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### You Should Have Arguments For Your Views?

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### *Introduction*

The discipline of informal logic is devoted to the study of the nature and value of argument. The Critical Thinking (CT) movement is the subdiscipline that applies the lessons of informal logic to the undergraduate curriculum.<sup>1</sup> A natural development of this agenda is to tie the undergraduate study of argument to democratic culture, using contemporary controversial social issues as the motivation for students to think seriously about the philosophical problems of reasoning.<sup>2</sup> It should be no surprise, then, that the rallying cry of the CT movement is something like "You should have reasons (arguments) for your views." Moreover, a more or less negative pedagogic routine falls out of the movement. Although the aim of informal logic is to neutrally find and evaluate arguments, the tools of the trade lend themselves primarily to finding bad arguments. As a result, the procedure becomes emphatically critical and most of this criticism is negative.

There are good reasons to take the rallying cry and its attendant pedagogy seriously. We sometimes find ourselves in disagreement about issues like abortion, gun control, immigration policy, and environmental protection. There are many ways to resolve such disagreements or breakdowns in intersubjectivity. We can appeal to experts, traditions, force, or a roll of the dice. But we are sometimes led to reasoning together by a shared sense that the alternatives are bad, or at least worse. For example, sometimes we positively do not want to rely on experts to set us back on course—either because we don't trust the ones available, or because we want everyone affected by the eventual solution to have a part in crafting or discovering it. Sometimes we even feel that an established area of expertise does not cover the situation in question at all. Just as we sometimes shun experts, we sometimes refuse to rely on habit or tradition, fearing for our autonomy, or our objectivity, or both. We often pass up on the use of coercion to impose a solution, knowing that an imposed solution is often deadly to morale. Sometimes, after canvassing these alternatives and others, we decide to try reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, reasoning together has its virtues, and they might attract us as much as we are repelled by the alternatives. If we want to figure out how to go on in a way which is democratic, inclusive, likely to produce a genuine list of the potential solutions, protected (at least ideally) from the distortions which flow from power or dogmatism, then we might feel drawn toward reasoning. Reasoning also has a good track record—we reason together everyday with perfectly satisfying (if not profound) results.

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<sup>1</sup> The CT movement has recently made its way into primary and secondary education as well.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Copi and Cohen (1998), Govier (1992), Johnson and Blair (1993), and Moore and Parker (1998). A notable exception to this trend is Wright (2001). While Wright does offer guidance for adjudicating controversy it is less substantively ambitious than the guidance provided by most authors in the CT movement.

<sup>3</sup> This material is drawn largely from Campolo and Turner (forthcoming).

Despite the motivation for the idea that we should have arguments for our views, below I will consider two different points that recommend a much more cautious attitude toward the rallying than is commonly accepted. If I am correct, the CT movement has placed a burden on our articulation skills--giving, recognizing and evaluating arguments--which it cannot bear. As a result, the call to provide arguments for all of one's views is not only, strictly speaking, impossible, it is, when applied to the adjudication of contemporary controversial social issues, pernicious.

### ***Why We Cannot Give Arguments For All Our Views***

The first point to make follows from the recognition of a practical constraint on our articulation skills. A viewpoint can be expressed in terms of a belief held by the agent whose viewpoint it is. But once we see this it is not hard to see the problem. There are literally an uncountable number of beliefs held by an agent at any given time. We have countless beliefs, for example, about the weather: predictions about what it will be like today, tomorrow, next week, the more distant future; a sense of what we should do about the weather today, tomorrow, next week; how future weather conditions will impact our lives. And so on. Our beliefs or views about the weather, however, just scratch the surface. To successfully get around in the world, to survive, we must come to believe countless things about our local environment. A typical trip in the family car to the store requires a great many, if not uncountable, number of beliefs about everything from the condition of the streets to the actions of other drivers. There are simply too many beliefs, then, to individually reflect on them all. And if there are too many beliefs to reflect on individually there are certainly too many beliefs to articulate the reasons we have for thinking those beliefs are reasonable or true.

In fact, the situation is more complicated than I have suggested. Wright (1995) has argued that what an agent comes away with from any given experience can be articulated in innumerable distinct ways. For example, walking back to my office I notice that a colleague is berating a student in the hall. What do I come away with from this experience: I thought it was rude to take that tone of voice with the student; I thought that it was rude to publicly humiliate the student; I thought that if the point of the display was to shame the student into better behavior in the future it probably would not work; I thought that you must have been working a bit too much lately and were likely ready to explode; I thought that I should probably talk with you about the incident after you had cooled off; I thought that the student would complain to the chair of the department; I thought that this incident, coupled with the student complaint last year, could get you in trouble with the administration. This list could continue indefinitely. As Wright points out all of these beliefs or views, for lack of a better word, could not have entered my consciousness at the same time and perhaps none of them did; however, my experience is what accounts for all of them. Moreover, there is nothing out of the ordinary about this scenario, it is, as Wright says, "not just typical, but inevitable. We could not learn all we do—all we must—one proposition at a time: there's too much of it. We take things in in big unarticulated lumps that are variously articulable." (Wright 1995, 4)

So if the way we come to learn about the world is in "big lumps that are variously articulable" then any given experience we have can be decomposed into uncountably many beliefs or views. And if we are to take the CT movement seriously, each one of these views or beliefs is in need of an argument, an articulable set of reasons for thinking each one of these

uncountably many beliefs or views is true. But this is absurd. It is quite literally impossible to provide an argument for all of our views. And if it is not literally impossible it is pathological, and from a practical standpoint dangerous. If, as an oncoming bus approaches, we deliberate about our options in ever greater detail the end result will not be a good argument, it will be an untimely death.

But perhaps what is meant by the claim that you should have reasons for your views is not that you should have reasons for all of your views just some of them; in particular, one might argue that the slogan is intended to suggest that you should have reasons for only those views that are controversial. This rendering of the slogan captures the CT movement's concern with offering relevant real world advice. Unfortunately, however, restricting the scope of the slogan to "controversial" views does not solve the problem, for it is entirely unclear what "controversial" means. In the right context any given belief I have could be controversial. For example, imagine that my colleague confronts me about what I witnessed in the hall. In this context every belief that I came away with from my brief observation of my colleague's behavior with the student is controversial. Since there are innumerable many of these beliefs I cannot provide an argument for each one of them. And, of course, similar considerations apply to our complex perceptions about drugs, school violence, the criminal justice system, welfare reform, the role of money in politics, global warming, global capitalism, the destruction of the rainforests, the obligations of rich nations to poor nations, female genital mutilation, etc.

Since we cannot articulate reasons for all of our views, even controversial ones, the slogan of the CT movement is at best an overstatement. But one might argue that this does not mean that we cannot or should not give reasons for the standard kinds of controversial views discussed in a typical Critical Thinking course. A conceptual point about the way we come to have views cannot show that teaching students to offer reasons for at least some of their views about matters of great social controversy, and then subjecting the resulting arguments to critical scrutiny, is problematic. True enough; the stronger claim concerning the pernicious nature of the rallying cry, and its pedagogic routine, when applied to the adjudication of contemporary controversial issues requires further argument. It is to this argument that we now turn.

### ***Why We Should Not Give Arguments For All Our Views***

The dialogical promise of reasoning is, at least in part, intersubjective effectiveness. Usually it's like this: we were doing something together, needed to continue, were doing fine, but then some sort of obstacle or confusion arose, and we began to disagree about how to proceed, or we were just stumped about what to do next. We offer reasons or arguments in this context in the hope that they will help us get back on track. And when the circumstances are right, giving reasons does the trick.

But it is not always easy to determine what counts as a reason since there are an infinite number of articulable propositions relevant to any potential conclusion. How, then, to select amongst this infinite amount of stuff? In what I will call safe cases<sup>4</sup> selecting from the infinite amount of relevant information is nearly effortless. So we may be able to learn something by looking at such cases. Consider five cases summarized below:

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<sup>4</sup> The term is borrowed from Campolo and Turner (forthcoming).

- 1) A colleague asks about an oil stain under my car. I tell her that my car must have an oil leak since the stain is new and the car hasn't been moved for a while. She thinks I must be right.
- 2) Several students drop by a professor's office during scheduled office hours to ask about a quiz. The professor's door is open but she is not in the office. One student suggests that she is gone for the day, but another points out that she just saw the instructor in class and that there is a steaming cup of coffee on her desk. The students jointly conclude that the instructor is around somewhere and will be back shortly.
- 3) Laura asserts that her husband is having an affair. Her friend says that she cannot imagine that John could do that sort of thing. Laura replies by pointing out that he has consistently been home late for the past two weeks, often smells of a perfume that she doesn't wear, and is trying to hide the fact that he is calling the number of a high school sweetheart that he recently ran into at his ten year reunion. Her friend finds it impossible to resist Laura's conclusion.
- 4) While out running errands together, my wife suggests that it would be better to go to the dry cleaner before the grocery store. When I ask why she says simply: we need ice cream. I head for the dry cleaners.
- 5) Sara suggests to her husband that they go visit her mother. When asked for a reason she responds by pointing out that a preemptive visit will preclude her mother from visiting them. Her husband concurs.

In these cases offering reasons successfully produces intersubjective agreement. In addition, the interlocutors can, as I mentioned above, almost effortlessly select just the right information from the infinite relevant information available. But how do reasoners do this? Is it luck? Clearly the answer is no. Rather, what is going on in safe cases is that contextual features are doing a great deal of work. One contextual feature, in particular, is important: knowing how your interlocutor's understanding of the situation in question differs from your own.

For example, in case one why mention that the oil stain is new and that my car has not been moved recently as reasons for my colleague to believe that the car has an oil leak? I could have, instead, suggested that gravity is at work in this situation, that cars use oil, that oil sometimes leaks from cars, that there's not much likelihood of an underground oil deposit in the neighborhood, or that vandals in this neck of the woods use egg products and not oil to do their dirty work. The reason I do not offer these propositions as support is obvious. My colleague's understanding of the situation differs from mine in relatively minor ways that are easy for me to determine. I know, for example, that she lives in the neighborhood, drives a car, takes it in to get oil changes and the like, but that she does not know that the stain is new and that the car has not been moved. It is these last two pieces of information, then, that are needed by way of argument if we are to secure intersubjective agreement. And if, for some reason, my colleague did not know all of the other things mentioned above, and many more, offering up any set of propositions for the conclusion that the car has an oil leak would fall on deaf ears; for if this were the case, my colleague would not need an argument she would need an education. Similar points can be made for cases two through five.

Of course, we do not always know how our interlocutor's understanding of the case at hand differs from our own, it is not always as obvious as the cases above suggest. Since this is precisely what allows us to determine what to select from the infinite amount of relevant information, we would expect the classic tools of the informal logic movement to offer some guidance. But none of the classic tools in the informal logic movement's toolbox help with this aspect of things at all. Validity and invalidity, for example, provide us with a way to determine if a set or premises does or does not entail the conclusion; however, this will not necessarily help interlocutors with the task of offering information that fills in gaps in what would otherwise be overlapping shared understandings of the circumstances. I could offer countless deductively valid arguments to my colleague with the conclusion that the car has an oil leak that would fall on deaf ears; that is, the offering of reasons would not result in a restoration of intersubjective agreement.<sup>5</sup> Similarly in case four my wife could offer a valid deductive argument for the conclusion that we should do the grocery shopping after we pick up the dry cleaning that would utterly fail to convince me. An appeal to statistics or fallacies will not fare any better since neither of these tools helps interlocutors to determine how they differ in their understandings of the circumstances.

One recent account of reasoning (Wright 1995) does offer guidance. Wright suggests that cases like the ones discussed above possess the necessary ingredients for reasoning to make good on its dialogical promise. The interlocutors in the cases above understand the problem or the issue that has arisen, they share a sense of the question that needs to be addressed. Wright calls this the "implicit question". In addition, they share a sense of what would count as an answer to the implicit question—we expect them to have little trouble arriving at a short list of plausible, distinct (or rival) answers. And we expect them to be able to identify some features of the situation that bear one way or another on the competition between those rival answers. Finally, we expect them to be able to make judgments about which rival answer is the best in light of those situational features. When the circumstances make it possible for arguers to settle on these issues, then it is not difficult to determine what counts as appropriate or relevant information: information is relevant as support if it has an impact on the list of plausible answers, or rival conclusions for the argument in question.

Consider, for example, case two. The students involved have the same question on their minds: Where is the instructor? For students savvy in the way of offices and instructors, there are few alternative answers worth considering: Either she's nearby and soon to be back or she's not in or likely to be in any time soon. None of the arguers will have any trouble picking out features of the situation that are relevant to the competition between those answers to the question. The open door, the recent sighting in class, the steaming coffee—the students will almost certainly feel that these elevate the first possible answer high over the second. We can organize some of the key components of this reasoning in the following manner:

Implicit Question: Where is the instructor?

Serious Rival Answers:

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<sup>5</sup> One might argue that the point of offering reasons is normative and so the fact that my colleague is not moved by my valid arguments is not indicative of a problem with the arguments, rather the problem is with my colleague. However, there are countless valid arguments that not only do not convince my colleague, they should not convince her.

C1: She's nearby, likely to return soon.

C2: She's not around, and she's likely to be away for a while.

Relevant Data (features of the situation which bear on the way we rank the rival answers):

P1: The instructor was just seen in class.

P2: The instructor's door is open and the light is on.

P3: There's steaming coffee on her desk.

And in the end we should expect all of this to result in an argument like this:

P1: The instructor was just seen in class.

P2: The instructor's door is open and the light is on.

P3: There's steaming coffee on her desk.

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C1: She's nearby, likely to return soon.

This is likely to end the matter. But if it does not, given that we have settled on an implicit question, a short list of serious rivals, and so on, we know how to provide additional information that, were it available, would likely settle the issue once and for all.<sup>6</sup>

To determine what information needs to be made explicit, then, we need to at least be able to formulate an implicit question and provide a short list of serious rivals. What allows us to settle on these things is competence on the topic under discussion and a generally shared relevant understanding.

To see that this is so, first reflect on how solitary reasoning works—I am faced with a question, I have an idea about what might be the contending answers, I can see how the bits of data available bear on the candidacy of each of those answers, and finally I can often pick out the best one. All of this can only work if I am very fluent in the part of the world I happen to be reasoning about. To figure out, on my own, that the professor has stepped out momentarily, I need to have a competent grasp of the behavior of professors, the everyday workings of university corridors, the set up of a typical academic office, the way people treat coffee, how doors work, and a great deal more. In the end, it is my near expertise in all of these little fields that enables me to see how some features of the situation can help me to answer the implicit question. Further, it is important to note that I can only have become an expert on all of these topics if the relevant parts of the world, professors, light switches, coffee cups, etc., work in relatively stable ways—they must be concrete enough that my errors will be corrected by further experience.

Things are even more complex when two or more people reason together. The mere fact that two people agree on the nature of the implicit question bespeaks a largely shared view of the world and of their relationship to it. To be able to arrive at a list of serious possible answers to that question, a grasp of the features of the situations that bear on the contest between those rivals, and a sense of how to obtain more relevant data if needed—to share all of this requires

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<sup>6</sup> Of course in some cases new information will vandalize our understanding.

that they already largely share deep expertise in the portions of the world at issue. Reasoners must have all of this in common—and must be able to take it mostly for granted.<sup>7</sup> If my interlocutor knows *nothing* about coffee, professors, office hours, and the like, then reasoning simply won't help. Again, if this is the case my friend needs an education not an argument.

Reasoning together, then, is a way of rallying what we know together (or at least believe together) toward the purpose of figuring out something we're unsure about. The point about the cases above is not that they are powerful or profound arguments. It's that in each case articulating bits of information is successful because the interlocutors rely heavily on a great deal of shared understanding and competence. It is easy to overlook this point and its importance, for in cases like the ones above this point is so obvious that it recedes into the background. If one of the reasoners does not have the right competences, or if the reasoners have trouble figuring out what each other means, or if the part of the world or life that they're talking about is not fairly stable, then articulating reasons not only may not solve anything, it may be harmful; for in such cases reasoners cannot rely on the resources that reasoning together requires.

And if Wright is correct, these key components of the circumstances that allow the giving of arguments to cash in on its dialogical promise are systematically missing from virtually all matters of controversy we typically deal with in standard Critical Thinking courses (e.g., abortion, God, gun control, gun laws, hate speech, capital punishment...). Consider, for example, the following paradigmatic case in which offering reasons does not live up to its dialogical promise:

Mary, a religious devotee and abortion foe, tries to convince Susan, a pro-choice advocate, that Susan's own beliefs already entail the wrongness of abortion: "After all, you believe that it is wrong to take the life of a person, and an unborn fetus is surely a person!" Susan's answer: "It's not always wrong to take the life of a person, and in any case, I don't believe that an unborn fetus is a person." The two have argued about these same points for years.

This case evokes the lines of a classic debate between those who do and do not believe that abortion should be allowed. Nevertheless, if the considerations adduced above are correct, then the two opponents have far too little in common to make much headway by reasoning. It is not even clear that the opponents have a definite question in mind. Is the question about whether or not Susan's beliefs entail the wrongness of abortion, or is it about whether or not abortion is wrong? Since they do not seem to have the same question in mind, Mary and Susan cannot turn to consider an agreed upon list of possible answers. It goes almost without saying that they won't be able to assess relevance relations, rank rival answers, or do any of the things that reasoners need to do to get back on track. Further, this sort of case is unhappily, but famously, lacking in the sort of concreteness that makes effective reasoning possible. Nothing in their surroundings or experience provides a common reference point or correction. Finally, the failure to provide these things is indicative of the fact that Mary and Susan's understandings of the relevant aspects of the world are radically different. However, one might object that there is less trouble here than I have suggested. Surely there is but one question that Mary and Susan are trying to answer: Should we allow abortion? And surely Mary argues that the answer to this question is "no" while

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<sup>7</sup> This accounts for the fact that reasoning together can sometimes seem like a process of trading rather obvious reminders.



Susan argues that it is "yes". But this picture of the exchange is too simple. Mary's "argument"--Abortion is murder because a fetus is a person--is not so much an argument as it is a stand in for a global picture of how things should go. The same is true of Susan's "argument".

Thus, even if they recognize where their understandings diverge, changing a substantial bit of understanding typically requires more than an argument or anything brief; substantial change in understanding requires experience, education, training and the like. Even philosophers, for example, do not have a clear sense of what sort of *argument* can be given for one normative picture of the world over another. Whatever the answer is to this question it is not something that can be easily raised, much less answered, in a typical lower division Critical Thinking course. However, because the significance of vocabulary rests on inarticulably vast aspects of our understanding of the case at hand, and the world generally, it is unlikely that Mary and Susan will be in a position to locate their disagreement and it is extremely likely that they will simply talk past one another. And even if they can agree on a common vocabulary they will likely use it in vastly different ways.<sup>8</sup> As a result Mary and Susan will quickly become impatient with each other. If they are sensitive, and well trained, much of their time and energy will be spent trying to employ interpretive charity. If they are not, much of their time and energy will be spent generating frustration and hurt feelings, and ultimately hurling unhelpful insults at each other.

We should not underestimate just how difficult it is to be charitable in situations in which the participants have such widely divergent understandings of the world. So, it should be easy to see that everything about this case militates against the possibility that Mary and Susan will reach intersubjectivity *through reasoning*. Their efforts will most likely be futile. But the real problem is that they may not realize this. Mary may feel compelled to convince Susan that Susan is wrong, and vice versa. But the "reasons" they give each other cannot bridge the gap between their views. Insisting on providing arguments in such a case amounts to pretending that by articulating what one knows, one can convert someone's very different understanding into one's own. This suggests that they have an inflated view of what reasoning can do, and this warps their sense of when reasoning should or should not be employed.

And so it should be easy to see now why the standard routine in Critical Thinking courses of requiring arguments for our views and then showing that the resulting arguments are bad or fallacious is both tempting and pernicious. It is tempting just because offering reasons works so effortlessly in the kinds of mundane cases described above. We expect it, then, to pay dividends in the more controversial aspects of our social lives as well. But it is pernicious in just this context. For controversy arises only when understandings are far apart, when we do not share enough to settle on an implicit question, a list of rivals, and the other features discussed in Wright's view. And if this is the case nothing in argument form can hope to address the issue. Everything offered in this form, then, will be inadequate, which is to say, bad. Thus, since every argument offered in this context is bad, showing that an argument is bad cannot be significant. However, the implication of spending time showing that an argument is bad is that the activity is significant. Thus, the rallying cry of the informal logic movement and the standard pedagogic

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<sup>8</sup> I suspect that this is why Dworkin's (1994, 2000) claim that disputants in the abortion debate or the debate over distributive justice really agree on the fundamental issues does not really advance things. For in both cases since the disputants have radically disparate understandings of the world, the significance of the vocabulary used to express the values embedded in those understandings is different, even if, as Dworkin suggests, it is the same vocabulary.

routine it inspires are pernicious; they mislead students about the use and usefulness of argument.

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