

# Why Study Argument?

## THE ALTERNATIVES TO ARGUMENTATION

The most obvious question you might have in an argumentation class is: Why are you here? That is, why should you devote a whole college course to the study of argument?

We titled this book *“Argumentation: Keeping Faith with Reason”* because the basic premise for this book and the class for which you are reading it involves a leap of faith. Specifically, we have faith that argumentation is a superior means of making decisions compared to the alternatives.

What are those alternatives? Let us say that you need to make a decision about buying a used car. One way to make such a decision is through “random chance”: You could simply put up today’s newspaper ads for used cars, throw a dart, and buy whatever car the dart lands on. For some decisions, flipping a coin, pulling a name out of a hat, or tossing a dart may be the easiest and quickest way to make a decision. There are now computer programs that allow you to set parameters for what sort of restaurant you want to eat at and then the program randomly generates a choice based on those parameters. However, most of us would agree that we would not be comfortable making important decisions randomly. Imagine a nation deciding whether to go to war, or the Supreme Court making a decision about the constitutionality of a law, based on a coin toss.

A second way to make decisions that has a long history in human culture is by “divine guidance.” If one believes that one’s rulers or priests know the will of God (or Gods, in some cultures), then it is sensible that one would trust those rulers or priests to make important decisions. If, on the other hand, one has doubts either about the existence of God(s) or about the ability of humans to know God’s will perfectly, then one might not be willing to put all of one’s faith in divine guidance for all important decision making. Moreover, reliance on divine guidance breaks down if there is a conflict between two or more interpretations of divine guidance: How does one decide between competing visions of divine will?

A third way to make decisions is through the exercise of “force.” Whatever the disagreement, whoever is more physically powerful, or controls weapons or

an army or the police, would simply make a decision and compel others to follow. Even as children, we probably resisted such decision making as “not fair” and wanted a better explanation for decisions than “because I said so.” By definition, a democratic form of governance (which, admittedly, may not apply to many families!) is based on faith in the superiority of group decisions over individual decisions enforced through brute power.

“... instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.”

Pericles in Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

“... since the general or prevailing opinion on any object is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.”

John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty”

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

First Amendment to the United States Constitution

“Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord.”

Isaiah 1:18

“Is not inquiry the cure of ignorance?”

Mohammad, reported in Sunan Abu Dawud 337

“Use soft words and hard arguments.”

English proverb

“People generally quarrel because they cannot argue.”

Gilbert K. Chesterton

Notice that some of these ways of making decisions may be acceptable on an *individual* basis. We will not try to argue in this book that all decisions can and should be made “rationally.” If one has a choice of a used car down to two final choices and is having difficulty deciding, it is not necessarily a bad idea to flip a coin. And we would not try to persuade students that their personal religious faith should not inform their beliefs and actions. However, when it comes to group decisions, especially matters of public policy, we have the most faith in argumentation as the best means of making such decisions.

In fact, one way to understand the U.S. Constitution is as a form of government based on faith in reason. Our laws are enacted through a process of argument and deliberation, and conflicts between parties are sometimes resolved in courts, which are based on a model of argument. Our Constitution was conceived and written in a time known as the Age of Enlightenment, which was defined by its faith in reason.

In short, we study argumentation because we have faith in reason and prefer to make decisions involving other people through rational argument rather than chance, divine guidance, or brute force.

Furthermore, we believe there is value to studying argument for students both as “producers” of arguments and as “consumers” of arguments. The study of argument can be dated back to the fifth century BCE when Greeks began to teach young adults how to present compelling arguments in such places as the law courts and the legislative assembly. It was understood from the beginning that some people are better arguers than others and that one’s argumentative skills could be enhanced through study and practice. We live in an argument-rich environment, one in which we are constantly bombarded with attempts to persuade us to buy this product or to vote for that candidate. In turn, almost all of us will find ourselves in professional or public settings in which we are expected to argue for a particular choice or course of action. This book will help you learn how to *make* better arguments as well as how to *evaluate* the quality of arguments made to try to persuade you.

## ARGUMENTATION IS A REQUIREMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

The benefits of argumentation as a means of deciding issues are not only for personal or practical situations. Argumentation as a means of deciding what to do is an essential requirement for a free, democratic society.

Many would argue that free elections with secret ballots is the defining mark of democracy. While not diminishing the importance of elections, we contend that open deliberation among citizens is every bit as essential. And to have good deliberation, the society needs to have the skills of argumentation.

One of the most striking features of the first sustained democratic society—classical Athens—is that they did not have a large number of elected offices. They chose many of their leaders by lottery instead. What they did have was an assembly where all citizens (albeit limited to adult males who were not slaves) could attend, listen, speak, talk among themselves, and then vote. Before the term democracy was in common use, Greeks used the term *isegoria*—which means that “everyone could have a say.” The marketplace (of ideas) was open and all should be able to participate on an even basis. And as imperfectly as they implemented that, it was still true that here was a city where decisions were not made by a small group deciding in secret, or by a hereditary king or a military ruler, but out in the open in front of everyone.

Turning to contemporary nations that are representative democracies, such as the United States, we see a contrast. Many are concerned that while we still have elections, the quality of our public deliberation is not what it should be. Surveying the evening news, the talk shows, the radio commentators, magazines, and the newspapers does not reveal a strong belief in the qualities of reasoned discourse that we will discuss in this book. Features such as the use of evidence, a commitment to admit and correct one’s errors, listening to different views with respect, an understanding of what sort of reasons prove a claim—these are hardly in abundance.

Regardless of how you assess contemporary society, deliberation is a crucial feature of maintaining a free society. One sign of this is that tyrannies almost

always attempt to limit debate. People wanting to seize power will proclaim that some urgent crisis means that debate has to be restricted. National security requires secrecy. A threat requires the suspension of rights and even elections. If not legally restricting speech and debate, intimidation will be used, such as labeling opponents as traitors or racists or some other term designed to diminish their viewpoints and prevent them from participating.

Nor are such tactics limited to governments. One way of viewing the Protestant Reformation is as a revolt against a demand for unquestioned belief in the pronouncements of the church hierarchy. Many of the reformers wanted to democratize the process of reading and interpreting the sacred texts—letting everyone study and debate for themselves. That would force the church to be more democratic.

Nor can it be said that a defense of deliberation is only a left-wing attack directed against right-wing tyranny. Extreme leftist movements have also sought to undermine faith in the possibility of arriving at truth by debate by engaging in censorship. A certain type of radical postmodernism denies that reasoned debate is ever anything but a cover for self-interest. All of these views reveal a lack of faith in the value of open, unfettered debate.

If a group has little political or financial power, one of the things it can do is reveal the truth of its situation. It can point out to the larger society how it is being treated. It can call on the society to live up to its ideals. It can make arguments that appeal to principles of fairness and justice. When it cannot do that openly, it often does it clandestinely, such as in the *samizdat* writings that Soviet dissidents circulated. When a group has no political power, all it may have is its ability to persuade others.

## AN ASSET FOR LIFE

The value of argumentation goes far beyond politics. We will argue in the next chapter that reasoned debate is a key component of many aspects of professional and personal life. You need to study argumentation because you cannot reliably learn these skills from the culture in general.

As with politics, so with consumer products, sports, business, and other aspects of life: One does not always see people making the best arguments. Maybe you don't typically see that. What gets picked up by the media, what attracts notoriety, is not generally the best, the most careful, the most nuanced.

So you need to study argumentation to defend yourself against this and to acquire the skills to make better arguments.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

### A Note to Students

If you are having trouble deciding on a topic for your papers, here are a couple of ideas. Look at the examples we use, both the big examples we describe in detail and those we just briefly mention. Maybe one of them will be interesting to you to explore in more depth. Some chapters have lists of famous examples or current case studies that you can explore.

Secondly, what if you discover you don't like one of our examples or think we've got it wrong? Argumentation applies, as you'll learn in the next chapter, to every single issue humans are involved with. We're unlikely to be infallible experts on every one. And while we've been careful and held ourselves to the same standards we are trying to teach in this book, the odds are that there is likely some example where we should have studied it further or time has brought new insight that we haven't included. We'll fix those problems when we discover them, but it is also an inherent part of argument that you are always learning, your conclusions are always subject to revision, and tomorrow will likely bring new information. So, go ahead, write a paper attacking one of our examples. If you follow the principles we set forth here, we'll be happy.

### A Note to Instructors

We have provided several features to assist teaching. Some chapters contain either a detailed case study or shorter lists of areas where the specific argumentation concepts are used. You may wish to expand on one of those or substitute other examples for your teaching. Chapters have summary information in a box that can provide students with study guide material.

### But Isn't It More Complicated?

Yes. Argumentation in real life is generally more complicated than we describe here. But what we do here is common to beginning texts in any subject. We break the topic down into separate concepts, we use examples that illustrate those examples, and we try to teach skills one at a time. Integration of skills comes after you have the skills and practice, practice, practice.