

Why Argue?

Why argue—if at all?—That's one of the key questions you need to find your own answer to. In the following pages, I've collected some answers that have worked for other people. Some are positive, some negative. Which seem most plausible to you? Which are the most strange? Do even the strange ones have some merit, if you think about them?

1. Arguing in Baghdad.

Iraqis Now Feel Free to Disagree

By Anthony Shadid, to the *New York Times*.

BAGHDAD, April 9, 2003 -- A scene erupted on a street in Baghdad today that many residents had not seen in their lifetimes. People debated.

"Believe me, I have waited for this moment for 35 years," said Majid Mohammed, an electrical engineer. "You must bring these words to the American people. Thank you, thank you very, very much."

Zuheir Girgis hesitated, then said he would wait and see. "Nobody hates freedom, and if they bring freedom, nobody will hate them," he insisted.

Dhikran Albert shook his head. "If they've come as invaders," he warned, "nobody will welcome them."

Mohammed delighted in the moment. No one was looking over their shoulders, no one was dreading a question. The Baath Party cadres in the neighborhood were in their homes, dressed in civilian clothes. The Iraqi soldiers had fled, some leaving weapons behind.

"We are now free, so everybody has an opinion," he said.

2. Apathy is rational.

From George Tullock, *Toward a Mathematics of Politics*.

We may well start our consideration of information and politics by taking seriously a well-known joke. Mr. Smith, upon being asked who made the decisions in his family replied, "We have a division of labor. My wife makes decisions on minor matters, and I make them on major

problems. For example, my wife decides where we should go for vacations, the children's education, etc. I decide our attitude toward the recognition of China." It is always a mistake to analyze a joke, but let us, at least, inquire what is funny about this one. Most people would agree that relations with China are, indeed, more important than where the Smith family spends its vacation. However, most people would also feel that, in fact, the wife runs this family. This apparent paradox is easily explained. The decision of the Smith family on where they will spend their vacation will be the controlling decision on that matter, but although in a democracy their decision on relations with China has some influence on the country's relations with China, it is clearly only a tiny amount. If we evaluate the importance on the minor influence which the attitude of the Smith family has on our relations with China, then we will see that the Smith family decision on China is, indeed, much less important—as regards effects—than their decision as to where they will spend their vacation.

Public problems are normally more important than private problems, but the decision by any individual on a private problem is likely to be more important than his decision on a public problem, simply because most people are not so situated that their decision on public matters makes very much difference. It is rational, therefore, for the average family to put a great deal more thought and investigation into a decision such as what car to buy than into a decision on voting for President. As far as we can tell, families, in fact, act quite rationally in this matter, and the average family devotes almost no time to becoming informed on political matters, but will carefully consider the alternatives if they are buying a car.

3. Our argument culture.

The book by Deborah Tannen

A pervasive warlike atmosphere ... makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight. It is a tendency in Western culture in general, and in the United States in particular, that has a long history and a deep, thick, and far-ranging root system. It has served us well in many ways but in recent years has become so exaggerated that it is getting in the way of solving out problems. Our spirits are corroded by living in an atmosphere of unrelenting contention—an argument culture.

The argument culture urges us to approach the world--and the people in it--in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as "both sides"; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you're really thinking is to criticize.

Our public interactions have become more and more like having an argument with a spouse. Conflict can't be avoided in our public lives any more than we can avoid conflict with people we love. One of the great strengths of our society is that we can express these conflicts openly. But just as spouses have to learn ways of settling their differences without inflicting real damage on each other, so we, as a society, have to find constructive ways of resolving disputes and differences. Public discourse requires *making* an argument for a point of view, not *having* an argument--as in having a fight.

The war on drugs, the war on cancer, the battle of the sexes, politicians' turf battles--in the argument culture, war metaphors pervade our talk and shape our thinking. Nearly everything is framed as a battle or game in which winning or losing is the main concern. These all have their uses and their place, but they are not the only way--and often not the best way--to understand and approach our world. Conflict and opposition are as necessary as cooperation and agreement, but the scale is off balance, with conflict and opposition overweighted.

4. Argument in Islamic culture.

From Taha Jabir al'Alwani, *The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam*

God Almighty has ordained differences between human beings in their mental capabilities, their languages, the color of their skin, and their perceptions and thoughts. All this naturally gives rise to a multiplicity and variety of opinions and judgments. If our languages, the color of our skins, and our outer appearances are signs of God's creative power and wisdom; and if our minds, our mental capabilities, and the products of these minds are also signs of God and an indication of His consummate power; and if the populating of the universe, the beauty of being alive, and being able to live are also indications of God's power, then we can justifiably say that none of this exquisite beauty and variety among human beings would have been possible if they had been created equal in every respect. . . .

The differences which occurred among our forebears in early Muslim history and which continue to be with us are part of this natural manifestation of variety. Provided that differences do not exceed their limits, and provided they remain within the standard norms of ethics and proper behavior, this is a phenomenon that could prove to be positive and extremely beneficial. . . .

If intentions are sincere, differences of opinion could bring about a greater awareness of the various possible aspects and interpretations of evidence in a given case. Such differences could generate intellectual vitality and a cross-fertilization of ideas. The process is likely to bring into the open a variety of hypotheses in tackling specific issues. Such a process is likely to present a variety of solutions for dealing with a particular situation so that the most suitable solution can be found.

5. How to win arguments, as it were.

By Dave Berry.

I argue very well. Ask any of my remaining friends. I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me. You, too, can win arguments! Simply follow these rules:

Drink liquor. Suppose you are at a party and some hotshot intellectual is expounding on the economy of Peru, a subject you know nothing about. If you're drinking some health-fanatic drink like grapefruit juice, you'll hang back, afraid to display your ignorance, while the hotshot enthalls your date. But if you drink several large martinis, you'll discover you have STRONG VIEWS about the Peruvian economy. You'll be a WEALTH of information. You'll argue forcefully, offering searing insights and possibly upsetting furniture. People will be impressed. Some may leave the room.

Make things up. Suppose, in the Peruvian economy argument, you are trying to prove that Peruvians are underpaid, a position you base solely on the fact that YOU are underpaid, and you'll be damned if you're going to let a bunch of Peruvians be better off. DON'T say: "I think Peruvians are underpaid." Say instead: "The average Peruvian's salary in 1981 dollars adjusted for the revised tax base is \$1,452.81 per annum, which is \$836.07 before the mean gross poverty level."

NOTE: Always make up exact figures. If an opponent asks you where you got your information, make THAT up too. Say: "This information comes from Dr. Hovel T. Moon's study for the Buford Commission published on May 9, 1982. Didn't you read it?" Say this in the same tone of voice you would use to say, "You left your soiled underwear in my bathroom."

Use meaningless but weighty-sounding words and phrases. Memorize this list: Let me put it this way/In terms of /Vis-a-vis /Per se /As it were /Qua /So to speak.

You should also memorize some Latin abbreviations such as "Q.E.D.", "e.g.", and "i.e." These are all short for "I speak Latin, and you don't."

Here's how to use these words and phrases. Suppose you want to say, "Peruvians would like to order appetizers more often, but they don't have enough money." You never win arguments talking like that. But you WILL win if you say, "Let me put it this way. In terms of appetizers vis-a-vis Peruvians qua Peruvians, they would like to order them more often, so to speak, but they do not have enough money per se, as it were. Q.E.D."

Only a fool would challenge that statement.

Use snappy and irrelevant comebacks. You need an arsenal of all-purpose irrelevant phrases to fire back at your opponents when they make valid points. The best are: You're begging the question. /You're being defensive. /Don't compare apples to oranges./ What are your parameters?

This last one is especially valuable. Nobody (other than engineers and policy wonks) has the vaguest idea what "parameters" means.

Don't forget the classic: You're so linear.

Here's how to use your comebacks:

You say: As Abraham Lincoln said in 1873...

Your opponent says: Lincoln died in 1865.

You say: You're begging the question.

You say: Liberians, like most Asians...

Your opponent says: Liberia is in Africa.

You say: You're being defensive.

Compare your opponent to Adolf Hitler. This is your heavy artillery, for when your opponent is obviously right and you are spectacularly wrong. Bring Hitler up subtly. Say, "That sounds suspiciously like something Adolf Hitler might say," or "You certainly do remind me of Adolf Hitler."

So that's it: you now know how to out-argue anybody. Do not try to pull this on people who generally carry weapons.

6. Keeping our ideas alive.

From John Stewart Mill, *Essay on Liberty*.

However true [an opinion] might be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth.

There is a class of persons (happily not quite so numerous as formerly) who think it enough if a person assents undoubtedly to what they think true, though he has no knowledge whatever of the grounds of the opinion, and could not make a tenable defense of it against the most superficial objections. . . . [But] this is not the way in which truth ought to be held by a rational being. This is not knowing the truth. Truth, thus held, is but one superstition the more, accidentally clinging to the words which enunciate a truth.

If the intellect and judgment of mankind ought to be cultivated, . . . on what can these faculties be more appropriately exercised by any one, than on the things which concern him so much that it is considered necessary for him to hold opinions on them? If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one's own opinions. Whatever people believe, on subjects on which it is of the first importance to believe rightly, they ought to be able to defend against at least the common objections. . . . On every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons. Even in natural philosophy [i.e., science] there is always some other explanation possible of the same facts; some geocentric theory instead of heliocentric; some phlogiston instead of oxygen; it has to be shown why that other theory cannot be the true one: and until this is shown, and until we know how it is shown, we do not understand the grounds of our opinion. But when we turn to subjects infinitely more complicated—to morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life, three-fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearance which favor some opinion different from it. The greatest orator, save one, of antiquity, has left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case with as great, if not with still greater, intensity than even his own. What Cicero practiced as the means of forensic success, requires to be imitated by all who study any subject in

order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute him. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments, or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; else he will never really possess himself of the portion of the truth which meets and removes that difficulty. Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition; even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess.

7. Arguing and women.

Again from Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*. Tannen collects many studies which suggest that women and men in American culture have different speaking styles—styles which make public arguing much easier for men than for women.

Madeleine Kunin, the first woman governor of Vermont . . . writes that the most important element in her transformation from private citizen to public person—and the hardest for her to accomplish—was learning to speak in public. She is eloquent in explaining why it was so hard: "The fearful idea that by speaking out I would no longer be a good girl, that my words might antagonize those who heard me, was deeply rooted. If I said the wrong thing at the wrong time, I risked punishment: I might not be liked. Worse yet, I would not be loved."

Governor Kunin articulates the interweaving threads: the expectation that a good girl does not speak up and the fear of an agonistic response. In the minds of many women, these two forces are inseparable. . . .

Governor Kunin's early reluctance to speak in public is shared by many women (and, of course, many men). The social lives of children hold some clues to how this develops. Recall the junior high school party that my students observed, where the girls were comforting one girl who had been hurt by another, and the boys were ridiculing one boy who had been embarrassed by another. My students noticed another difference between the boys and the girls at the party. When they came upon Kate and Mary whispering in the laundry room, the girls immediately stopped talking. But when they were listening in on the boys' conversation, the boys (in Cortney Howard's words) "kind of acted up their emotions as if they were playing in front of an important audience." These differing reactions to being observed were extensions of the ways the conflicts were played out: the girls' in a series of private conversations, the boys' as a form of public display.

Because the boys are used to playing out their rivalries publicly, opposing someone at a meeting is probably less uncomfortable and unacceptable to more men than women. And Governor Kunin's experience is testimony to the usefulness of such early practice.

These different patterns—the girls' inclination to hide their conflict, the boys' to make it into a kind of performance—might explain why

many middle-class girls are reluctant to talk in front of others—for example, in school—and why many adult women find it hard to speak up at meetings. In school, many boys compete aggressively to be called on in class, stretching out their arms and even waving them or calling out. They want to be called on, quite apart from knowing the answer. My nine-year-old nephew tipped me off to this when he said, "You know, it's like in class. You wave your hand to be called on, and then when you are, you have to think fast what to say." Most girls, it seems, don't raise their hands unless they've already thought of what they want to say.

8. Debate and personal liberation.

From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

I've told how debating was a weekly event there at the Norfolk Prison Colony. My reading had my mind like steam under pressure. Some way, I had to start telling the white man about himself to his face. I decided I could do this by putting my name down to debate.

Standing up and speaking before an audience was a thing that throughout my previous life never would have crossed my mind. Out there in the streets, hustling, pushing dope, and robbing, I could have had the dreams from a pound of hashish and I've never have dreamed of anything so wild as that one day I would speak in coliseums and arenas, at the greatest American universities, and on radio and television programs, not to mention speaking all over Egypt and Africa and in England.

But I will tell you that, right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been. Standing up there, the faces looking up at me, things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling it right, then I had won the debate--once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating. Whichever side of the selected subject was assigned to me, I'd track down and study everything I could find on it. I'd put myself in my opponent's place and decide how I'd try to win if I had the other side; and then I'd figure a way to knock down those points. And if there was any way in the world, I'd work into my speech the devilishness of the white man.

9. We need dissenters.

"Pressure to Go Along With Abuse Is Strong, but Some Soldiers Find Strength to Refuse,"

The New York Times, May 14, 2004 By Anahad O'Connor

The images of prisoner abuse still trickling out of Iraq show a side of human behavior that psychologists have sought to understand for decades. But the murky reports of a handful of soldiers who refused to take part bring to light a behavior psychologists find even more puzzling: disobedience.

Buried in his report earlier this year on Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba praised the actions of three men who tried to stop the mistreatment of Iraqi detainees. They are nowhere to be seen in the portraits of brutality that have touched off outrage around the world.

Although details of their actions are sketchy, it is known that one soldier, Lt. David O. Sutton, put an end to one incident and alerted his commanders. William J. Kimbro, a Navy dog handler, "refused to participate in improper interrogations despite significant pressure" from military intelligence, according to the report. And Specialist Joseph M. Darby gave military police the evidence that sounded the alarm.

In numerous studies over the past few decades, psychologists have found that a certain percentage of people simply refuse to give in to pressure - by authorities or by peers - if they feel certain actions are wrong. . . .

The power to resist coercion reflects what psychologists call internal locus of control, or the ability to determine one's own destiny. People at the other end of the scale, with external locus of control, are more heavily influenced by authority figures. They prefer to put their fate in the hands of others.

"If they fail a test, it's the teacher's fault; if they do poorly at a job, it's the boss's fault," said Dr. Thomas Ollendick, a professor of psychology at Virginia Tech. "They put the blame for everything outside of themselves. They are high in conformity because they believe someone else in charge."

The average person, research shows, falls somewhere in the middle of the scale. People who voluntarily enlist in the military, knowing they will take orders, Dr. Ollendick suggested, may be more likely to conform. "These are people who are being

told what to do," he said. "The ones who are conforming from the outset feel they can't change the system they're in. Those who blow the whistle can go above the situation and survive. They can basically endure whatever negative consequences might come from their actions."

10. Debate and career success.

College debaters get head start on exec track

By Sherwood Ross

REUTERS, June 3, 2002

It seems that extracurricular debate team that you signed up for back in school may come in handy in the working world after all.

In fact, executives at management consultants A.T. Kearney in Chicago were so impressed several years ago upon hiring Leslie Mueller--a former debater at Northwestern University--that they asked her to head a group to find more college debaters.

So Mueller and her colleagues attended college debate tournaments to identify future hires "as part of the recruiting pool, because debaters make terrific consultants," she said.

"They are able to take complicated problems, listen to what other people are saying, and narrow that down to arrive at the critical solution, and that's difficult to do in business," Mueller said. "They are very logical in verbal and written communications."

Holt Spicer, a retired debate coach at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, agreed. "There was some evidence that corporate employers favored those who were involved in debate," he said.

It is not uncommon for debaters to achieve national prominence. In fact, many former U.S. presidents were debaters in their day. . . .

"It's hard for me to imagine a profession for which debate is not a valuable kind of preparation," Zarefsky, a former coach of Northwestern's powerhouse orators, said.

Debating, he said, requires the ability to strip "complex issues down to their central questions and to realize there is no absolute right or wrong, and that decisions are made in the context of specific situations and cases. That trains

people to deal with victory and defeat without taking either one too personally," Zarefsky said.

College debate today is a 90-minute formal contest in which opposing two-member teams argue the pros and cons of public issues. They present their cases, cross-examine each other, and typically close with a dramatic appeal to the judges.

"Debate is probably the single most important course that I ever took in school and has held me in good stead my entire life," said Kogan, who, since retiring from the Supreme Court in 1998, practices law at Wetherington, Klein and Hubbart in Miami.

"You learn how to do research, how to think in a logical and orderly manner, how to put your brain in gear before you put your mouth in motion," Kogan added. "It also gives you a great deal of self-confidence and to a large extent, the courage of your convictions."

Redland's coach William Southworth said that whereas the typical college student learns "how to describe from writing book reports, debaters become very familiar with advanced research techniques and learn how to analyze."

11. Arguing with the Lord.

A story from the Jewish Talmud (Baba Metzia 59b). It is being debated whether a particular sort of oven is unclean, according to religious law; Rabbi Eliezer is losing the argument, and turns to other means of persuasion.

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought all the proofs in the world, and the masters would not accept them.

He said to them: If the law is according to me, let this locust tree prove it.

The locust tree moved a hundred cubits. (And some say: four hundred cubits.)

They said to him: The locust tree cannot prove anything.

Then he said to them: If the law is according to me, let this stream of water prove it.

The stream of water turned and flowed backwards.

They said to him: The stream cannot prove anything.

Then he said to them: If the law is according to me, let the walls of the House of Study prove it.

The walls of the House of Study began to topple.

Rabbi Joshua reprimanded the walls: If scholars are disputing with one another about the law, what business is it of yours?

The walls did not fall down out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, and they did not straighten up out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, and they are still inclined.

Then Rabbi Eliezer said to them: If the law is according to me, let the heaven prove it.

A voice came forth from heaven and said: Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer? The law is according to him in every case.

Rabbi Joshua rose to his feet and said: "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 30:12).

What is the meaning of "It is not in heaven"?

Rabbi Jeremiah said: The Torah has already been given once and for all from Mount Sinai; we do not listen to voices from heaven. For You have already written in the Torah on Mount

Sinai: "After the majority must one incline" (Exod. 23:2).

Rabbi Nathan came upon [the prophet] Elijah [who walked with the Lord].

He said to him: What was the Holy One, blessed be he, doing at that moment?

Elijah said to him: He was smiling and saying: My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!

12. Debate in education.

From Roy P. Mottahedeh, "Traditional Shi'ite Education in Qom"

Talent in disputation or "dialectic" (*jadal*) is the most respected achievement of students, and is the key to understanding classroom techniques, and, indeed, an important aspect of the intellectual approach that traditional Shi'ite education fosters in its pupils. . . . Students are encouraged to dispute points whether made in the textbook, or by other students, or even by the teacher himself. . . .

To prepare himself for class a student chooses a study partner called a "fellow discussant" with whom he practices disputing the meaning of the text. The student also reads commentaries, some of which are written in a style reminiscent of disputation, that is, the commentary offers the original text with the words: "He says," and then adds after the quotation from the original: "But I say," followed by the remarks of the commentator. . . .

The image of education as disputation is so powerful that in theory when a student wins a disputation with the teacher, the teacher should cede his place to another teacher.

13. A variety of views.

"I have never in my life learned anything from any man who agreed with me."

-Dudley Field Malone

"Silence is one of the hardest arguments to refute."

-Josh Billings

"People generally quarrel because they cannot argue."

-Gilbert K. Chesterton

"The sounder your argument, the more satisfaction you get out of it."

-Edward W. Howe

"The fellow that agrees with everything you say is either a fool or he is getting ready to skin you."

-Kin Hubbard

"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

-Jeseph Joubert

"He who establishes his argument by noise and command shows that his reason is weak."

-Michel de Montaigne

"There is no conversation more boring than the one where everybody agrees."

-Michel de Montaigne

"You have not converted a man because you have silenced him."

-John Morley

"A man never tells you anything until you contradict him."

-George Bernard Shaw

"He that always gives way to others will end in having no principles of his own."

-Aesop

"It is not necessary to understand things in order to argue about them."

- Beaumarchais (1732-1799)

"It is easier to play football than to debate"

Dragan Stojkovic Piksi (1965 -), president of Yugoslav football asociation and former Yugoslav national team member

"There is always a multitude of reasons both in favor of doing a thing and against doing it. The art of debate lies in presenting them; the art of life lies in neglecting ninety-nine hundredths of them."

- Mark Rutherford

"Putting it in plain terms, the general public must be reduced to its traditional apathy and obedience, and driven from the arena of political debate and action, if democracy is to survive."

- Noam Chomsky