

## 3 *Everyday Arguments*

Lots of us enjoy discussing—even debating—different aspects of society. Anything from the latest news headline to a walk through our neighborhood can inspire such a conversation. An opinion is uttered, someone else chimes in to either agree or disagree, and we're off.

These conversations tend to be relaxed, without many rules about what you can or can't contribute. The arguments that people make—with their grounds, warrants, and conclusions—receive little close scrutiny. As a result, there are no clear standards for what we might call critical thinking in these situations.

This chapter examines some common elements of everyday arguments that are flawed. They are tempting to use, and may even seem convincing on the surface, but they have limitations that need to be understood.

### Anecdotes

Arguments often feature stories about one's own experiences: "Just the other day I saw. . . ." Usually these tales are intended to provide firsthand evidence of something that the speaker means to

be understood as common, or a particular example offered as support for some broader claim: “I saw two people sitting at a table in a restaurant, each of them staring at their own phone. We are losing the ability to talk to one another face-to-face.”

In other cases, the anecdote is not firsthand. Instead, the teller relays a story that he or she heard from a friend or on the news. But again, the implication is that this case is somehow typical. Thus, an example of someone who fraudulently claimed benefits from a social welfare program can be used to argue that many of the program’s beneficiaries do not really need or deserve assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Such anecdotes may seem quite compelling to the people telling them, but they should not be considered especially strong evidence. The very fact that a story is distinctive or memorable enough to catch your attention may be a sign that this case is not at all typical. A single example (for instance, you know a poor person who strikes you as lazy) is a weak basis for broad generalizations (all poor people are lazy). After all, we occupy a big world with billions of people living all sorts of lives. A story about something we have witnessed can no more represent the complexity of the whole world than any one photograph can depict everything we might see. Even if someone can regale us with two or three or even more examples, we need to realize that we all travel in more or less restricted social circumstances. Let’s say Sally, a teacher we know, complains about bad behavior among some of her students. Perhaps she can offer lots of examples, perhaps she convinces us that the students in her classroom are indeed a difficult bunch. How confident can we be that her experiences with her class tell us much about what’s going on in other classrooms, or in other schools?

Anecdotes are almost inevitably about atypical or unusual behavior—something that caught the teller’s attention and seemed

interesting enough to share with others. After driving through traffic, we aren't likely to tell anyone about all the other drivers we witnessed stopping at red lights; it is the driver who ran the red light who becomes the anecdote.

Suppose Carlos tells you he saw just such a red-light-running driver, then declares, "Traffic is getting more and more dangerous with drivers like that on the roads." If you check the statistics collected by traffic enforcement agencies, though, you will find that in fact rates of traffic fatalities have fallen dramatically over the last several decades.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, this doesn't mean that Carlos didn't see someone run a red light; but it might make us question his conclusion that that red-light-running driver proves that today's roadways are more dangerous than they used to be.

Of course, if you remark that traffic fatality rates are down, Carlos might respond that such statistics are irrelevant: after all, no one died when the driver he saw ran that red light. This raises an important point about evidence. Evidence is almost never complete or perfect. There is no way of knowing the precise rate at which drivers run red lights; we can't monitor every driver's approach to every stop light, and even if we could, we can't go back in time to make similar measurements, so we can't possibly prove that red light running has increased (or, for that matter, declined). So we look for the *best available* evidence. We might assume that, in contrast to fender benders, many of which may never come to the attention of law enforcement, accidents serious enough to cause a fatality are almost sure to be reported, and as a result, counts of traffic fatalities are probably reasonably accurate. So, it is not unreasonable to counter Carlos's anecdote about the driver who ran a red light with evidence that traffic fatality rates are

declining. Presumably if reckless driving is becoming more common, accidents should be increasing, and so should fatalities.

It is certainly possible to continue to debate the value of the traffic fatality evidence. Carlos might suggest, for example, that increased recklessness may be causing a big rise in nonfatal accidents. But without more evidence to support that claim, his argument has no teeth. The point here is that evidence is key to a successful argument.

Anecdotes have another feature: they usually describe a sequence of events—Q happened, and then R followed, and that led to S. It is important to appreciate that such stories or narratives have their own limitations. Any narrative is necessarily selective; it is impossible to tell a tale that encompasses everything that happened. Highlighting the Q-R-S sequence inevitably ignores A through P.

One way to think critically about a narrative is to question its choice of elements. Have all the relevant events been included? Are parts of the narrative's sequence irrelevant? That is, does it make better sense to add elements (to tell the story as P-Q-R-S, instead of just Q-R-S), or even to subtract some (so that we have only Q-S)? Disagreements about why something happened—anything from how we wound up eating at this restaurant to whether slavery caused the Civil War—often revolve around which elements are selected to make sense of the story.

Even when we agree about the essential elements in the story, we may interpret them differently. When Carlos tells the tale of the red light runner, he suggests that the driver was simply reckless, but a critic might propose other possible explanations: perhaps the driver had an emergency or whatever. Agreeing on the relevant

elements in a sequence does not necessarily mean that people will agree on an interpretation. Notice that we may be inclined to accept some stories that fit well with our ideas of what is relevant or true and resist others because they seem to contradict what we believe.

We all use anecdotes. Stories can make things seem clearer, which is why authors and journalists often begin their books and news stories with an example so as to give their topic a human dimension. But anecdotes have limitations. If someone making a sweeping declaration—“The world is going to hell!”—is asked for evidence—“What makes you say that?”—and responds with an anecdote, about people looking at their cellphones or running a red light, say, at first glance this simple evidence may seem sufficient to support the conclusion. But an anecdote is always weak, imperfect, incomplete as evidence. We ought to try to move beyond specific examples if we want to understand social life.

## Ad Hominem Arguments

An ad hominem argument is one that focuses on the person who has said something, rather than on what has been said. Claiming, “Well, that person is an environmentalist [or a conservative or \_\_\_\_ just fill in the blank], so I don’t have to listen” rejects the message because it comes from a particular messenger. This is dangerous, because it closes off the listener from whatever ideas that person may be presenting.

Of course, people disagree about lots of things. But it is a mistake to think that you can simply ignore or reject out of hand whatever the people you disagree with might say. It is fine to reject an argument because of its weaknesses, but not simply because it was made by a kind of person with whom you probably disagree.

It can be tempting to fall into ad hominem arguments. Most of us have complex identities that include particular political or religious views, and we know that others disagree with those views. People who consider themselves liberals realize that other folks think of themselves as conservatives, and vice versa. We probably can sketch rough descriptions of what people on the other side of the fence think, and we probably find their arguments predictable; we may think we already know what they are going to say. Still, to ignore argument simply because the person making it belongs to a category of people who disagree with us is an error of reasoning.

The term *ad hominem* is Latin, meaning “to the person”; the error involves addressing the supposed motivations or biases of the person making an argument, while ignoring the argument’s intrinsic logic or evidence. It is a logical fallacy that was named centuries ago, at a time when learned people wrote their analyses in Latin.<sup>3</sup>

The key to critical thinking is assessing evidence. Assessing does not mean accepting. As we have already noted, there is nothing wrong with arguing that an anecdote is a relatively weak form of evidence, that a description of a specific incident is a poor basis for making broad generalizations. But that is not at all the same as rejecting the anecdote’s relevance because the person telling the story holds beliefs different from yours.

Intense conflicts often lead opponents to develop dismissive, hostile names for one another—slurs based on ethnicity, religion, or politics. These labels are hurled back and forth, and they encourage ad hominem critiques: if Jane is a [derogatory label], then we don’t need to listen to her ideas or even to her evidence—whether that’s the evidence she presents in support of her own claims or in her critiques of our arguments. This is a seductive line of thinking because it seems to excuse us from taking our opponent seriously.

And it returns us to the familiar temptation: simply to criticize our opponent's arguments (or just ignore them), as opposed to the much more challenging task of thinking critically about what we ourselves are claiming in response. Ad hominem arguments are terribly dangerous, because they cause us to huddle among those who share our views, while discouraging us from using our capacity to engage in critical thinking.

While this chapter is focused on pitfalls in everyday argument, we will have occasion to further discuss ad hominem arguments in later chapters dealing with sociological reasoning.

## Myths

Like ad hominem critiques, calling something a “myth” is another way to justify dismissing an argument out of hand, without considering its merits. Folklorists—the people who actually study myths—use the term to refer to origin tales about gods and goddesses and how the world took form. Different cultures have different myths—the Greeks and Romans, the Norse people, and the Navajo: all have their own mythologies. In everyday conversation, however, calling something a myth is to argue that it is false, and that only mistaken people believe it. Presumably the reasoning is that since we consider tales featuring Aphrodite or Thor as fictional, the key feature of these myths must be that they are not true. Social scientists sometimes use the term this way. For example, one can find lists of rape myths—sets of statements about rape that some people may believe but that, the analysts insist, are simply false (e.g., “Women incite men to rape,” “Women fantasize about being raped”). Similarly, there are lists of marriage myths, disaster myths, immigration myths, and so on.

As we have seen, there is nothing wrong with reviewing the evidence regarding some claim and arguing that that evidence is so weak that the claim should be rejected. It is less clear that labeling such claims as myths is helpful. Calling a claim a myth dismisses it, simply by declaring it to be false: “Some people believe that X happens, but that isn’t true; it’s just a myth.” But what does this mean? Is the argument that it is a myth because X never happens, or that it happens only infrequently, or what? Much like ad hominem arguments, the myth label promotes dismissing an argument out of hand without actually assessing its evidence.

This is a tactic that can be used by anyone who wants to challenge particular ideas. Try Googling global warming myths or inequality myths—or virtually any social issue + *myth*. All of these folks are using the term *myth* to say, in effect, that some misguided people may believe X, but X is just wrong, wrong, wrong.

Notice, too, that people with competing views often declare the other side’s assertions to be myths. Thus, a *Huffington Post* piece entitled “10 Abortion Myths That Need To Be Busted” begins: “1. MYTH: Abortion is dangerous”; while “10 Pro-Abortion Myths That Need to Be Completely Debunked,” an article posted on *LifeNews.com*, leads off with “1. MYTH: Abortion is safe.”<sup>4</sup> Or take competing lists about guns: the second myth discussed in the *Federalist’s* “7 Gun Control Myths That Just Won’t Die” is “Nobody’s Demanding Gun Confiscation”; yet “10 Pro-Gun Myths, Shot Down,” from *Mother Jones*, features as Myth #1: “They’re coming for your guns.”<sup>5</sup> Such examples of contradictory myth-spotting suggest that simply branding claims as false—or as myths—may be overly simplistic.

We can suspect that it would help to define some of these terms. What precisely do these folks mean by “safe,” “dangerous,”



“confiscation,” or “coming for”? These claims to identify myths seem to argue for a kind of absolutism: if something isn’t completely true, then it must be absolutely false. Clarifying definitions may resolve some of this confusion. Take abortion—is it safe or is it dangerous? One approach might be to acknowledge that abortion is a medical procedure, and that every medical procedure carries risk that something might go wrong. We can, however, suspect that the vast majority of abortions performed by doctors—like the vast majority of, say, appendectomies—do not lead to serious medical complications, and still agree that some very small number of abortions may result in problems.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the issue is not whether abortion is perfectly safe (in the sense that no woman who undergoes abortion ever suffers harm), but whether it is relatively safe in the sense that other well-established medical procedures that rarely lead to harm are considered safe. This definition might lead us to argue that abortion is about as safe as other common medical treatments. On the other hand, a different definition—say, that any evidence of harm having occurred justifies considering abortion risky—might lead to acknowledgment that it and lots of other medical procedures involve some danger. Understanding either claim requires that we examine both the definitions being used and the evidence; we can’t simply impose the word *myth* and consider the matter settled.

But examining the evidence is precisely what calling something a myth discourages. Giving reasons why a particular belief may or may not hold up to scrutiny is a form of critical thinking, but simply responding to a claim with “That’s a myth” is, in effect, an argument that there is no need for reasoning, that the matter is settled. Critical thinking demands that we review the evidence. This will not necessarily end debate—reasonable people may still

disagree about how to interpret the evidence; but at least it offers a more solid basis for discussion.

## Folk Wisdom and Metaphors

In addition to studying myths, some folklorists study aphorisms—those little sayings that are invoked to support everyday arguments. Aphorisms are often contradictory. Imagine a conversation where Bob says he's having difficulty making a decision regarding work. Maria urges him on by remarking, "He who hesitates is lost." But then Vince adds, "Look before you leap." These two time-worn bits of advice advocate opposite courses of action, and probably won't be of much use to Bob. In other words, folk wisdom tends to be awfully flexible: it is usually possible to drag out some aphorism to support whatever argument one wants to make.

A related form of talk is the invocation of metaphors. The course that Bob says he's considering taking may sound on the surface reasonable, but Vince might comment, "Sounds like a slippery slope to me," or remarks that it could be just the tip of the iceberg, meaning, respectively, that making a small concession now will inevitably lead to further concessions, or that whatever is visible may be only a small part of the whole. Metaphors can make conversations more colorful, at least until they become so overly familiar that people dismiss them as clichés. But their real purpose is to condense a larger argument into a single, familiar bit of folk wisdom.

The problem with metaphors is that they can discourage thinking critically about the claim being made. We all know that only the tip of the iceberg, about 10 percent of the whole, is above the waterline and visible. When the metaphor is used to describe, say, some social issue, we are being asked to imagine a hidden, vastly larger

problem that would have to be addressed eventually. Of course, that may be true; there probably are some cases where we simply can't see the underlying issues. But what proportion is hidden? Is it really 90 percent (as in the case of a real iceberg's hidden mass)? Or is it only 50 percent? Or significantly less? Without presenting anything in the way of evidence, the iceberg metaphor encourages us to imagine that the issue is much larger than it may in fact be.

Aphorisms and metaphors are verbal shortcuts; they package strings of reasoning into just a few, familiar words. This is valuable, even necessary.<sup>7</sup> Imagine how sluggish our thinking would be if we could not use metaphorical reasoning to recognize similarities and act on them. Yet because they simplify complexity, metaphors can also easily misdirect us. We need to think critically about where they are leading us and whether that's where we want to go.

## Facts

Our commonsense understanding of fact is that it refers to something that is simply true. The declaration "That's just a fact!" is often intended as a kind of argumentative trump card—a statement that cannot be disputed. At the same time, we know that people sometimes get into arguments over just what the facts are. How is this possible?

A better way to think about facts is to realize that facts depend on social agreement. Imagine a gathering of people who belong to a particular religion, who all agree a particular book is holy, that it is the word of God. Within that gathering of believers, people may agree that it is a "fact" that that book reveals God's will. Now, suppose other people with different beliefs join the gathering; perhaps they don't believe in God, or perhaps they believe that a different

book reveals God's will. Suddenly there is going to be disagreement among those present about what is factual.

This example demonstrates that facts are social; they depend on people agreeing about the evidence—and those agreements can change. Today, small children learn that the earth is one of eight planets that revolve around the sun in our solar system; this is taught as a fact. When I was in school, though, I was taught that there were nine planets. And a thousand years ago, people were confident that the sun revolved around the earth—this was considered a fact. Similarly, in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, people considered the existence of witches to be a fact; today we dismiss that belief as ridiculous. We explain these changes in what is considered factual in terms of improvements in people's understanding of the evidence; this allows us to dismiss earlier factual claims as erroneous.

What is deemed factual can also vary from group to group. Whether it is considered a fact that a particular book is the actual word of God depends on whom you ask. A group of believers may affirm it as a fact, but a collection of people with more diverse religious beliefs will not necessarily agree.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who was a social scientist before he entered politics) reportedly said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." This reveals our commonsense understanding that two contradictory statements cannot both be factual. This is why the expression "alternative facts" quickly became a target of ridicule. Critical thinking requires that, when we are confronted with two antithetical claims, we weigh the evidence. But there are other, less critically satisfying responses, such as announcing that because you know that what your group believes is true, anyone who says something different is wrong.

Weighing the evidence will not necessarily lead to immediate agreement on what the facts are. People may question another's evidence or the way that evidence is interpreted. People who hold strong beliefs often cling to what they believe, even in the face of evidence that strikes others as compelling. The historical record is filled with cases where people believed prophecies that the end of the world was nigh. So far, all of those predictions have proved wrong, and yet most true believers continued to hold to their convictions.<sup>8</sup> Nor is the tendency to cling to discredited theories limited to religious believers. Scientists have been known to be slow to accept findings that seemed to discredit their positions.<sup>9</sup>

We like to think that the facts are the facts, that they are true, a sort of last word that cannot be disputed. But what is considered factual always reflects some social consensus: at some particular time, there is agreement among some specific people that something is true. Critical thinking is a tool that can help us sort through evidence for and against claims that something is factual. We may conclude that that evidence supports the consensus, that we can agree that a claim that something is a fact is well founded; but we also need to understand that claiming that something is a fact is not, in and of itself, enough to end debate.

## Everyday Reasoning

Critical thinking is something we all do, every day. We argue with one another about such everyday matters as our tastes in music, food, sports, and politics. Disagreeing with others, standing up for our own ideas, or being persuaded by someone else's arguments can be fun; or we can agree to disagree, even tease those we disagree with about their preferences. Most of these discussions are

casual and not very consequential, so we don't worry too much about the quality of the reasoning. But sometimes disagreements grow heated, and we become frustrated when others don't accept our reasoning. As this chapter has tried to point out, mundane reasoning can be flawed, and it can help if we are able to examine it critically.

We can be pretty good about thinking critically in the context of everyday arguments, at least when we care enough to disagree. Listen to two people debating the relative merits of their favorite quarterbacks or their favorite television shows, and you can find them offering up evidence to support their own positions and criticizing the evidence for the other side. But in other cases, when we already agree with one another or when we just don't care very much, we may not bother thinking critically about the evidence. We just nod along with an anecdote or ignore ad hominem attacks.

That said, when flawed arguments spill over into serious attempts to understand the world, critical thinking becomes very important. The efforts of social scientists trying to improve our understanding of social life, for example, merit critical evaluation. This is the subject of the remaining chapters.

## Critical Thinking Takeaways

- Anecdotes are a weak form of evidence.
- Ad hominem arguments and dismissing claims as “myths” are ways of avoiding critical thinking.
- Aphorisms and metaphors may contain assumptions that need inspection.
- Facts depend on social agreement.