

1 Why Do We Argue?

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was an especially astute observer of human nature. Among his many famous pronouncements and ideas, the following two claims may already be familiar to you:

- 1 Humans by nature are political creatures.
- 2 Humans by nature desire to know.

The first of these quotations comes from Aristotle's book titled *Politics* (1253a2), and it is often interpreted as saying that humans are naturally "political" in our current colloquial sense of that term. To say that we are political in this sense is to say that we are competitive, ambitious, cunning, shrewd, manipulative, and perhaps ruthless. But this is not the sense of "political" that Aristotle intends. In claiming that we are by nature political, Aristotle means to say that we are by nature social and sociable beings. That is, Aristotle saw that it is no accident that human beings live together in families, neighborhoods, communities, and other social forms of association, including political associations.

Not only are we social in the sense that we enjoy the company of others, we also *depend* on each other in various ways. We need others if we are going to live lives that exhibit the familiar characteristics of a *human* life. From the time we are very young, we need others to nurture and care for us; we need others to teach us how to get along in the physical and social world. Moreover, there are certain distinctively human capacities—capacities for friendship, loyalty, love, gratitude, sincerity, generosity, kindness, and much else—that can exist only given the presence of others. For example, one cannot be a friend all by oneself, and generosity can be exercised only toward needy others. Finally, it seems that the ability to use language—to communicate, to express ourselves—is one of the most central features of human life, and communication presupposes a social life. In order to be fully human, we need others.

As Aristotle also observed, our dependence on others is not a one-way street. Others need us, too. Our dependence is mutual. This is most obvious in the case of friendship. Our friends need us, and, though it may

4 *A Conception of Argument*

sound odd to say so, we not only need them, but *we also need to be needed by them*. That's just what friendship is. Even infants, arguably the most helpless among us, provide for adults occasions for the development and exercise of the distinctive dispositions and attitudes appropriate to caregivers, nurturers, and guardians. We depend on others even when they depend on us. Dependence is not necessarily a one-way street. As human beings, we are interdependent. We need each other, and we need to be needed by each other.

Importantly, this inevitable and pervasive mutual dependence is not a sign of weakness or deficiency in human beings. As Aristotle also claimed, interdependence is *proper* to human beings. That's simply who we are. We are the kind of creature that needs others of its kind. Our relationships with others are what *make us properly human*. In fact, Aristotle went so far as to say that any creature that is not dependent on others in these distinctively human ways is thereby not a human being at all, but rather something either greater than or less than human—a god or a beast, he said.

Although our dependence on each other is not a defect, our mutual dependency does make our social relations complex and sometimes even problematic. It's obvious that our interdependence means that we must *rely* on others. We *count* on others to be sincere, to think and behave rationally, to follow the agreed-upon rules, to play fair, and so on. Consequently, in order to have the humanizing effect we all need, our relations of mutual interdependence must be in some sense *reciprocal*. They must have as their aim some *mutual* benefit. Or, to put the matter in a different way, we are not made more human when our relations with others are one-sided and inequitable, aimed at dispensing benefits only to one party to the relationship at the expense of the other party. Takers need Givers and perhaps Givers need Takers, too; but unless the taking and giving are aimed at some kind of mutual benefit for *both* parties in the long run, their relationship becomes merely a case of someone taking advantage of another. We sometimes speak of one person *using* another. The term *using* captures the one-sidedness of the relationship's benefit.

Perhaps more importantly, if our relationships are to have a humanizing effect, they must involve more than a simple *quid pro quo* or exchange of benefits, as when you scratch your neighbor's back so that he will in turn scratch yours when the time comes. Living socially involves relying on others, and in relying on others we seek not only a *mutual* benefit, but a *common* benefit, a benefit that accrues to *us*. In other words, properly ordered social relations aim at a common good among those who participate in the relation.

Consider, for example, the norms for standing in line. When someone cuts the line, the people behind that person in line have been wronged to some degree, at least by the fact that they must now wait a little longer, or they may miss out on the finite resource being doled out. It is certainly right for those folks to object to this instance of line-cutting. But it does

not seem out of place for someone *in front* of the person cutting the line to object, too. This is because cutting in line is not simply a case of one person inconveniencing others; it also involves the breaking of a social rule, and following the rule in question provides for everyone a more peaceful and cooperative social environment than the one that would result from a mad scrum for counter service. A mark of civic-mindedness is that even those not wronged by an infraction can and will object to it.

The humanizing element of our social relations makes possible civic-mindedness, the disposition to think not merely of one's individual good (good for me), but to consider also the shared good of the group (good for us). Families are the first places where these group-minded goods begin to motivate humans, but that civic-mindedness grows to larger associations, and ultimately to the state.

As mentioned above, these features of our mutual interdependence make our social relations complex, and this complexity gives rise to complications. Our mutual dependence creates opportunities for some to take advantage of others. Sometimes people enter into relations with others that are in fact not nurturing and mutually beneficial, but instead are lopsided, manipulative, stifling, or even abusive. What is philosophically interesting (and personally vexing) about relations of this kind is that those who are on the losing end of them often do not realize that they are being harmed; they do not see that they are being manipulated and used by the other. Frequently these are cases of misplaced trust and outright manipulation. These cases are possible because of our mutual dependence, and it is often because of the dependencies that people who are exploited in these relationships cannot recognize their exploitation.

Consequently, our natural dependence gives rise to a kind of vulnerability. In relying on others, we place a degree of trust in them; we interact "in good faith," and we count on others to reciprocate. In some sense this initial expression of trust and good faith is made blindly. We trust others so that they may prove worthy of trust; we rely on others, at least initially, in the hope that they will prove to be reliable. As we know all too well, sometimes we trust the wrong people to the wrong extent. Hence we not only depend upon others, we depend on others to be worthy of our dependence; we trust them to be responsible, reciprocating, and cooperative. And sometimes we learn a difficult lesson, and we consequently know that some others, under certain circumstances, are not to be trusted. And there are certain people who not only should not be trusted, but rather should be positively distrusted. It's an unpleasant fact. But that's life.

We are inherently social creatures, we depend on each other. This, in turn, means that it often matters to us how others live their lives. Since the question of whether those upon whom we depend are in fact trustworthy is a recurring issue for us, we must make the lives of others our business. We must sometimes make it our business to discover and evaluate what others do, even in private, as it were. That your neighbor stores dangerous

6 *A Conception of Argument*

chemicals under unsafe conditions in her garage is your business. That the store-owner downtown engages in unfair hiring practices is also your business. Perhaps it is also your business how the couple across the street raises their children. Of course, it has been a main occupation of political philosophers to discern the limits to the concern we should have with the lives of others. We depend and rely on each other, and so the lives of others are our business, at least to some extent; nonetheless, we must not become busybodies. The philosophical project of drawing a proper line between having a healthy regard for others and being a nuisance or busybody is notoriously difficult. The history of philosophy is replete with varied attempts to do just this. Luckily, we need not undertake this task at present, because our concern is with an area of our shared social lives where we tend to think that the line is easier to discern.

To be more specific, one of the most obvious features of our social lives is that we depend on each other *epistemically*. *Epistemology* is the area of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge, evidence, belief, and the like. Epistemologists are also concerned with the ways in which knowledge is transferred and accumulated, how new knowledge is achieved, and how knowledge differs from other phenomena, such as wishful thinking, blind faith, and lucky guessing. We need not delve deeply into the field of epistemology to make our central point, which is this: Much of what we believe and take ourselves to know derives in large measure from others.

Think about it. Apart from what you believe based on your own memories (“I had Cheerios for breakfast this morning”; “Tomorrow is my mother’s birthday”) and current bodily sensations (“I have a mild headache”; “I see an apple”), most of what you believe involves reliance on reports, information, findings, testimony, and data that are provided by others. You depend on these others to be reliable, accurate, sincere, and honest. Accordingly, we often regard what others think, and especially what others claim to know, as our business.

And this brings us to the second of Aristotle’s claims from the beginning of this chapter. In his book titled *Metaphysics* (980a22), Aristotle observes that we each desire to know. Aristotle is often taken to be saying that humans are naturally or insatiably curious and eager to learn. This is a claim that is obviously disputable. Some of our fellow professors would go so far as to say that, in light of their many years teaching college students, it is obviously false. According to a more plausible interpretation of the quotation, Aristotle is asserting that we take ourselves to know quite a lot, and we are disturbed when we discover that we are wrong about some thing or another. We do not like being mistaken. We hate being wrong. We all desire to know insofar as we desire to avoid being duped, confused, incorrect, or deluded. If this is what Aristotle meant, then it looks as if he may be correct. Again, we try to avoid error, and we do not like having to change our minds about things, especially when it comes to the things we think are important.

The interest we have in knowing, the importance we place on getting things right, and the corresponding discomfort and frustration we feel when we discover that we have erred are all easy to understand. Our actions, plans, and projections are to a large extent based upon the things we believe to be the case. Consider even the mundane example of planning to meet a friend for lunch at a local restaurant. In setting your plans, you take yourself to know the location of the restaurant at which you are to meet your friend. You also take yourself to know that the restaurant in question is open for lunch. And in setting your plan, you take your friend to also know the location of the restaurant, and to understand that you are to meet at the determined time of day. And so on. To be mistaken in any of these beliefs will likely result in a failure to meet your friend for lunch. So, if it is important to you that you succeed in meeting your friend for lunch, it is important that you actually know the things you take yourself to know. The same is true in examples involving more important matters. Suppose you think that your health is very important, and accordingly try to keep to a healthy diet. Now imagine that you (mistakenly) believe that banana-splits are extremely healthy, and so you eat one or more banana-splits every day. Your false belief about what foods are healthy undermines your attempt to preserve your health.

More generally, your behavior is based on what you believe to be the case. If your beliefs are false, you are more likely to act in ways that contravene your intentions and undermine your aims. In a very literal sense, when your actions are based on false beliefs, you don't know what you're doing. Hence we tend to think that knowledge is highly valuable, and, correspondingly, we think it is important to avoid error. Consequently, it makes sense that we attempt to *manage* our cognitive lives, to exercise some kind of control over the processes by which we form, evaluate, sustain, and revise our beliefs.

The main way in which we try to manage our cognitive lives is by trying to attend to our reasons. When we hold beliefs, we typically take ourselves to have good reasons for them, reasons that provide sufficient support for the beliefs we hold, while also suggesting that we should reject competing beliefs. Consider an example. You look out the window and see that it is sunny. You consequently form the belief that it is not raining outside. Your observation of the clear sky and the bright sun provides you with reasons for your belief that it is not raining, while also giving reason to reject the belief that it is raining. Moreover, your belief that it is not raining outside provides you with reasons to act in various ways. If you were planning to go outside, you would probably not wear your raincoat nor carry an umbrella, and so on. Additionally, you think that your reasons for thinking that it is not raining outside can readily be made available to others. Were someone to doubt that it is sunny, you could show her the clear sky and bright sun or you could tell her that you just saw it was a nice day, and then she, too, would have good reason to believe that it is not raining outside.

8 *A Conception of Argument*

It all seems rather easy, right? We believe for reasons. Or, to put the point more precisely, when we believe, we typically take our belief to be the product of what our reasons say we should believe. And this is exactly as it should be. There seems to be something odd, perhaps irrational or even idiotic, about believing *against* the reasons we have. Someone who insists that it is raining while gazing out the window onto a sunny day is not only making the error of believing what is false; she is also failing at rationally managing her beliefs. She not only fails to believe what her best reasons say she should believe; she also believes against them. That is, she not only denies what is obviously true, she denies something whose truth should be obvious *to her*. In such cases, we may say to her, “Look out the window! Can’t you see that it is sunny?” And if our interlocutor persists in asserting that it is raining outside, we are likely to conclude that she’s playing some kind of joke or just being stubborn. In either case, we take it that she doesn’t *really* believe that it is raining, but only *says* that she does. We may scratch our heads, and then move on.

The sunny day case involves a *low-cost error*. Our friend may be wrong about the rain, and so she may take her umbrella with her when she goes outside. No biggie—she carries an umbrella with her on a sunny day. However, change the case a bit. Imagine that it’s raining, it’s clear from the available visual evidence that it’s raining (that is, if she looked out the window she’d see a rainy day), and yet she believes it’s not raining but sunny. So she’s wrong, again. But now add one more thing to the case: she’s planned a large picnic. She’s taking the kids, some grandparents, the neighbors out to the park for a day in the grass and sun. Imagine she reasons as follows: *it can’t be raining, because rain would ruin the picnic*. Not only does our friend reason badly (this is a case of simple wishful thinking), this is a *high-cost error*, and the cost in this case isn’t paid only by her, but by the kids, the grandparents, and the neighbors. There they are in the rain with their cute little picnic baskets, which now are full of soggy sandwiches. That’s a biggie, and one that our friend should want to avoid not just for the sake of having true beliefs about the weather, but to avoid ruining a Saturday for her friends and family. Her beliefs and how she forms them, then, matter not just to her, but to all those folks involved.

Recall from earlier our point about civic-mindedness. Even those who aren’t directly impacted by those breaking the rules nonetheless have grounds for objecting to the violation. Originally our point was about the norms of standing in line, that even those *in front* of the person cutting the line are right to criticize the person who cuts the line behind them. Well, the same thing goes for cognitive norms, too. With the rainy picnic case, not only do the neighbors, kids, and grandparents who got wet have reason to criticize the reasoning, but even those who’d never go on the picnic are right to criticize it, too. And it’s not just because the picnic got ruined, but also because it was bad reasoning.

Again, consider the line-cutting case. Imagine that the inconvenience to those back in line was negligible, and the line moved quickly, and nobody missed out on anything. It still is reasonable to criticize the line-cutter for the simple reason that they broke the rule of lines—*no cuts, wait your turn*. That's because it was just a lucky accident that nobody was inconvenienced. The rule exists in order to make the inconvenience of line-standing equitable and so that we can reasonably manage our time. Well, the same goes for the picnic. Even if the picnic came out fine, the reasoning behind it was still worthy of criticism. This is because it put the picnic and others' Saturdays in jeopardy of ruin, and that ruin was avoided merely by a stroke of good luck. The reasoning was, in a word, careless. We depend on each other to make plans responsibly, follow the rules, and reason well. Those who don't do those things deserve criticism, even if things turn out just fine in the end. Why? Because in being careless, they break the trust we place in them as social creatures.

We are now in a position to pull Aristotle's two insights together. That we are social creatures means that we are interdependent; we rely on each other in various ways in order to develop the attitudes, dispositions, and capabilities most characteristic of human life. Our interdependence involves relations that are mutual and reciprocal. Hence our lives are, at least to some extent, properly the business of others. This is most obviously the case when it comes to the ways in which our beliefs are dependent on information provided by others. We depend upon others to be honest, precise, careful, and accurate. When we rely on others who turn out to be deceitful, malicious, careless, or sloppy, our lives can be damaged. The health of our cognitive lives depends in large part on the health of the cognitive lives of others.

Now, one of the persistent, and perhaps permanent, facts of social life is that people disagree with each other about many of the most important matters. To live socially is to encounter others who believe things that differ from what you believe. What's more, to live socially is to encounter others who believe things that you believe to be patently false. And on top of that, living socially involves encountering others who believe that the things you believe are patently false. In short, social life is rife with disputes and disagreements. This is evident to anyone who reads the newspaper or watches the news on television or has ever read a political blog. It is also evident that not all disputes can be solved by a casual glance out the window, as with the cases we discussed a moment ago. That is, not all disputes are cases in which one party has grasped the relevant facts and the other has simply failed to do so. When people disagree, often they also disagree about what their reasons say they should believe. And sometimes they disagree about what reasons there are.

Perhaps it is unsurprising to find that disagreements over the things we tend to think most important are often of this latter kind. When it comes to Big Questions—matters of how to live, the meaning of life and death,

the natures of justice, liberty, dignity, and equality, and the like—we often not only disagree about what to believe, we also disagree about what should count as a good reason to believe one thing rather than another. For sure, these are cases in which errors can be high-cost. If you're wrong about the nature of justice or the meaning of life, you're likely to do many unjust things and do things with your life that don't actually contribute to its meaning. It's important to figure such things out. The trouble is that disputes over Big Questions are often messy, and, consequently, seemingly interminable. Moreover, they are also *persistent*: that is, despite their messiness and seeming interminability, we nonetheless *continue* to debate these matters. Debate concerning these matters continues precisely because we want to get them right. In fact, even the view that Big Questions are nonsensical and that hence the debates over them are pointless is *itself* a view about which there is great and ongoing debate. Whether we should spend our time debating Big Questions is itself a Big Question! (And whether it's a very costly error to continue to discuss Big Questions is one too!) The point is that we can't stop caring about these matters, and so debate over them persists, despite the fact that it seems likely that no one will ever have the last word.

Imagine a trolley which just keeps going along its track, never reaching a destination. Would it be wise to board such a trolley? More importantly, once on the trolley, would it be wise to not get off if given the chance? Students in our courses sometimes contend that philosophy is like a trolley that just keeps going around in circles. They say that this means that philosophy is a pointless voyage that goes nowhere. Maybe they are correct in the simile. Philosophical debates do seem to go endlessly around and around. But we think our students are wrong to draw the conclusion that philosophy is for that reason *pointless*. Again, to claim that ongoing, perhaps never-ending, debate about things that matter is pointless is to take oneself to know something about what really matters. It is to take oneself to know something about what is a waste of time and what is worthwhile. The claim that philosophy is pointless is itself a philosophical position about a Big Question, one about which there is, as usual, lots of room for prolonged debate. Once again, we confront our puzzling, perhaps even mysterious, condition. We are creatures for whom argument over Big Questions is inescapable—some would say that it is irresistible—yet it is, it seems, without termination. To put the matter succinctly, we are incurable arguers. The question is why we bother.

So why do we bother? Why do we engage in argument? It might help to begin by asking what argument is. As it turns out, it is not easy to say what argument is. In fact, there are long-standing debates among philosophers about the matter. Yet we have to start somewhere. So we begin with the following. In the most general sense, argument is the attempt to make clear the reasons why we believe something that we believe. That's not bad for a start, but it is insufficient. Argument has an additional

dimension that must be introduced. Argument is the attempt not only to make clear what our reasons are, but also to *vindicate* or *defend* what we believe by showing that our belief is well-supported by compelling reasons. We may say, then, that argument has an *inward-looking* and an *outward-looking* aspect. On the one hand, argument is the attempt to articulate the basis for the beliefs we hold; it is an attempt to explain why we believe what we believe. On the other hand, argument is the attempt to *display to others* that they have reason to believe as we do.

Given this latter formulation, we see that argument is one kind of response to disagreement. Since it involves an attempt to respond to disagreement by stating and examining the weight of our reasons, we may say that argument is the *rational* response to disagreement. Argument addresses disagreement by trying to resolve it by means of reasons. To put the point in a different way, an argument is an attempt to put a disagreement to rest by showing those with whom you disagree that they should be compelled by reasons to adopt your belief.

Assuming that this is at least minimally acceptable as a starting-point, it is important to notice that an argument is not simply a verbal fight or a contest of words. To repeat, it is an attempt to *rationally respond to a disagreement*. But notice also that, when we argue, our aim is not simply to resolve a disagreement by winning agreement. Rather, the aim of argument is to win agreement *in the right way*, namely, by presenting reasons and compelling those who disagree with us to recognize their quality. Consequently, when you and your neighbor argue about, say, the death penalty, you do not aim for your neighbor to simply *say* that she believes what you believe; rather, you want her to come to actually believe what you believe. Moreover, you want her to come to believe what you believe *for the good reasons you (take yourself to) have to believe it*. You don't seek merely to persuade your neighbor, you want her to *rationally adopt* your belief. And so you must attempt to show her that the most compelling reasons support your belief (and not hers). To seek simply to persuade her to *say* that she believes what you believe is not to attempt to resolve the disagreement so much as to merely cover it up. But covered-up disagreement is disagreement nevertheless.

To return now to our main query, why should you care about whether your neighbor agrees with you about the best answer to some Big Question, such as, for example, the justice of the death penalty? Why should you care about what your neighbor thinks about anything, for that matter?

The insights from Aristotle that we discussed earlier can help us. We are by nature social creatures for whom believing the truth and avoiding error is of high importance. Consequently, disagreement is troubling to us. This is not only to say that we typically find disagreement uncomfortable, especially in face-to-face contexts. It is also to say that we often find the *fact* that others disagree with us to be troubling. The simple reason is that the fact that others believe things that you reject can sometimes be

evidence that you are wrong. To be sure, this is not to say that widespread agreement about some belief is evidence that it is correct (though it can be, especially when there is widespread agreement among those who have thoroughly investigated the belief in question); nor is it to say that when others disagree with you there is sufficient reason to take yourself to be wrong. The point rather is that when others who seem relatively intelligent, informed, sincere, and rational reject a belief that you accept, you have good reason to worry that you have made a mistake. Perhaps you have misjudged the force of your evidence? Maybe you have overlooked some important consideration or misunderstood the significance of some piece of data? Could there be some new reason or argument that you have not considered? Or perhaps you have been misinformed, misled, or deceived? In other words, disagreement is often an appropriate cause for concern about our beliefs.

But it is important to note that to be concerned about your beliefs is not to stop believing. That others deny what you accept is not in itself cause for skepticism, or the suspension of belief. Believing that Madrid is the capital of Spain is consistent with feeling the need to double-check or reassess the evidence you have for that belief. When one feels concern about a belief, and consequently reviews one's reasons and evidence, one engages in an act of *cognitive hygiene*, not self-doubt. In fact, in our next chapter, we will present reasons for thinking that cognitive health requires us to *maintain* our beliefs, rather than simply holding them steady. That is, we will argue that cognitive health is much like health of other kinds. For example, dental health requires us to make regular trips to the dentist, even when we have no special reason for thinking that our teeth are unhealthy. Other forms of physical health require us to exercise our muscles and consume healthy foods. We do these things even when we have no special reason to believe ourselves unwell. In fact, in the cases of dental and bodily health, if one does not engage in routine check-ups, one incurs certain risks; health problems that would otherwise be minor and easily treated can become serious if they are not diagnosed in their early stages. Moreover, we have regimens of maintaining the health of our teeth and our bodies—we brush regularly and have exercise regimens. Similarly, our cognitive health requires us to occasionally *check* and *maintain* our beliefs and the reasons we have for holding them.

And here's the rub. Cognitive health requires us to maintain a regimen of cognitive hygiene. In order to be healthy believers, we must on occasion reexamine, reassess, and reevaluate the reasons we have for holding our beliefs. Now, these processes are inevitably social in that our reasons, evidence, and data in large measure derive from the experiences, testimony, and expertise of others. We must rely on others in order to remain cognitively healthy. We need others in order to manage our cognitive lives.

People tend to see disagreements and the arguments they occasion to be signals of disharmony and unhealthy conflict. To be sure, face-to-face

disagreements sometimes are hostile and unfriendly affairs. But recall that in the sense we are employing here, argument is not necessarily aggressive or unsociable. Our claim is that properly conducted argument and reasoned disagreement is a normal and necessary feature of social life. In fact, we have suggested further that disagreement is a kind of cognitive resource, and thus a good. Those who disagree with the things you believe provide an occasion for you to check your beliefs and your reasons.

And this gives rise to two results that may seem surprising: There is a sense in which argument is an expression of our *respect* and *care* for each other. That is, when you argue with your neighbor, you exhibit concern not only for your own beliefs, but for hers. Again, in arguing, you not only try to win agreement from your neighbor, but you also address her as a fellow rational agent, a person both capable of following and being moved by reasons, and one who can be a source of reasons that can move you. In this sense, engaging in argument with others is a way of showing *respect* for them. But we also see that arguing is also a way of *caring* for others. In arguing, we help others to check their own beliefs and reasons; we provide the resources by means of which they can maintain their cognitive health. It does seem strange, we admit, to say that arguing with others is a way of showing that you care, but everything hangs on what argument is and how it is conducted. If you conduct yourself properly in argument, arguing with others indeed shows that you care for them. If you behave badly in argument, it most certainly alienates others and gets in the way of our cognitive health. And as a consequence, we'd say it's a failure of care. Consequently, arguing well is very important, and what we call the *dialectical* notion of argument captures this social element of arguing well.

So let us ask once more: Why do we bother with argument? We bother with argument because it matters to us that we believe responsibly, and it bothers us when we find that we have made a mistake or have been duped. The fact that others disagree with the things we believe occasions in us the concern that, in forming our beliefs, we have overlooked or misjudged some important piece of evidence or some compelling kind of reason. In cases where the beliefs in question are important, we often call upon those who reject what we believe to provide their own reasons, and we subsequently attempt to weigh their reasons against our own. Even though some arguments over Big Questions seem to go on and on, we engage in the activity of arguing for the sake of caring for our beliefs. You see, it is not so puzzling or mysterious after all.

Not all communication is argumentative. Sometimes people speak in order to haggle, bargain, jockey, compete, flatter, insult, amuse, inform, threaten, and charm. As was said earlier, argument is the attempt to resolve disagreement rationally. The discussion so far has emphasized the positive aspects of argumentation. However, as everyone knows, in the real world, things are not nearly as rosy. People often evoke the apparatus of argument in order to accomplish aims other than rational persuasion.

Under the guise of earnest reason-giving, they seek to embarrass, discredit, ridicule, humiliate, stigmatize, and silence those with whom they disagree. Further, there are those who are simple rationalizers; they have preferred beliefs and pretend to argue for them, but they do not put forth the reasons on the basis of which they truly hold their beliefs. They'll just say anything that they think will place their beliefs in a favorable light. Such is what might be called *pseudo-argument*. It is often difficult to tell the difference between proper argumentation and its counterfeits. In other words, there is a dark side to argumentation. The rest of this book consists of an attempt to provide guidance on how to argue properly, and how to distinguish proper argument from its imposters.

For Further Thought

- 1 According to the view developed in this chapter, we argue primarily because we encounter disagreement, and we need to find a way to respond rationally to it. But maybe a better response to disagreement is simply to avoid it altogether. Is there any reason why one should not attempt simply to interact only with those with whom one agrees about the things that matter most?
- 2 Might the answers to certain Big Questions be a matter not of evidence but of faith? Does the answer to this question affect the overall view presented in this chapter?
- 3 Many philosophers think that almost no one forms beliefs on the basis of reasons, arguments, and evidence. They say that our beliefs are most frequently the products of non-rational phenomena, such as habituation and acculturation. Suppose they are correct. Does this render argument pointless? Might there be a difference between *how we come to believe* what we believe and *how we maintain* our beliefs?
- 4 Is it really other people's business what you believe? Is it your business how your neighbor forms her beliefs, even if they have nothing to do with you?
- 5 In this chapter we argue that if people think it's pointless to argue over Big Questions, they must take themselves to have answered a Big Question. Is that right? If we are right, does it mean that the view that it's pointless to argue about Big Questions is self-refuting? Or is there another option?

Key Terms

Epistemology	The philosophical analysis of knowledge. The key questions are: What is Knowledge? What do we know? How do we show that we know?
Big Questions	Roughly, questions about central values and truths at the foundation of a meaningful human life. There is

wide and persistent disagreement about these questions and their answers.

Dialectical View
of Argument

The take on argument that it is an attempt to rationally resolve a disagreement and answer critical questions. Argument is best seen as an instance of dialogue in search of truth.

Pseudoargument

The argumentative product of rationalization, where one finds a preferred conclusion and goes looking for premises to support it.

2 Why Argument Matters

Here's where things stand. We know why we argue. Argument is a natural activity for social beings that desire to know. Insofar as humans are by nature political beings who value knowledge, we might say that arguing is an essential part of what it is to be human. Now a new consideration emerges. That argument is a natural activity for humans does not mean that humans are naturally *adept* at argument. It only means that we are *prone* to argue. That we tend to engage in argument does not mean that we tend to argue properly, or even adequately. Some claim that it is obvious that most people argue poorly. In fact, after you take a logic class and learn the fallacy lists, you will likely come to believe that people reason more poorly than you had thought. It's a regular occurrence among students in our logic classes to bemoan the fact that once they've gotten good at detecting fallacies, they can't look anywhere without seeing them. Bad arguments are pretty much the only arguments around.

But before things get too cynical, let's be clear about what arguing well is all about. The topic of the present chapter is the importance of arguing well. After examining this issue, we will be prepared to examine *how* to argue well, which is the subject of the remainder of this book. Only once we've gotten clear about what comprises a good argument can we really see what's going wrong with bad ones.

When you think about it, arguments—or at least what are *presented* as arguments—are everywhere. In our everyday lives we are constantly subjected to purportedly rational appeals that attempt to alter our beliefs or create wholly new ones. These come from our friends and associates, teachers, authors of books, news media, celebrities, talk-show hosts, advertisers, leaders, and governments. It is easy to see why this is so. As was already noted, our beliefs frequently guide or determine our behavior, and others care about how we behave. Thus they have reason to care about what we believe.

That we care about how others behave and thus what others believe is, as we emphasized in the previous chapter, a consequence of the fact that our social interdependence requires us to rely on each other in various ways. And, once again, this mutual reliance can give rise to troubling