Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

THINK AGAIN

How to Reason and Argue

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PREFACE

Why I Wrote This Book

I have taught courses on reason and argument for over thirty-five years at Dartmouth College and now Duke University. Many students tell me that my courses have helped them in various areas of their lives. They motivate me to keep going.

While my students learned to argue, the rest of the world lost that skill. The level of discourse and communication in politics and also in personal life has reached new lows. During election years, my course has always discussed examples of arguments during presidential debates. During the 1980s, I had no trouble finding arguments on both sides in the debates. Today all I find are slogans, assertions, jokes, and gibes but very few real arguments. I see dismissals, put-downs, abuse, accusations, and avoiding the issue more than actual engagement with problems that matter. There might be fewer protests in the streets today than in the 1960s, but there are still fewer serious attempts to reason together and understand each other.

I could not help but conclude that our culture, like my students, could benefit from a strong dose of reason and

argument. When I moved to Duke in 2010, I was offered a chance to reach a wider audience through the magical medium of MOOCs (that is, Massive Open Online Courses). With my friend, Ram Neta, I taught a MOOC (*Think Again* on the Coursera platform) that has attracted over 800,000 registered students from over 150 countries. This surprising response convinced me of a hunger around the world for learning how to reason and argue. Of course, not all of my students finished the course, much less learned how to argue well—but many did. My hope is that their new skills helped them understand and work together with their neighbors.

The book that you have in your hands (or on your screen?) is another step in that direction. My goal is to show what arguments are and what good they can do. This book is not about winning arguments or beating opponents. Instead, it is about understanding each other and appreciating strong evidence. It teaches logic instead of rhetorical tricks.

Although this book began as a manual on how to argue, I realized that I also needed to start by explaining why people should argue. That motivational discussion then grew into Part I: Why Argue? The lessons on how to argue then became Part II, complemented by an overview of how not to argue in Part III. By the end of the book, I hope that you will be both willing and able to argue and assess arguments as well as to provide motivation and a model for others to join you in constructive engagement. These skills can improve not only your life but also our shared society.

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INTRODUCTION

Our Cultural Rut

CALAMITIES THREATEN OUR WORLD: War is constant. Terrorism is common. Migrants seek refuge. Poverty is extreme. Inequality is growing. Racial tensions are rising. Women are mistreated. Climate change is looming. Diseases are running rampant. Health costs are soaring. Schools are deteriorating. The news leaves us overwhelmed and depressed.

These crises are gigantic in scope and scale. Because of their immensity, none of these problems can be solved without widespread cooperation. Indeed, real solutions require collaboration among diverse groups of people with conflicting beliefs and values. It's not just that warmongers need to stop fighting, racists need to stop discriminating, and ignorant fools need to learn basic facts. In addition, those of us who are neither warmongers nor racists nor fools need to work together despite our differences and disagreements. The refugee problem cannot be solved unless a number of countries with disparate goals and assumptions agree on the nature of the problem and its solution and then come together to convince everyone to do their share. The problem of climate change cannot be solved unless countries all over the world agree that there is a problem and then curtail their production of greenhouse gasses. Terrorism cannot be exterminated until every nation denies terrorists safe haven.

It will never be enough for one person or even one country to decide what to do and then do it alone. They also need to convince many others to go along.

That much is obvious. What is not so obvious is why smart and caring people do not just do it. Why don't they work together to solve their common problems? Contemporary science gives us remarkable powers to learn, to communicate, and to control our futures. Yet we fail to use these abilities for good. So little gets done when so much is at stake! These same problems are bad for everyone on both sides of these disputes, even if some unfortunate groups are harmed much more than others. Nonetheless, politicians from various countries and indeed politicians within the same country quibble instead of cooperating, undermine instead of supporting, interrupt instead of listening, and draw lines in the sand instead of proposing compromises that could gain mutual agreement. Politicians add to the problems instead of solving them—or they propose solutions that they know will be rejected immediately by their opponents. Some exceptions—notably the Paris Accord on climate change—show how countries could work together, but such cooperation is all too rare.

Not only in politics. Facebook, Skype, Snapchat, smart phones, and the Internet make it much easier than ever before to communicate around the globe, and many people do spend a lot of time talking with friends. Nonetheless, these exchanges almost always occur within bubbles of allies with similar worldviews. Moreover, discourse has reached new lows on the Internet. Complex issues are reduced to 280-character tweets or shorter hashtags and slogans. Even thoughtful tweets and blog posts are often greeted with contempt, gibes, humor, and abuse by Internet trolls. Moderate opinions encounter immoderate insults that masquerade as wit and spread willful misinterpretation of opponents. The Web makes it easier for large numbers of critics to attack quickly, viciously, and thoughtlessly. This new

medium and culture reward bluster instead of modesty and leave little incentive to be caring or careful, fair or factual, trustworthy or thoughtful. Rhetoric gains likes. Reason receives dislikes. The medium that should be our tool shapes our actions and goals.

This dark picture is not always accurate, of course, but it is too accurate too often. And many of these disparate problems stem largely from the same source: a lack of mutual understanding. Sometimes people avoid talking with each other. Even when they do talk, there is little communication of ideas on important issues. As a result, they cannot figure out why other people believe what they say. Politicians cannot work together, at least partly because they do not understand each other. Opponents will never agree to bear their share of the burden if they do not understand why that burden needs to be carried.

This lack of understanding might sometimes result from incommensurable world views or conflicting assumptions that prevent mutual comprehension. However, political opponents too often do not even *try* to understand each other, partly because they see no personal or political gain in reaching out and being fair. Indeed, they often have strong incentives neither to reach out nor to be fair. Tweeters and bloggers go wild on the Internet, because their goal is to gain likes for their jokes and gibes. They receive few such rewards on the Internet from balanced attempts to see the other side in contentious debates. Why should they try to understand their opponents when they think that they are bound to fail and get nothing in return for their attempts? Admittedly, many interesting and insightful conversations do occur on Twitter and the Internet, but the huge number of lurking trolls scares off many potential contributors.

When they give up on understanding, they turn to willful misunderstanding and misinterpretation. People on both sides of divisive disputes repeatedly put words into each other's mouths and then retort or snort, "I cannot imagine why they

think that." Of course, they cannot imagine why their rivals think *that*, because they formulated their rivals' views in that way precisely to make those views look silly. They know or should know that they are misrepresenting their opponents, but they do not care. Their goals are not to convince opponents or appreciate their positions. They seek only to amuse their allies by abusing their opponents.

These attitudes undermine respect, connection, and cooperation. You hold your position. I hold mine. I cannot comprehend how you could be so blind. You have no idea why I am so stubborn. I do not respect your views. You return the favor. We abuse and come to despise each other. I do not want to meet with you. You do not want to deal with me. I refuse to compromise. So do you. Neither of us is open to any possibility of cooperation. No progress is made. Sad!

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

How did we fall into this cultural hole? How can we climb out? The full story is complex, of course. Anything as widespread and intricate as a culture is bound to have many aspects and influences. These issues should not be oversimplified, but it would be overwhelming to try to discuss all of its complications at once. Consequently, this short book will emphasize and explore only one part of the problem. I focus on this one bit, because it is often overlooked, because it is fundamental, because it lies within my expertise, and because each of us can do something about it in our personal lives instead of having to wait for politicians and cultural leaders to act. We can all start to work on the problem right now.

My answer is that many people have stopped giving reasons of their own and looking for reasons for opposing positions.

Even when they give and receive reasons, they do so in a biased and uncritical way, so they fail to understand the reasons on each side of the issue. These people claim too often that their stance is so obvious that anyone who knows what they are talking about will agree with them. If so, opponents must not know what they are talking about. Even before their opponents start talking, these people feel confident that those on the opposing side must all be deeply confused or misinformed or even crazy. They disparage their opponents as so silly that they cannot have any reason at all on their side. Then they cynically assume that reasoning won't do any good anyway, because their opponents are driven only by emotions—fear, anger, hatred, greed, or blind compassion—and do not care about truth or about the same values that matter to them. As a result, elections are decided by who gets out the most voters and perhaps by who creates the most rousing or humorous advertisements and slogans instead of by who gives the strongest reasons for their policies. This strategy cannot help us climb out of our rut.

We need to state and understand arguments on both sides. We need to offer our reasons to our opponents and demand their reasons from them. Without exchanging reasons, we cannot understand each other. Without understanding, we cannot figure out how to compromise or cooperate with each other. Without cooperation, we cannot solve our problems. Without solving our problems, we will all be worse off.

HOW DO WE GET OUT OF HERE?

This analysis of the problem suggests a solution. We all need to communicate more and in better ways. One crucial step is to assert less and question more. The most useful questions

ask why we believe what we do and how our proposals would work. These questions ask for reasons of different kinds, so we especially need to learn how to ask each other for reasons. Still, questions are not enough by themselves. Asking for reasons won't help if nobody can answer. Answers take the form of arguments that express our reasons. Thus, we need to learn how to give appropriate arguments when asked, how to appreciate arguments that others give us, and how to spot weaknesses in our own arguments as well as in arguments on the other side. I will try to begin to teach some of these lessons in the following pages.

These lessons need to begin with a rough understanding of what reasons and arguments are. Chapter 6 will go into more detail, but we should head off some common misunderstandings from the start. Many people mistake reasons and arguments for weapons in a war or at least in a competition, like a debate. That is far from what I recommend here. Wars and competitions cannot help us work together.

Instead, I will present reasons and arguments as attempts to increase understanding. When I give you a reason to justify my claim, my reason helps you understand why I believe that my claim is true. Similarly, when you give me a reason for your claim, your reason helps me understand why you believe your claim. Our reasons can achieve these goals without convincing either of us to change our minds at all. We might continue to disagree, but at least we understand each other better. That mutual understanding is what helps us work together.

The same goal can be aided by another kind of reason that explains why something happens. It is useful to know that an event, such as an eclipse, will occur. This knowledge enables you to go and watch the eclipse. However, it does not help you predict future eclipses. You cannot figure out when an eclipse will occur without understanding why eclipses occur (and without

a lot more information as well). To predict the future, we need explanations or explanatory reasons why events occur in the present. And we need to be able to predict the future to determine which proposal will (in the future) succeed in solving a problem. That is why we need explanatory reasons if we are to work together fruitfully.

Because we need reasons, we also need arguments. The kinds of arguments that I will discuss here are not verbal fights, such as when married couples or political rivals "argue" by yelling at each other. Arguments as I will present them here are more constructive than that. Roughly, an argument is given when—and only when—someone (the arguer) presents one claim (the premise) as a reason of some kind for another claim (the conclusion). The reason is the premise, and the argument presents that premise as a reason. The purpose of the argument is to express the reason to an audience and thereby to increase their understanding either of why the conclusion is true or why the arguer believes the conclusion.

This definition excludes some things that are often called arguments (such as cursing at another person), and it includes other things that are often not seen as arguments (such as explanations). It does not pretend to capture common usage. Nonetheless, it picks out what we need in order to understand each other and work together.

Although we need more arguments of this kind, we should not argue all day long. Everybody needs a break. Moreover, arguments are not all we need. Arguments do little good when the audience is not receptive, so we also need to learn social skills and habits to encourage our audiences to be receptive to reasons. We need to learn modesty (or not claiming that we possess the whole truth), graciousness (including conceding opponents' good points), patience (in waiting for audiences to think through our points), and forgiveness (when an opponent

refuses to concede our own good points). Although much more is needed, arguments play an important role in a larger scheme that can solve or at least reduce some problems in our culture. Arguments are necessary even if they are not sufficient by themselves to solve our problems.

Reason and argument are often presented as if they were enemies of emotion, but that is another misunderstanding to avoid. Reasons often guide emotions, such as when evidence of a friend's treachery makes me angry at that friend. Indeed, emotions can *be* reasons in the broad sense that I am using here. The premise that I feel love when I am with someone is a reason to spend time with my beloved and to believe that this time will be well spent. The premise that I feel fear when I drive too fast is a reason not to drive so fast and to believe that driving so fast is dangerous. In such cases, emotions and reasons do not compete and might not even be distinct. Thus, strong feelings can be rational. We do not always need to suppress emotion and to remain calm in order to use reason and argument.

More generally, misunderstanding of reasons and arguments can lead to cynicism and contempt for reasons and arguments. That cynicism and contempt is part of what causes the problem of polarization. Hence, learning to understand and appreciate reasons and arguments properly can help to solve part of the problem. It can help us climb out of our cultural rut.

PART I

WHY TO ARGUE

SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR

HOW MANY OF YOUR CLOSE FRIENDS hold political views that are diametrically opposed to your own? In other words, if you are liberal, how many of your close friends are very conservative? If you are conservative, how many of your close friends are extremely liberal? And if you are moderate or independent, how many of your close friends hold immoderate positions on either side of the political spectrum? For most people today, the answer is, "Not many."

To figure out why, we need to ask a few more questions. Would you worry if your child or sibling held political positions diametrically opposed to your own? Would it bother you if they married someone with opposing political views? Would you be scared or annoyed if you had to move into a community where most people vote for different candidates than you do? Do you go out of your way to listen to people who disagree with you about politics? Do you read, watch, or listen carefully to news that comes from sources that support political positions hostile to your own? Do you despise the party that competes with yours? Do you think that it is a threat to the well-being of your country and of people whom you care about? Do you understand why its supporters prefer it and its candidates? Do you recognize any good reasons for their positions? Can you fairly explain why they take the stands that they take on crucial

issues? How sure are you that you are right about the political issues that divide you from them?

In many countries around the world, these questions receive different answers today than they received only a decade or two ago. Today many people have few close friends with radically different political views, live in communities with vast majorities that support the same political party, read or listen to news sources that agree with them, build social media networks with only political allies, and rarely come across people who express views hostile to their own. When they do encounter such views, they almost never talk at length or try hard to understand why those people disagree so much with them. When they talk with opponents, they do not try to give reasons but instead resort to emotional appeals, verbal abuse, jokes at their expense, and threats of ostracism or worse. Or they quickly change the subject to avoid uncomfortable disagreements. None of these reactions builds bridges or solves problems.

Skeptics might wonder, however, whether we really are as polarized and isolated as I have been suggesting. After all, many people hold moderate or mixed political views, even if they do not usually express them loudly or go into politics. Most of us do know some people with opposing political views, even if we usually avoid talking with them about politics. Opposing political parties do hold lengthy debates in most democracies, even if those debaters often sidestep the real issues. Parties write platforms, even if they rarely follow them. Politicians do support their positions in various news media, even if only by reasserting them. Such exchanges do often seem to give reasons for each side. And both sides do tend to think that they understand their opponents perfectly well. Sometimes political opponents even like each other. So maybe the "culture wars" are exaggerated.

In order to determine the depth and breadth of polarization, this chapter will consider some empirical research on polarization. A boatload has been written on this topic, so we can only survey a small sample, but we can learn a lot from this little bit, starting with the United States and then turning to other countries.

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?

Polarization is hard to study partly because it means different things to different people.[1] Sometimes polarization is measured in this way:

> *Distance*: Groups are more distant from each other when their views are farther apart on some relevant scale.

Of course, there can be a great distance between the average views of two groups even when there is also a large area of overlap between these groups—if the individuals in these groups vary enough among themselves. Imagine a scale of left (liberal) to right (conservative) orientation in politics from 0 to 10. If a liberal party varies from 0 to 7 with an average of 3 and a conservative party varies from 3 to 10 with an average of 7, then a lot of people between 3 and 7 will share views even though they are in competing parties whose averages lie far apart.

For this reason, some researchers and commentators usually add another measure of polarization:

> *Homogeneity*: Groups are more internally homogeneous when there is less variance among members of each group.

Distance plus homogeneity equals polarization. These features together are enough to capture the metaphor of poles, since the North and South Poles are points far from each other.

Still, merely being far apart does not ensure that parties and people will not get along. For one thing, we might disagree a lot about issues that do not matter much to us. Many Taiwanese like stinky tofu, and I love it, but many Americans find it disgusting. These views on stinky tofu are extremely different, but that kind of polarization does not create any serious problems. Neither group dislikes the other because of its views on stinky tofu. They just eat what they want.

Conflicts do not arise until we add more to distance plus homogeneity:

> *Antagonism*: Groups are more polarized when they feel more hatred, disdain, fear, or other negative emotions toward people on the other pole.

Antagonism is about how people feel, but these private feelings often get expressed in public speech:

> *Incivility*: Groups are more polarized when they talk more negatively about the people at the other pole.

Negative speech causes feelings of hatred, and this hatred leads people to use more negative epithets, which leads to more hatred, which leads to more epithets, and so on. Antagonism and incivility reinforce each other in a vicious circle.

Bad feelings and speech are bad enough, but what matters more are actions. In order to move beyond feelings and speech to actions, many commentators also associate polarization with certain barriers in political or private life:

> *Rigidity*: Groups are more polarized to the extent that they treat their values as sacred rights on which they refuse to compromise.

Rigidity is clearly connected to the intensity of one's emotions and values as well as one's views on the source of those values. Because cooperation often requires compromise, rigidity can lead to

> *Gridlock*: Groups are more polarized to the extent that they are unable to cooperate and work together toward common goals.

Gridlock is often what bothers people most about polarization, because it prevents government actions that can solve social problems.

Governments can still function when society is split between groups that are polarized, antagonistic, and rigid if one group has all or most of the power, either because it constitutes a significant majority or because it somehow grabbed the reins of government. Thus, gridlock in the sense of inability to get anything done occurs only if neither group can lord over the other. Still, even if one group dominates and gets what it wants, gridlock in the sense of groups being unable to work together is undesirable as long as both groups should have some control over the institutions that govern them.

Gridlock also might seem less likely or less dangerous in governments with more than two parties, such as those in Germany, Israel, India, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. In such systems, different parties need to work together in order to form coalitions that achieve a majority. Nonetheless, such coalitions can still easily become antagonistic, rigid, and incapable of working with anyone outside the ruling

coalition. Then there is polarization between coalitions instead of between single parties, but the same problems can arise.

So, what is polarization? All of the above. The full syndrome includes every one of these aspects—distance, homogeneity, antagonism, incivility, rigidity, gridlock—and more. This complexity cannot be simplified without distorting the issue. Still, when we discuss polarization, we should not talk about all of these aspects at once. To avoid confusion, we need to know which specific features of polarization are relevant to each particular discussion.

ARE THE POLES MOVING APART?

How much polarization exists? Let's start by looking at polarization understood simply as distance plus homogeneity. How can we measure distance and homogeneity? In politics, the standard method is to ask randomly selected members of a group a variety of questions with typical liberal and conservative answers. Distance between the groups is measured by how far apart the average answers are for each group. Homogeneity within a group is measured by how close the answers of different members of the group are. We can use these questionnaires to track trends in this kind of polarization over time.

In the United States, polarization seems to have grown tremendously in the decades since the 1990s. That impression is widespread and supported by surveys. First consider distance between the parties, called the partisan gap. This gap has grown on a wide variety of issues. Here are some dramatic examples:[2]

> "The best way to ensure peace is through military strength."
>
> 1994: 44% of Republicans and 28% of Democrats agreed.

2014: 48% of Republicans and 18% of Democrats agreed.

On this issue, the partisan gap almost doubled from 16% to 30%.

"Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good."

1994: 64% of Republicans and 46% of Democrats agreed.

2014: 68% of Republicans and 29% of Democrats agreed.

On this issue, the partisan gap more than doubled from 18% to 39%.

"Stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy."

1994: 39% of Republicans and 29% of Democrats agreed.

2014: 59% of Republicans and 24% of Democrats agreed.

On this issue, the partisan gap more than tripled from 10% to 35%.

"Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return."

1994: 63% of Republicans and 44% of Democrats agreed.

2014: 66% of Republicans and 28% of Democrats agreed.

On this issue, the partisan gap doubled from 19% to 38%.

"Blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition."

1994: 66% of Republicans and 53% of Democrats agreed.

2014: 79% of Republicans and 50% of Democrats agreed.

On this issue, the partisan gap more than doubled from 13% to 29%.

Notice that Republicans changed more on some issues, whereas Democrats changed more on other issues. Each side often blames their opponent for creating polarization by moving to an extreme position, but actually both sides have moved, though to different degrees on different issues. The result is that the gap between Republicans and Democrats has increased significantly in a short time on many central issues.[3]

CAN'T WE AT LEAST AGREE ON THE FACTS?

These studies focus on political values and norms, but polarization also extends to religion and even to matters of fact. Democrats and Republicans disagree strongly about whether climate change is caused or exacerbated by human greenhouse gas emissions. That is a scientific issue that could potentially be settled independently of whether one thinks that greenhouse gas emissions and climate change are bad, good, or neutral. Despite this possibility, politics often drives scientific beliefs instead of science driving policy. Similarly, Democrats and Republicans have very divergent factual beliefs about many other factual issues, including these:

(1) whether fracking is dangerous,
(2) whether capital punishment deters murder,
(3) whether waterboarding is effective in fighting terrorism,
(4) whether gun ownership promotes or reduces gun violence,
(5) whether social welfare programs help or hurt economic growth,
(6) how many immigrants entered the United States illegally,
(7) how many illegal immigrants are criminals,

(8) how many illegal immigrants take jobs that citizens want,
(9) how much voter fraud is committed in United States elections,
(10) whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the United States attacked.

Most Democrats answer these questions differently from most Republicans, suggesting that these parties cannot agree on facts any more than on values.

Liberals sometimes blame conservatives for this problem because they think that conservatives base their factual beliefs on religion or on unreliable authorities instead of science. This common accusation makes it worth noting that liberals often reject the scientific consensus on whether genetically modified foods are safe, whether vaccinations cause autism, or whether nuclear wastes can be disposed of safely.[4] On the other hand, Republicans are more likely to reject the scientific consensus on climate change, though conservatives who doubt man-made climate change do not show less scientific literacy.[5] Neither side has a monopoly on scientific evidence or on the facts.

Facts and values are connected, of course. If we do not agree about whether capital punishment deters or about whether global warming is caused by human activity, then it should come as no surprise when we also disagree about whether to allow capital punishment or to fight global warming. When people do not agree about crucial facts, they are unlikely to agree about what to do in face of the facts.

Given such widespread disagreement, it is surprising how confident both sides are. Many defenders of capital punishment are completely sure that it deters murder. Many opponents of capital punishment have little doubt that it does not deter any murder. One explanation of their confidence might be that they