

## How to Argue Without Being Argumentative

We should first of all begin by explaining the title of this lecture: “How to Argue Without Being Argumentative.” Whenever people think of “arguing” or “having an argument,” many of them have the wrong idea in mind. They think of people in an argument as disputing, contradicting each other, and even calling each other names, until gradually (or not so gradually) the argument gets louder and louder until the participants are yelling at each other and no longer even listening to the other side. In the popular view, this is what it means to be “argumentative,” and anyone who is arguing is by definition argumentative!

However, in the academic view, this is not really what an argument is supposed to be like. An argument is simply a discussion in which statements called “**premises**” are joined together in order to reach a “**conclusion.**” These premises are supported by different types of “**evidence.**” So, for example, if one person says, “The President is doing a great job” and another says, “No, he isn’t” and the first says, “Yes, he is” and the second says, “No, he isn’t, you idiot”—these two people are not really arguing, even though it may sound like it. They are simply disputing, expressing their opinions, and contradicting each other. In order for this dispute to qualify as a real argument, each participant would need to offer **premises** which lead to the **conclusion** he or she wants to reach, either that the President is doing a good job or that the President is not doing a good job. Furthermore, each participant would need to offer **evidence** to support the premises of his or her argument. This evidence could be statistical information, the results of specific presidential actions, analogies taken from history, statements from authorities, or some other type of evidence. The important point is that **one must make a rational case and offer rational support for one’s views in order truly to be offering an argument.**

So we can see that in a real argument, even though the people involved may talk loudly and even get emotionally “fired up” about what they are saying, the point is not their loudness or emotion. **The point is the rational content and structure of their argument, the rational case they are making for their views. By approaching argument in this way, we can be involved in arguments without necessarily being “argumentative.”**

In this lecture, four primary topics concerning argument will be addressed. These four topics are:

- **One: The Virtues of a Good Argument.**
- **Two: How to Challenge an Argument.**
- **Three: Recognizing Enthymemes.**
- **Four: Common Informal Fallacies, or “Counterfeits” of Argument.**

In the next few minutes, we will briefly take up these topics and give examples for each one.

### **First: The Virtues of a Good Argument.**

In Plato’s famous work, *The Republic*, the main character Socrates is at one point discussing the best education young people should receive in order to live a good life with a good character (VIII.549b). He refers to one type of young person and says, “His character is not thoroughly sound,” because he was

not given “the only safeguard that can preserve [character] throughout life, a thoughtful and cultivated mind.”

But what is a thoughtful and cultivated mind? Other translations of *The Republic* give these words in a much more literal and exact way. One says that this young person “lacks the best guardian,” which is “Reason mixed with musical training, [which is] the lifelong preserver of virtue.” Another translation is even more exact; it says that “Argument mixed with music . . . dwells within the one possessing it as the savior of virtue throughout life.”

This viewpoint certainly seems odd to us today. We can understand how appreciating fine music can help mold a young person’s “thoughtful, cultivated mind,” but why should “argument” be so important in developing good character? It seems to us that the habit of argument would work *against* someone’s character, not *for* it. Why is argument so important for the preservation of a good character?

The answer lies in the virtues that we need to cultivate within ourselves in order to present good arguments. Let’s look at a few of the virtues which one must have in order to argue effectively:

The first two virtues seem to go against each other or contradict each other; they are **intellectual tenacity and intellectual openness**. To be intellectually tenacious, you must hold to the views you have and be willing to stand up for them. How often have we heard people say, “Well, that’s just my opinion,” as if their opinions were of no value? No, we should be confident and willing to argue for what we believe.

On the other hand, we should remain intellectually open as well. Listen to what others have to say on a subject and remain curious about other points of view. You never know—you yourself might change your own mind when you hear opposing arguments. Perhaps I reject a different perspective on a topic simply because I’ve never heard it effectively stated. Another virtue which goes along with intellectual openness is **humility**. None of us knows everything, and we should be willing to admit that we can learn from people who might disagree with us. However, to be willing to *consider* other points of view does not mean that we have to give up our own point of view. **Be open and tenacious at the same time.**

Here are some other virtues of argument: Don’t make an argument a conflict between the “hero” (you) and the “villain” (the other person in the argument). This type of thinking often leads to angry and unfair dismissal of the other person and the other person’s argument. **Never substitute emotion for evidence!** Just because I feel a certain way very strongly doesn’t mean that I have much good evidence for my position. Don’t think of the one who disagrees with you as villainous or evil just because of that disagreement. For example, in the abortion debate, does one side really want to “kill babies”? No. Is the other side really involved in a “war on women”? No. These are simply emotional slogans designed to bypass the need for argument and evidence.

This leads into another virtue: **Honesty. Be intellectually honest in handling evidence;** don’t twist the facts or “cherry-pick” the evidence just to find what looks good for your side.

In fact, be willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the other person in the argument. This is called “**charity**” or sometimes “**common courtesy**.” Do not insult or ridicule the opposition in an argument, and be willing to present their views in a reasonable and clear way. In one student’s paper in favor of same-sex marriage, she wrote that those opposing same-sex marriage “do not even see homosexuals as human beings.” (In fact, she wrote this sentence twice in the paper.) Her instructor challenged her to find even one opponent of same-sex marriage who actually said that he or she did not see homosexuals as human beings. When the student could not find even one, she realized that she was not presenting the opposition’s views in an honest and charitable way. The end result was a better paper and a stronger argument.

So the virtues of a good argument can help us in other ways throughout life. These virtues include **intellectual tenacity, openness, humility, honesty, charity, and courtesy**.

### **Second: How to Challenge an Argument.**

Earlier we talked about how an argument does not simply consist of contradicting someone else, but is a set of premises or statements leading to a conclusion. A very early example of an argument is the following:

- **Premise 1: All humans are mortal.**
- **Premise 2: Socrates is a human.**
- **Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.**

Arguments such as these are made up of **premises, conclusions, and terms**. Therefore, in order to challenge an argument, I cannot just say, “I disagree with that argument”; **in order to challenge an argument, I have to challenge either a premise, or the conclusion, or a term used in the argument. I have to show either that a premise is weak or untrue, or that the conclusion does not follow from the premises, or that a term is vague, ambiguous, or biased.**

For an example of **challenging a premise**, consider this argument:

**Premise 1: All pets are cats.**

**Premise 2: I have a pet.**

**Conclusion: Therefore, my pet is a cat.**

This argument illustrates the logical difference between a “**valid**” argument and a “**sound**” argument. In a “valid” argument, given the premises, the conclusion will follow. In that respect, this argument is valid, because the conclusion follows from the premises; if all pets are cats, and I have a pet, then my pet will be a cat. However, the argument is not “sound,” for a **sound argument is both valid AND TRUE**. In this argument, the first premise (“All pets are cats”) is not true; therefore, if I were challenging this argument, that first premise is what I would challenge. The argument is valid as it stands, but it is not true, and therefore not a good argument. (By the way, I do have a pet, as in Premise 2, and my pet is a cat, as in the Conclusion. However, since Premise 1 is false, the argument itself is also false.)

Here is an example of **challenging a conclusion**:

**Premise 1: It is wrong to spit on your elders.**

**Premise 2: Jim is not my elder.**

**Conclusion: Therefore, it is all right to spit on Jim.**

In this case, both premises are true: It is wrong to spit on your elders, and Jim is not my elder. However, the Conclusion does not follow from these premises. Just because Jim is not my elder does not mean it is all right to spit on him. Actually, I should not spit on *anyone*. Therefore, I would challenge the Conclusion to this argument, since it does not follow from the premises.

Here is an example of **challenging a term**:

**Premise 1: It would be wrong to have a silly job.**

**Premise 2: A job as a traffic control cop would be a silly job.**

**Conclusion: Therefore, it would be wrong to have a job as a traffic control cop.**

In this argument, the term “silly” is too **vague**. What makes a job “silly”? Why is the job of a traffic control cop a “silly” job? This argument should be rejected because the terms of the argument are far too vague.

In other cases, we might challenge terms if they are “**loaded**” terms. For example, if I say, “Nina is quite selective about her friends; she is very thoughtful,” that sounds much better than saying, “Nina is quite bigoted; also, she is rather slow-witted.” In an argument, do not hesitate to challenge terms if they appear to be **loaded or biased** in one way or the other.

In this section, we have seen that in order to challenge an argument, I have to challenge either a premise, or the conclusion, or a term used in the argument. I have to show either that a premise is weak or untrue, or that the conclusion does not follow from the premises, or that a term is vague, ambiguous, or biased.

However, in most of our arguments, the premises and conclusions are not laid out quite as neatly as in these examples given. Most of the time, we present shortened forms of arguments in which at least one premise is left out or is assumed to be “understood” without actually being given. These arguments are called “enthymemes,” and we will look at them in the next section.

### **Third: Recognizing Enthymemes.**

As just mentioned, an “enthymeme” is an argument in which one premise is not explicitly stated. This premise is usually left out for one of two reasons. The harmless reason is that the speaker assumes everyone will automatically agree with the missing premise, and so it actually does not need to be stated. The not-so-harmless reason is that the speaker wants to disguise the missing premise because it

is controversial. In both cases, it is most helpful to be able to recognize and articulate the missing premise in an enthymeme.

Here is an example of a “harmless” enthymeme:

**“Ben Franklin died before the second presidential election. So he couldn’t have been the second President.”**

The missing premise in this argument is simple: **“Dead people cannot be President.”** I labeled this enthymeme as “harmless” because the speaker obviously assumes everyone will automatically agree with the second, unstated premise. But what about this one:

**“It is biologically natural for humans to eat animals. So it is morally all right for humans to eat animals.”**

What is the missing premise? As we examine this argument, we see the missing premise: **“Anything that is biologically natural for humans is morally all right.”** This is quite a bit more controversial than the first premise. Is it true that everything that is biologically natural for humans is also morally permissible for humans? No matter what you think about eating animals, you can see that **bringing this unstated premise out into the open is crucial if this argument is to proceed any further.**

How about one that is openly hostile:

**“Christians are stupid. After all, it’s really stupid to believe in an old man with a long white beard who lives in the sky.”**

This argument is a little different in that the conclusion (“Christians are stupid”) is given first, before the reason or premise is given. However, the structure is still the same in that there is a missing premise here; it is an enthymeme. What is this missing premise? It seems to be the following: **“Christians believe in an old man with a long white beard who lives in the sky.”** As soon as the missing premise is brought out into the open, we can immediately see that it is controversial and open to dispute; in fact, the missing premise is a bit stupid itself. **Bringing out the missing premise in an enthymeme is the key to addressing the argument.**

Here’s one for you to try:

**“The CEO of the company should be fired. Did you hear he cut retirement benefits for all employees?”**

What is the conclusion in this enthymeme? And what is the missing premise?

#### **Topic Four: Common Informal Fallacies, or “Counterfeits” of Argument.**

In our final topic on argument, we will look at some common “fallacies.” Fallacies sound like arguments but really are not; they are actually “counterfeits” of real argument. We might think of fallacies as mistakes that people make when they are trying to defend a position, but sidestep the work necessary

to come up with a good, solid argument. In a **formal fallacy**, the mistake lies in the very structure of the argument. Here is an example of a formal fallacy:

**Everyone in Dairytown owns a cow.**

**I own a cow.**

**Therefore, I must live in Dairytown.**

This is a **formal fallacy** because the problem is in the structure of the argument: the second premise and the conclusion have been reversed. Here is how it should look:

**Everyone in Dairytown owns a cow.**

**I live in Dairytown.**

**Therefore, I must own a cow.**

In a formal fallacy, the error can be corrected simply by correcting the logical structure of the argument.

However, we are not going to look closely at formal fallacies, but rather at **informal fallacies**. In an **informal fallacy**, the error is not in the structure of the argument; the error will be located in the content of the reasoning of the argument, or the error might be located in the quality and type of evidence given. As we go through examples of some of the most common informal fallacies, you will notice that some have Latin names. The Latin names come from the Middle Ages, when the study of logic in school was much more common and intensive than it is today. We will look at the following **informal fallacies: Ad hominem; Hasty generalizations; Begging the question; Equivocation; Ad misericordiam; Ad ignorantium; False dichotomy; Red herring.**

- **Ad hominem** means “to the man” or “to the person.” The argument is not directed at the opposing argument, but rather at the opposing person.

For example, suppose I am at a town hall meeting discussing a new road to be built through my neighborhood. I have one position on the road’s construction, and my neighbor Joe has the opposing position. During the discussion, it seems that Joe is making a better argument and getting more people on his side, so I suddenly cry out, “Look, folks. You all know Joe is a heavy drinker. Whom are you going to trust and support: me or an alcoholic?” Note that I am not attacking Joe’s arguments regarding the road; instead, I am attacking Joe himself. This is an *ad hominem* fallacy.

- **Hasty generalizations** occur when we jump to conclusions based on not enough evidence.

We often do this in daily life. For example, have you ever heard someone say, “Fords are lousy cars”? When we question why, the speaker says, “I owned a Ford once, and it gave me nothing but trouble. The car I own now has never given me any trouble at all.” Or perhaps we are discussing going out for dinner, and I mention a Chinese restaurant as a possibility. “No, not there,” says someone else. “I ate there once and I didn’t like what I had.” Here is another example: Someone says, “You can’t trust

Slovakians.” We might ask why not. “Well, I dated a Slovakian when I was younger, and he turned out to be untrustworthy. He broke up with me and started dating a friend of mine.”

What these three examples have in common is that they all commit the fallacy of hasty generalization; they all come to a general conclusion based on very little evidence. This is a common form of reasoning similar to **inductive logic**; however, inductive logic is usually valid because it is based on many examples, while hasty generalizations are based on too few examples. It is a common fallacy, but it is still a fallacy.

- **Begging the question** means assuming the truth of the conclusion within the premises of the argument itself. Here are some famous examples:

**David: Miracles don’t happen.**

**Clive: But there have been many reports of miracles.**

**David: Yes, but we should assume those reports are not true.**

**Clive: Why?**

**David: Because everyone knows miracles don’t happen.**

In this example, the first speaker is arguing for the conclusion “Miracles don’t happen.” However, in his argument, he uses the conclusion itself as one of his premises in *support of* the conclusion. This is “begging the question.” Here is another example:

**Josie: The Bible is God’s Word.**

**Kim: Why should I believe that?**

**Josie: Well, the Bible itself says it is God’s Word.**

**Kim: Yes, but why should I accept the Bible’s teachings?**

**Josie: You can trust the Bible’s teachings because the Bible is God’s Word.**

Notice that begging the question is sometimes also called “circular reasoning.” The first speaker is trying to defend her conclusion, “The Bible is God’s Word,” but in this argument she uses that conclusion as a premise; she “begs the question.” Because of this, the argument could go on and on, in a never-ending circle.

- **Equivocation** occurs when the same word is used within the same argument, but in a different way or with a different meaning.

For example, listen to this argument: “Assisted suicide is a **legal** right in some states. So I think that assisted suicide, at least in those states, could be the **right** thing to do.” If someone were to say this argument quickly enough, the equivocation might slide right by the unwary listener. However, upon inspection, it is obvious that the word “right” in the first sentence refers to a legal claim, while the

second use of the word “right” refers to moral correctness. The same word is used twice in the argument, but with a different meaning.

Here is another example:

**James: I don’t agree at all that the universe was made in six days. Those creationists are all wrong. They’ve been listening to the Pope too much.**

**Shayla: But the Pope is not a creationist. He does not believe the universe was made in six literal days. He simply believes that God created everything.**

**James: Yeah, that’s what I said. He’s a creationist, too.**

Notice that in this example, when the first speaker is confronted with a contrary fact, he changes his own definition of the word “creationist” in the middle of the argument. This also is an example of “equivocation.”

- **Ad misericordiam** means the “appeal to pity,” or more generally, “the appeal to emotions.”

For example, imagine a defense attorney making her final appeal to the jury. Her client, Patricia, has been accused of murdering eight people with a chainsaw. The evidence seems conclusive that Patricia is guilty, so instead of going over the evidence again, the defense attorney goes back to Patricia’s childhood. She points out that Patricia flunked gym class several times and therefore could not make it into college; because of this, Patricia could not realize her childhood dream of becoming a brain surgeon. Her first six husbands abandoned her, the last one missing his left hand, and Patricia could not support herself, slipping further and further into poverty and Dutch Elm disease. Therefore, the defense attorney concludes, we should allow Patricia a light sentence because we should take pity on her.

Now the prosecuting attorney approaches the jury. His argument is quite short: He tells us to imagine how we would feel if we were a family member of one of the victims. He argues for a heavy penalty for Patricia based on this consideration.

Both attorneys in this example have committed the same fallacy, **the appeal to pity or appeal to emotions**. This is a fallacy because it treats our pity or emotions as the only relevant (or even the primarily relevant) consideration to take into account when reaching a logical conclusion or a rational decision. Students commit this fallacy quite often; how many times have teachers heard students cry out, “You have to let me pass this class or else I’ll lose my financial aid!” There are no logical arguments in support of this claim; it is purely an appeal to pity. Even if it occasionally works, it is still a logical fallacy.

- **Ad ignorantium** is the argument that something is true or possible simply because it has not been proven to be false or impossible; this is known as the “argument from ignorance.”

This type of fallacy is fairly common. For example, we often hear people say something like, “Well, no one has proven UFOs exist, but no one has ever proven they do *not* exist, either!” However, since it is

quite difficult to prove a *lack* of existence, this type of argument really does not make a good case for anything. It certainly does not make any sort of case that UFOs actually exist.

One exception should be noted. In some cases, the lack of evidence is conclusive. Suppose Joe is at a party and tells everyone else, "There's a great big ostrich standing in the corner!" Everyone else assures Joe there is no ostrich there. If Joe then says, "Well, I can't prove there's an ostrich in the corner, but you can't prove there's NOT an ostrich in the corner," we could reasonably assure him that the lack of evidence in this case is conclusive; there is no ostrich in the corner.

- **False dichotomy** is a form of fallacy sometimes also known as a "**false dilemma**." In this fallacy, the speaker assumes that only two options exist with respect to a certain situation. The speaker then rules out one of the options and claims the other option is the only one left. This is a fallacy IF in fact there are other options which have not been considered.

As a parent, sometimes I have been guilty of this form of fallacy: "You can either clean your room or you can be a bum all your life!" "You can either go to college or you can beg in the streets for a living!" Another example is seen on a bumper sticker that was once popular: "America—Love It or Leave It." These are all fallacies because they assume that the two options given are the only options available. Is it really true that if I do not clean my room right now, the only other option is to be a "bum" for the rest of my life? Is it really true that begging in the streets is the only other career choice available if I don't go to college?

This fallacy shows up both in important matters and those not so important. Here is an important matter: "You can either believe in evolution or you can believe in the Bible, but not both." (I have actually heard this false dichotomy offered from both sides of this debate.) Sometimes false dichotomies are not so important: "Well, we can either go to the movie or we can sit here all night and do nothing."

Again, what all of these examples have in common is that they do not take into consideration other options that may be available. These are false dichotomies, and therefore are a fallacious form of reasoning.

We should note that not all either/or statements are false dichotomies. If I say, "Either I will stay in my house tonight or I will go out to do something else," that is not a false dichotomy; that is an example of the logical law of **excluded middle**. In other words, either I will stay in my house or I will not stay in my house; one of those statements has to be true and one false. But that is not a false dichotomy.

- **Red herring**—a **red herring** is not strictly a fallacy in the sense that these other informal fallacies are, but it is a rhetorical strategy with the same end in mind: to win an argument in an illogical and irrational way. **A red herring is an off-topic diversion thrown out by one speaker in the attempt to side-track the argument.** Usually this occurs when the speaker knows he or she is losing the argument and wants to avoid reaching the conclusion.

For example, suppose the question has arisen whether or not Muslim terrorism is a danger to the stability of the Middle East. One speaker might suddenly point out, "Well, you know, Christians should

not get on their high horse. After all, they were responsible for the Crusades, too.” This might be technically true; however, the Crusades occurred about 800 years ago and are no longer relevant to the question of the stability of the Middle East. Even if the speaker honestly thinks that the Crusades are relevant to the discussion, this is a **red herring**.

Or suppose a company has been caught manufacturing products in a country using slave labor. The company’s spokesperson might say, “Our company is completely opposed to the existence of slave labor. Last year alone, we donated great sums of money to foundations working to eliminate slave labor from the world.” Again, this may be technically true; however, it does not address the question at hand, whether or not the company itself has actually used slave labor. In this case, the spokesperson is trying to avoid reaching the inevitable conclusion by throwing out a **red herring** to get the discussion off track.

**In conclusion, let’s consider some of the topics we have covered in this lecture.** We began by defining what an argument actually is, and what it is not. An argument is simply a discussion in which statements called “**premises**” are joined together in order to reach a “**conclusion**.” These premises are supported by different types of “**evidence**.” In an argument, **one must make a rational case and offer rational support for one’s views in order truly to be offering an argument. By approaching argument in this way, we can be involved in arguments without necessarily being “argumentative.”**

We then moved on to four specific topics of argumentation. These four topics were:

**One: The Virtues of a Good Argument, such as honesty and courtesy.**

**Two: How to Challenge an Argument, by challenging either its premises or its conclusion or its terms.**

**Three: Recognizing Enthymemes, remembering that an enthymeme is an argument in which one of the premises is left out. Figuring out that missing premise is often crucial to addressing the argument.**

**Four: Common Informal Fallacies, or “Counterfeits” of Argument. Out of the many types of informal fallacies, we went through eight of them: *Ad hominem* or the “against the person” fallacy; Hasty generalizations; Begging the question; Equivocation; *Ad misericordiam* or the “appeal to pity”; *Ad ignorantium* or the “appeal to ignorance”; False dichotomy; and Red herring.**

Let’s always remember what Socrates says: Our characters can only become sound and healthy if we become skilled in the virtues of argument. These virtues of argument will help us develop a thoughtful and cultivated mind, which is what we truly desire out of our education.