why argument matters

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introduction

Especially lately, commentators have indulged in a kind of rueful sentimentality about the nature of argument. Individuals used to engage in high-minded debates, the lament goes, whereas now all they do is yell at each other or allow measured argument to decline into insult and personal attacks.

Yet people proverbially counseled against arguing about either politics or religion long before social media turned raging about both into a narcotic pleasure. It is nearly impossible to have a rational argument about political or religious beliefs that have been, almost by definition, arrived at along irrational psychic paths.

It is nearly impossible to have a rational argument that is not built out of the sticks and stones of emotion, period. Written in 55 BCE, Cicero's *De oratore* is a classic treatise on how to argue, though in places it might sound to contemporary ears like a description of how far argument has declined from the popular conception of its orderly classical proportions: “Now nothing in oratory . . . is more important than to win for the orator the favor of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse or emotion, rather than by judgment or deliberation. For men decide far more problems by hate, or love, or lust, or rage, or sorrow, or joy, or hope, or fear, or illusion, or some other inward emotion, than by reality, or authority, or any legal standard, or judicial precedent, or statute.” Contrast this with Barack Obama lamenting in his presidential memoir that while in the White House he came to realize that “whether I liked it or not, people were moved by emotion, not facts.” This is an idealized understanding of the role of feeling in argument.

As for those Apollonian days of calm, rational, public debate: Caesar was murdered, not debated, that March day on the floor of the Roman Senate. In 1856, a pro-slavery member of the House of Representatives strode into the Senate chamber and caned the anti-slavery Republican senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, nearly to death. In the British Parliament, jeers and booing are common from the back bench, and although an elegant riposte has often clinched an argument, gross insults sometimes erupt. Then–Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was called a "sex-starved boa constrictor" on the floor of Parliament, a cut upon which any Twitter troll would cast a longing eye.

Emotionally charged manipulations of the truth were present in our hallowed deliberative halls before Twitter. Covering the Senate confirmation hearings for Justice Samuel Alito in January 2006, I ran, along with a gaggle of journalists, after Alito's wife, Martha-Ann Bomgardner, when she fled the chamber seemingly in tears following an aggressive question about her husband's stance on abortion. When I reached her after she stopped running, standing a few inches away from her, I watched as she removed her hands from her face. Not only were her eyes dry, she was smiling. The theatrical scene had the desired effect of derailing an argument in progress.

Argument is as Dionysian as it is Apollonian. It is ironic that many of the same people who decry the disappearance of calm, rational debate enthusiastically assent to the theories of the Israeli psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, who posited, in highly influential academic papers they published throughout the 1980s, that the myriad ways in which reality is irrationally "framed" influence how we interpret reality—which is another way of saying that an argument is too influenced by extraneous factors to be rational. The choice of a word, the inclusion or omission of a detail, an inflection of sincerity or irony, the tone of a voice can determine our response to even the most critical decisions we must make in the course of our lives.

However, the opportunities for the application of a cognitive frame are nearly limitless.

FRAME ONE: Argument explodes the artifice of "framing" by its conscious transformation of social manipulation into formal persuasion.

FRAME TWO: Argument restores free will to human affairs by replacing the reductionist premises of Kahneman and Tversky with a process of transparent rational deliberation.

FRAME THREE: The concept of framing assumes that people don't recognize when reality is being framed. Therefore the concept of framing itself is the product of a narrowly framed understanding of human nature.

In other words, you could even frame the concept of framing to make one type of argument or another. Argument lives as a rational, as well as an emotional, activity, after all.

Social dynamics may be saturated with subtle modes of argumentation, but argument is in our flesh and blood.

In *Mysticism,* her classic study on the subject, the Anglo-Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill writes that the "beginning, for human thought, is of course the I, the Ego . . . which declares, in the teeth of all arguments, I AM." She adds, "The uncertainties only begin for most of us when we ask what else is." Yet for all of us, we begin asking what else is as soon as we are able to speak. And from Descartes on, even the formal structures of philosophical thought have been dedicated to demonstrating that we cannot prove that we ourselves exist. In such a situation, where argument is woven into biological existence itself, a beautifully constructed argument possesses the ragged contours of human life.

Bound up with the urgency of living, argument is as much an autobiographical process as it is an intellectual construction and a rhetorical art. Because our very life is an ongoing argument about the value of our life, the way we argue tells a story about who we are.

Take the philosopher Spinoza. As the child of Dutch Marranos who was later excommunicated by the Dutch Jewish community for, among other things, his attraction to Christian ideas, Spinoza lived out a divided nature. Born Baruch Spinoza, he changed his first name to Benedict after his expulsion. No wonder he refused to accept Descartes's segregation of mind from body, arguing instead for a picture of reality in which God's pantheistic presence provided a bridge between the two. And no wonder that he was the only philosopher to explicitly use Euclid's geometrical method in making his arguments in his *Ethics*. The geometrical method gave explicit expression to the two sides of his nature—Jewish and logical, Christian and abstract—while also providing an intellectual resolution to his rivenness.

In *Against Interpretation,* her seminal essay making a case that the meaning of art lies not in the imposition of any kind of stable, articulable meaning, Susan Sontag argues that a work of art is indistinguishable from its form. Thus a work of art cannot be captured or classified. Sontag herself was "queer" before that became a defining, or undefining, social term. Like the thesis of her argument, her sexuality could not be captured or classified.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. But give two lilies the double-edged blessing of consciousness, and within minutes they will be arguing with each other. And each lily's argument will be the expression of its unique, particular existence. This fact of disputation being as primal as what Christians call original sin is what the French Catholic writer Charles Péguy meant when he said that "everything begins in mystery, and ends in politics."

Years ago, the *New Yorker* magazine ran a cartoon that depicted a grid composed of small squares extending infinitely in all directions. Each square was occupied by a person. There were no empty squares beyond the square that each person stood on. In the front row, one man is turning to the man standing next to him and saying, "Excuse me, sir. I am prepared to make you a rather attractive offer for your square." To exist is to argue your existence.

Familiar types of argument come to mind: the forceful speech, the mordant polemic, the debater pressing a point with a breathtaking flourish, the carefully staged summation to a jury. These are the forms argument takes as a consciously practiced art. But simply occupying a space in the world as a human being is an argument with a society that needs to know we exist.

"Attention must be paid!" cries Willy Loman's widow at the end of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman.* No matter what place we occupy in life, there are moments when we have to make the same argument on our, or someone else's, behalf—to a spouse, a lover, a friend, a colleague, a business connection, a doctor, a cop, a judge, a neighbor, a stranger turned adversary by a sudden change of circumstance. "I know my own heart and thus I understand all humankind," postulated Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the beginning of his *Confessions,* one in a long line of autobiographies, from Saint Augustine's to Ta-Nehisi Coates's, that demonstrate how a particular life is really an argument for that particular life.

"Hineni," say Moses and Abraham when Yahweh asks, "Where are you?" They are not saying, "I am here," but rather "I am in this moral position in life where I am ready and willing to do your bidding." In everyday life, the response to a divine being asking such an existential question would be an argument. The response might be "I am not ready for this, and this is why" or, as Gloria Gaynor sang in another context, in another argument, "I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with you." Or the call might cause a different argument: "I have to leave my obligation to you because God is calling me and this is why I have to obey the call."

"Hier stehe ich," proclaimed Martin Luther, "Here I stand," thus turning the richly ambiguous "Here am I" into a defiant Protestant argument that has raged, intellectually and also bloodily, for centuries. We all say, or refuse to say, "Here am I" or "Here I stand," in one way or another, every minute of our lives. Then we argue for or against the consequences.

"That it was suddenly and obviously there, a person not from another town or from a different country but from life itself, the simplicity of that, was communicating to him a clarity and precision of purpose" is how the novelist Ian McEwan describes the effect that witnessing the birth of a child has on its father. The child is the subject of an argument the parent will make on its behalf to all the world, ceaselessly. With its appearance, the child begins its own argument. A child is born. Space is made. Attention is drawn. Water and oxygen are consumed. Matter is appropriated and evacuated. The entire world readjusts itself, if imperceptibly, microscopically. As the child's purpose becomes clear, as its appetites grow, as its personality declares ambitions and imposes boundaries, as the world yields or resists or simply bides its time, an argument is being made—on both sides.

"Son" begins Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me,* addressed to his little boy. What more definite and defiant way to start an autobiographical polemic?

Or to come at it from the opposite direction: as Joseph Conrad put it in *Nostromo,* whenever someone dies, that person's particular truth leaves the world. Nothing presented as truth has ever gone uncontested. Neither has any human life.

"Let there be light" are Yahweh's first words in the Bible, spoken with luxuriant ease in absolute isolation. Only a transcendent being, existing outside time and space, history and society, can speak in declarative sentences that are as uncontested as such a being's existence would be. Introduce even a single human consciousness, and argument is sure to follow.

The authors of the Hebrew Bible made argument as primal and elemental as the Garden of Eden. They were keenly aware of the complicated status of argument as something good or bad, as a corrective of overweening power or an instrument of power itself. The first words spoken by a human being in the Bible belong to Eve, in response to the serpent, who has cunningly asked her if God really told her not to eat of any tree in the garden, thus implying that God is treating her and Adam unfairly.

Eve answers, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die' " (Genesis 3:2–3). By quoting God's prohibition instead of paraphrasing it, as she does the other part of his instructions, she is inviting the serpent to offer his own interpretation of God's words, and his own advice about how to respond to them, perhaps hoping that he will justify her sense of being mistreated. That is to say, Eve is starting an argument with God by stripping his words of their luxuriant ease and making them as contingent on context as all mortal words are. Eve's first words, the first words of newly created humanity, are the beginning of an argument.

They are also a revelation of the power that argument has to transform an imbalance of power. Since what is good and what is bad are usually matters of interpretation, what God's prohibition foreclosed was a situation in which the human beings he created would argue with him, a situation in which he would not be able to say "let there be" anything without a debate.

Finally, this subtle argument with God that Eve is starting is the Bible authors' own argument. It is not rhetorical, though; it is poetic. We shall examine the argument of poetry, of art, in part II. But this instance is too good, and too instructive, to let pass.

After eating from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve hear God "walking in the garden in the cool of the day," and then hide from him. But why would God be walking in the garden precisely at the moment when it becomes cool? The provocative implication is that God was waiting until the cool of the evening to take his walk because like any mortal he wanted to avoid the heat. God's own creation was beginning to bedevil him, and that creation includes Adam and Eve. This lovely realistic detail was perhaps the authors' argument that divinity itself was human and that therefore humans shared in the nature of the divine. It was an argument that would continue through painters' depictions of Christ that demonstrated Christ's humanity in the expression of his face or even the portrayal of the Christ Child's phallus.

Now a skeptic could respond to my argument by saying this is all nonsense. First of all, such a skeptic might argue, I am using the King James translation here. The Hebrew word translated as "cool of day," or sometimes as "breezy," could well derive from an Akkadian word meaning "storm." This would have God walking in "the wind of the storm," a rendering that is appropriate since Adam and Eve fear his wrath for having disobeyed him. Still others could dismiss my interpretation as both labored and tendentious. The breathtaking, realistic touch is no more than that, the biblical authors having fun by inserting a mundane detail from life into the sublime setting.

May the best side win.

Argument goes so far back because argument is, you might say, an ontological necessity.

A standard definition of ontology is (in part): an effort to prove that what seems to be an abstraction actually exists. Your spouse or partner argues with you about your habit of leaving crumbs on the kitchen table after lunch because she or he is trying to make the idea of a clean and tidy house a reality. And if that argument actually hides a deeper argument between the two of you about your relationship, then you are both struggling to make suppressed desires real.

Lawyers in a courtroom, two neighbors each of whom feels wronged by the other, corporate board members, presidential advisors, participants in the monthly Board of Education meeting, drivers backing up into each other in a parking lot, the tradesperson who is feeling abused, the homeowner who is feeling cheated—each party has a concrete goal in mind at the end of the argument.

With the exception of lawyers in the courtroom, these situations might never rise to the level of argument, of course. Some might remain quarrels that never rise to the level of a dispute. Argument relies on logic, rhetoric, evidence, artful self-presentation. Two people shouting at each other in a supermarket is no more an argument than reaching across the board and grabbing your opponent's king in a game of chess. Shouting is usually the product of an ontological error. Your absolute certainty that you are right blots out the existence of the other person. War is not, as the bromide goes, the continuation of politics by other means. War is the conviction that a cause is too good, or too desperate, for the empathetic—in the sense that you must inhabit your opponent to understand your opponent—art of politics.

The almost proverbial shout- and screamfest that the internet has become is the product of this conviction that other people do not exist. It is the consequence of a technology that reduces other people to pliable, Gumby-like figments of the imagination. In terms of argument, the internet is one of the grossest ontological errors of our time. An argument conducted in words—as we shall see, arguments can also be made in pictures, music, and verse—has to be not just the sharpest rebuttal of an opponent's position. It has to be the fullest understanding of an opponent's position.

Argument lies at the heart of the human imagination, so it is not surprising that in the realm of religion argument is central. Argument can either validate the tenets of a religion or pose a grave threat to it. It is never far from the minds of religious scholars and authorities.

The Qur'an says, warily, "Man has ever been, most of anything, prone to dispute." Islamic scholars list several types of argument, ranging from the rich and productive to the petty, destructive, and impoverished. A commendable argument proves the truth by means of evidence. Discreditable arguments come in several forms: "Dispute to conceal the Truth"; "Dispute to show one's merit and belittle others"; "Dispute that causes enmity"; "Dispute that usurps the rights of others." It is significant that, for the most part, dispute leads to trouble. According to the Qur'an the Prophet Muhammad said, "I guarantee a house on the outskirts of Paradise for one who abandons arguments even if he is right."

Hinduism recognizes three different types of argument: Vada, Jalpa, and Vitanda. The most respected arguments—

Vada—rely on the practitioners' honesty and openness about their aim, and how well they employ the art of argument, maintain decorum, and show respect for the opponent. But these are not the types of arguments the architects of Hinduism focused on. They were more interested in the manifold actuality of argument.

Vada in fact is not really an argument. Rather, it is an amiable conversation between two parties who are not committed to making their point of view prevail. Vada becomes possible only when there are "two persons of equal merit and standing." Think of two mothers putting their heads together to resolve a conflict between their young daughters in pre-K. Vada is the ongoing, careful negotiation we make with reality every day of our lives, a gentle persuasion that never rises to the level of argument.

Jalpa and Vitanda, by contrast, are arguments. They are made with the goal of winning, and neither one sticks to the intellectual or behavioral decorum of debate. The aim of the first is to use any rhetorical means necessary to demolish the opponent's position—no full understanding of the opponent's position here. The second also aims for absolute victory, but in addition, the arguer strives to shame and humiliate the opponent. A literary editor once told me why he was particularly proud of a polemical book review he had written years before. “I called X’s book ‘weak but important,’ ” he said. “Ah,” he added with a satisfied smile, “that ‘weak’ really got to him.” That is Vitanda.

In politics, in screen-dominated social life, Vitanda seems to have almost entirely displaced rational argument. One reason for this development is that in the West, at least, a long process of unmasking—in academia, in the media, in popular culture—has now led to a general belief that behind all the forms of law, custom, and civility stands the naked lust for power.

It sometimes seems that who gets to say what on which platform makes power, status, and authority more naked issues than ever before. But the truth is that imbalances of power have always been tangled up in the sources of arguments major and minor. Socrates, for example, invented his method to discredit the socially powerful Sophists. The declamatory polemical style of the pamphleteers during the American Enlightenment deployed brevity and speed to undermine the distant, alien laws of England, while European intellectuals from Voltaire to Friedrich Schiller used the intimate form of a letter addressed to their fellow citizens to bring their arguments closer to people estranged from monarchs who ruled from afar.

For all of Buddhism’s emphasis on peace achieved through the abolition of ego and desire, the Buddha himself was the most contentious founder of any major religion. In one of the many debates the Buddha had with the Brahmins of his day, he explicitly takes on the arbitrary foundation power rests upon, addressing a Brahmin named Assalayana. "But, Assalayana, the brahmins' brahmin-women are plainly seen having their periods, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and nursing [their children]. And yet the brahmins, being born through the birth canal, say, 'Brahmins are the superior caste.' " You might call this *argumentum ab corpore*—an argument from the body. You find it in Montaigne—"Kings and philosophers shit." It is in Shakespeare's deconstruction, in *King Lear,* of Lear's kingship to the humbling biological reality of being a "poor, bare, forked animal." In the 1960s, artists and political activists deployed bodily functions against the entrenched social and political forms of the day. The Living Theater's performance piece *Paradise Now* used nudity as consciousness-raising strategy. Michel Foucault's argument about the human body being a literal, physical atlas of the effects of social and political power is probably the terminus point of this lengthy historical argument that, in fact, shuts down argument.

An argument from the body occurs when a power imbalance makes reasoned argument impossible. Such an argument falls into the larger category of changing the framework of debate entirely. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn defined as a "paradigm shift" the moment when a scientific worldview gives way to another worldview with which it has no continuity and which seems to have come from another reality—a shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, for example. Historical change is even more radical. Whenever the status quo is threatened, argument is not simply transformed. It becomes suspended. Here, from Matthew 22:23–33, are the Sadducees trying to draw Jesus into an argument in hopes of refuting his claims of truth:

> That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"
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> Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."
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> When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

It is likely that, rather than being astonished at Christ's teaching, the crowds were amazed at his audacity in sweeping away the vision of reality they had accepted and lived by until that moment. No logical, rhetorical, evidentiary response can be made to Christ's claims. They are as discontinuous from the Sadducees' argument as the theory of relativity is from Newton's three laws.

For argument to exist, the parties on each or every side have to share the same reality. Sometimes the shouting that results when they do not is the product of an ontological error. Sometimes it is the dawn of a new way of looking at reality.