehandedly civilize the internet or force elected officials to do their jobs. What we can do is improve the quality of our interactions with people who disagree with us about contentious issues. We have to learn how to argue better.

The first step in improving the quality of our arguments is to stop thinking of them as fights or competitions. The goal of a good argument is not to attack enemies or to make opponents look silly. You can do that using terrible arguments or simply with jokes and name-calling. The point of engaging in argument is to improve our understanding of one another and of important issues. When you present a reasoned argument for your position, you help me to understand not only what you believe but also why you believe it.

Imagine that I support inheritance taxes and you oppose "death taxes." I might assume that you're rich and selfish, and you might assume that I'm jealous of rich people. These assumptions make our conversation frustrating and fruitless. But things are different if you argue that death taxes hurt family farms, and I counter that we need inheritance taxes to help poor and middle-class people who inherit little or nothing.

Once we begin to understand each other's reasons, we're more likely to stop yelling at each other. We're able to work together to formulate a compromise that will serve both our purposes—helping the middle and lower classes without hurting family farms. We would not have known where to look for a compromise if we hadn't clearly articulated our arguments.

**'If your goal in arguing is just to stir up people who already agree with you, you might be happy to use rhetorical tricks.'**

Of course, arguments are not all we need. Not every audience is willing to listen to reason, and we should not expect even good arguments to convince everyone immediately. Nevertheless, good arguments can help a lot when they're presented in the right way to the right audience. In order to achieve the goal of mutual understanding, people who engage in argument need three

qualities.

Be candid. If your goal in arguing is just to stir up people who already agree with you, you might be happy to use rhetorical tricks. But if you seek to improve your own understanding of a controversial issue, it's better to state your premises clearly, admit your assumptions and spell out each step in your argument. For example, if you argue that we need a carbon tax to slow climate change, you should admit that you're assuming that climate change is a serious and pressing problem, that higher carbon taxes will not cause too much harm to the economy and that there's no better way to prevent the harm caused by climate change.

On the other side, if you argue that we should not have a carbon tax, you should admit that you're assuming that climate change will not be as bad as the most dire predictions claim and that businesses will not be able to adjust to a carbon tax by developing other sources of energy. When such claims are brought out into the open, it becomes clear that both sides depend on assumptions that are far from certain. This openness about assumptions enables opponents to pinpoint precisely where they disagree and prevents allies from getting stuck in a rut when they take too much for granted.

Be respectful. It's easy to get likes and applause on the internet by dismissing opponents as stupid, ignorant or crazy. But abuse is not argument. To argue well, you need to recognize that there are points to be made on both sides and to anticipate the strongest objections to your own position.

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For example, if you argue that the U.S. should accept more Middle Eastern or Central American refugees, you need to face the objection that some of these refugees might be terrorists or criminals. And if you

argue that the U.S. should build a wall on its border with Mexico, you need to respond to the objection that persistent immigrants will find ways to enter despite the wall. You can reply to these objections forcefully and remain fully committed to your position, but your convictions will be sharper and stronger for being tempered in the fire of worthy opposition.

Be patient. Short, simple slogans are memorable, but good arguments take time. A tweet is never long enough to explain any controversial position. Just try to specify how we ought to deal with North Korea or Brexit or the opioid crisis in 280 characters. In order to make progress on such complex issues, we need to listen carefully and charitably to our opponents. We also need to learn how to argue at length and in detail for our own views.

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In today's political climate, we too often reward quick and catchy but bad arguments. Or else we avoid argument altogether, by interrupting each other or refusing to answer questions. Because these patterns are so common, we do not expect to be called out when we offer bad arguments, or no arguments. In order to improve our culture and to better understand our opponents as well as ourselves, we need to start demanding better arguments—from everyone.

*—Mr. Sinnott-Armstrong is Chauncey Stillman Professor of Practical Ethics in the department of philosophy and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. This essay is based on his new book, "Think Again: How to Reason and Argue," just published by Oxford University Press.*

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