

Arguing Values

1. What are values?

As the textbook *Asking the Right Questions* says, are the *abstract ideas* that a person thinks are worthwhile. Values strongly influence behavior: If you are committed to the *idea* that achievement is good, then it's likely you'll work hard.

2. What values are there?

Here are two lists of the things we value, from one ancient and one modern theorist.

As you read the lists, ask yourself what (if anything) is wrong. Are there values that are important to you that aren't there? Are there values that are listed that don't seem, well, valuable?

Also ask yourself whether there's been much change in human values, from ancient to modern times? Does every human being want basically the same things?

From Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (ca. 330 B.C.):

Happiness

Fair-mindedness, courage, temperance, high-mindedness, generosity, and all other like virtues

Health, beauty and the like; for they are excellences of the body

Wealth

Friendship

Honor, fame

Power in speaking, power of action

Natural ability, memory, aptness in learning, quickness of thought

Life

Justice

From Milton Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values* (1973):

A comfortable life (a prosperous life)

An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)

A sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution)

A world at peace (free of war and conflict)

A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)

Equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)

Family security (taking care of loved ones)

Freedom (independence, free choice)

Happiness (contentedness)

Inner harmony (freedom from inner conflict)

Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)

National security (protection from attack)

Pleasure (an enjoyable, leisurely life)

Salvation (saved, eternal life)

Self-respect (self-esteem)

Social recognition (respect, admiration)

True friendship (close companionship)

Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)

Question: How, if at all, do these values apply to the debates you've encountered so far?

Which values do advocates on each side seem to rely on the most? Do both sides rely on the same ones? Are there values that haven't been used in the debates? Do you see how they also might apply?

3. Can we support values with reasons?

Can we support values at all? If everyone has their own values, isn't it just a waste of time to reason about them? Shouldn't we respect each other, and leave each other alone? As the textbook *Asking the Right Questions* says, "value preferences require some justification that critical thinkers can consider"—that is, values require *reasoning*.

Chaim Perelman was a philosopher in the mid-twentieth century who also expressed this idea. Having lived through World War II, he was impressed by the need to substitute arguing for fighting as a way of resolving conflicts within and between societies. Here's what he said about the possibility of arguing about values, in his book, *The New Rhetoric*.

Values enter, at some stage or other, into every argument. In reasoning of a scientific nature, they are generally confined to the beginning of the formulation of the concepts and rules that constitute the system concerned and, insofar as the reasoning aims at the truth value, to the conclusion. As far as possible, the actual unfolding of the [scientific] argument is free from values, and this exclusion is at a maximum in the exact sciences. But in the fields of law, politics, and philosophy, values intervene as a basis for argument at all stages of the developments. One appeals to values in order to induce the hearer to make certain choices rather than others and, most of all, to justify those choices so that they may be accepted and approved by others.

In a discussion, it is not possible to escape from a value simply by denying it. Just as someone who contests that something is a fact must give reasons for his allegation, . . . so, when a value is in question, a person may disqualify it, subordinate it to others, or interpret it but may not reject all values as a whole: this would amount to leaving the

realm of discussion to enter that of force. The gangster who rates his personal safety above anything else can do so without any need for explanation as long as he confines himself to the domain of action. But if he wants to justify this primacy to others or even to himself, he must acknowledge other values marshaled against it in order to be able to fight them. In this respect, values are comparable to facts: for, when one of the interlocutors puts forward a value, one must argue to get rid of it, under pain of refusing the discussion.

Question: What does Perelman mean by saying that if the gangster wants to *justify* his action, he has to appeal to values? Is that really true?

4. How do we support our values?—four methods.

I'm going to assume you're willing to at least try out the idea that we can actually *support* our values.

So: what specific tools do we have for supporting them? There has been surprisingly little research on this important subject—it would be a good topic for an independent study! I'm going to suggest four of the undoubtedly many methods we have for supporting values. For each, I'll bring in examples from Martin Luther King's speeches and writings.

(a) The Comparison method.

Milton Rokeach's studies suggest that Americans, and perhaps all humans, basically share the same values. It's unlikely, for example, that a person wouldn't care about National Security *at all*. People differ, however, in the way they rank the values. Each of us has our own *value hierarchy*—our own list of the top, middle, and bottom values.

(One exercise you may want to try is to put Rokeach's list of values (page 1) in order for yourself. Then ask a family member, friend or roommate to do the same, and compare your lists. Any surprises?)

So if we all agree that all the values have *some* value, what are we arguing about? Often when arguing values, we're really arguing that one value is *more important* than another value. For example, one side may argue that National Security requires us to give up a little on Freedom; the other side may argue that Freedom requires a sacrifice of National Security. As the textbook, *Asking the Right Questions* puts it, we often find not that one side has values and the other doesn't, but that the values are in *conflict*. And we try to resolve the conflict by *comparing* the values—seeing which one is more important in this case.

Martin Luther King supported his position in this way in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, trying to persuade his audience that it was even allowable to break laws against marching in the streets in order to eliminate segregation. He is supporting the idea that Justice and Freedom are more important than Law and Order:

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. . . . [But] We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a Communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws. . . . I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.

So this is Method 1: Comparison: make an explicit and vivid comparison between the value we have to achieve, and the value we have to sacrifice.

(b) The Concreteness method.

Values like True Friendship, Equality and Freedom seem important but vague--they are abstract, intangible, and thus unlikely to move anyone. They're just words, even with the capital letters. To support the importance of an abstract value like these, try talking about a *concrete example* of it. It's easier for your audience to relate to the concrete example; it's more vivid, interesting and emotionally powerful. Think about it: although I bet you wouldn't risk your life for "Friendship," I bet

you would if necessary for your actual best friend.

For example, instead of talking about the abstract value of Equality in his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King used the concrete example of a specific, concrete *sacred text* that he expects everyone in his audience to care about.

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check: a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

In addition to sacred texts, you could also argue the value of Equality by giving an example of a *person*—for example, Dr King himself. Advertisements for charities do this frequently: as a powerful reminder of the value of Generosity, they show us haunting pictures of specific children, or tell us their vivid stories.

In addition to texts and persons, any other specific *object, image, event* or whatever could work, as long as it effectively reminds the audience of what they really care about.

In the next few weeks of this course, we'll discuss arguments from example. We'll see that

in general, it takes more than one example to establish that something will in fact happen. But notice that that is a *factual* argument, not a *value* argument—it isn't trying to establish what is *good*, but what *will happen*. Unlike factual arguments, it often only takes one example to establish a value claim—one vivid, powerful, passionate one.

So this is Method 2: Concreteness: give a specific example that the audience will find vivid and attractive.

(c) **The Think Big method.**

Usually we make decisions while just paying attention to what's in front of us. We focus on whatever is concerning us at the moment, and decide what to do quickly and efficiently.

Often, in order to support the values you want your audience to step back, out of their immediate concerns, and think much more deeply—to Think Big.

You can ask your audience to Think Big in space, considering what people around the world would think of us if we live up to or fail to live up to the value.

You can also ask your audience to Think Big in time. Our deepest values are the ones we inherited from our ancestors, and hope to pass on to our descendents.

In fact, Thinking Big is the technique that gave Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech its name. Notice how he points to both the "dream" of the past (the founding of the United States) and the "dream" of a future in which true equality will exist.

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American

dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed-- we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

Notice that in speaking of his dream, Dr. King isn't trying to make a specific prediction. That would require support (to answer the HDYKT? question). Instead, he *dreams* the future, and shares his dream with us in vivid, effective language. Again, value argument and factual argument turn out to be rather different.

So this is Method 3: Think Big: help the audience imagine vividly why the value is important in the big picture—what others will think, what we have inherited from the past and hope to leave to the future.

(d) **The Hypocrisy method.**

People may have a value, but not live up to it much. To persuade them to act better, try pointing, politely, to the difference between what they know and what they do. Remind them of their value commitments, and then show them how they aren't living up to them. Here is Dr. King pointing out that his Christian readers had not been living up to their faith, from his "Letter" again:

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church

was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were a "colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

Of course, you want to use the Hypocrisy method carefully. In general, we don't go around denouncing people for failing to live up to their values. (Although prophets *do* do just that.) However, it is possible to remind people in a restrained fashion what they really believe, and how different their actions are.

So this is Method 4: Hypocrisy: make an explicit and vivid comparison between the value we care about, and our actual actions.

NOTE: If there is a quiz on this reading, I will select one of the four methods, and ask you to give an example of your own of it (in one sentence). If you like, prepare now by making up and writing down one example for each method, and hand in that sheet at the time of the quiz.