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The Challenge of Making Good Logical Arguments

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By Ron DiSanto and Karen Adkins

Why do we argue? To some extent the answer depends on what we mean by "argue." In the context of philosophical discussions, *inter alia*, the word "argument" refers to the process of backing up a statement alleged to be true or a proposal deemed to be action-worthy with statements already known (or thought) to be true – the process, in other words, of supplying premises in support of a conclusion. We argue in this way to make clear to others (or to ourselves) whether and why a claim is indeed true and should be affirmed or whether and why a proposal is indeed worthwhile and should be implemented. We seek to enlighten. But there is another meaning of argument that carries with it another *élan*. We sometimes use the word as synonym for a "quarrel" or a "heated exchange," as in, "They got into an argument and ended up abruptly parting company." In this statement, we imply that at some point their arguing became less a matter of throwing light on an issue and more a matter of throwing verbal rocks at each other. The will-to-enlighten had devolved into the will-to-dominate. Domination tends to foreclose enlightenment and entirely rules out mutual understanding.

The first challenge to the making of good, logical arguments, then, is the challenge to keep heat subordinate to light, to hold the will-to-dominate in check, to keep argument in the preferred sense from devolving into argument-with-an-asterisk (argument*). It may not be easy to do this. In the contentious contemporary context of U.S. politics there is a lot of argument* going on in public discourse: a lot of clever name-calling, ridicule that plays to the crowd, colorful rants, etc. It may seem easier or at least more fun to take part in this rather than engage in the serious and sometimes tedious task of careful reasoning. Moreover, we might be tempted to think that engaging in such argument* is the best way to achieve desirable results, such as steering our stu-

dents in the right direction, e. g., in the direction of endorsing and promoting social justice. What if the clever use of rhetorical devices can do a better job of this than the careful thinking that recognizes credits and deficits on both sides of an issue? Isn't it better to win the argument* (and thereby win over the students) than to produce sound arguments that few people are able or willing to acknowledge? If the promotion of social justice (or any other significant good) can be better attained by a temporary detour from the track of genuine argument, why not take the detour?

Why not? For one, there is this thing we call intellectual integrity. If we esteem it, we need to maintain it. We can't put it aside, even with the best of intentions, and expect to get it back easily. Second, we teach by what we model. If we would "steer our students" in the right direction, we need to model what is involved in **finding** the "right direction," and for this there is no substitute for meeting head-on the two challenges that are internal to good argumentation: the challenge of marshalling **true premises** and the challenge of **reasoning correctly** on the basis of these premises.

Providing true premises requires that we get our facts straight. We can't argue well without genuine facts (though, of course, we might be able to argue* well with "alternative facts"). In this information age, with its ever more sophisticated information-retrieval devices, it may seem to be rather easy to have an abundance of potentially pertinent facts at our disposal. Unfortunately, it's not so simple. The worm in the apple of the information age is the fact that the age makes available not only a mound of genuine information but also a mound of misinformation (including the distortions that come from facts divorced from their contexts). Sorting out what "facts" belong in which pile can be complicated. We may be

tempted to un-complicate the task by "cherry picking" the "facts" we find most convenient for our purposes. Intellectual integrity requires that we resist this temptation.

The problem that arises from the availability of a surfeit of potential information is complemented by the problem that arises from the thought that no information is needed, since – despite an unacknowledged limited basis for thinking so – one already has the truth. This problem paradigmatically shows itself when students make use of stereotypical "facts" in otherwise well formed arguments. We who write this have both seen instances of this in student papers and discussions over the years, but more so in recent years. We suspect it is due in part to increasing segregation in many areas of life. Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008) and Robert Putnam's *Our Kids* (Simon & Schuster, 2015) document the increasing political, racial, and economic segregation of communities. These factors, along with a proliferation of segmented media and news sources, make it cumulatively very easy to grow up in this country without having meaningfully engaged any idea, perspective, or person whose experience doesn't tightly cohere with one's own. This, we believe, puts more, not less pressure on a college classroom – it is often the first site of engagement

or experiences inform their views – can locate them and also create space for classroom discussion (other students can articulate information or experiences that differ). Second, we can model this habit of citation ourselves; naming our sources of information when we offer up an argument for consideration makes this kind of thinking visible. Finally, we can model inclusion; making a point to compare and evaluate news media that offer differing perspectives makes us better able to engage with the differing experiences students bring to our classes.

The final challenge is that of maintaining correct reasoning or "proper form. "Philosophers differentiate between inductive reasoning (where conclusions can be probable only, because the conclusion reaches beyond the premises) and deductive reasoning (where the connection between premises and conclusion is alleged to be air-tight, so if one accepts the premises as true one must accept the conclusion). Political arguments are often inductive in nature – we take a small set of information or experiences and seek to conclude beyond it. But whether inductive or deductive, when argument fails to be either valid or strong, it is "fallacious." (A "fallacy" is not a "falsehood." It is not an instance of untrue content, but an instance of disconnectedness between reasons and conclusions, of bad form.)

> ### Sorting out what "facts" belong in which pile can be complicated. We may be tempted to un-complicate the task by "cherry picking" the "facts" we find most convenient for our purposes. Intellectual integrity requires that we resist this temptation.

Fallacy types are myriad. Suffice it to mention two that seem to be not only perennial but also particularly popular in contexts like ours where contentious argument* rules the day: the *ad hominem* ("against the person") fallacy and the "straw person" (or "easy target") fallacy. We commit the former when we either attack the person's character or single out the person's circumstances as a way of arguing for the wrongness

with political difference, and it is our job to model it effectively. The fact that some stereotypes can be deeply offensive or insulting to students raises the emotional stakes in the classroom.

So what might a professor do when students appeal to stereotypes in support of their views? First, we can engage them in conversation. Asking them how they came to these beliefs – what information

of the person's stance on an issue. For instance, we might argue against a person's stance on civil rights on the grounds that this person has been maritally unfaithful, or we might argue against a person's stance on the issue of free public higher education on the grounds that she is, after all, a student. But a "bad" person can still be "right" and a person with a stake in the outcome of an issue can still produce a

good argument. Hence, the disconnect between our premises, even if true, and our conclusion. We commit the "straw person" fallacy when we distort the opponent's position, so that we can easily knock it down. For instance, we argue against an opponent's call for "humane prison conditions" on the grounds that she prioritizes "coddling prisoners over fighting crime." In this case, there is a disconnect between the opponent's actual stance and our interpretation of it. Bad form. We might add that the straw person fallacy frequently evinces a powerful convergence between illogicality and dishonesty. Recognizing *ad hominem* and straw person arguments when they are offered, and highlighting those fallacies, can invite students to consider their positions with greater nuance.

In sum, the challenge of making good, logical arguments includes the challenge of keeping "winning" subordinate to "enlightening," the challenge of marshalling premises that are worthy of acceptance, and the challenge of maintaining good, rational form. Doing these things makes it more likely that we can talk across our differences in a fruitful and constructive way.

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Loyola New Orleans faculty headed to Women's March on Washington

Faculty members pose along side the statue of St. Ignatius Loyola before heading to the Women's March on Washington in January.

The posters were created by Daniela Marx, associate professor in the department of design, and the photo was taken by Maria Calzada, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences.

Pictured from left to right are: Rae Taylor, associate professor, criminal justice, Laura Hope, associate professor, theatre arts and dance, Lydia Voigt, distinguished university professor, academic affairs (sociology), Patricia Dorn, professor, biology, Susan Brower, associate professor, library.