

2 Why Argument Matters

Here's where things stand. We know why we argue. Argument is a natural activity for social beings that desire to know. Insofar as humans are by nature political beings who value knowledge, we might say that arguing is an essential part of what it is to be human. Now a new consideration emerges. That argument is a natural activity for humans does not mean that humans are naturally *adept* at argument. It only means that we are *prone* to argue. That we tend to engage in argument does not mean that we tend to argue properly, or even adequately. Some claim that it is obvious that most people argue poorly. In fact, after you take a logic class and learn the fallacy lists, you will likely come to believe that people reason more poorly than you had thought. It's a regular occurrence among students in our logic classes to bemoan the fact that once they've gotten good at detecting fallacies, they can't look anywhere without seeing them. Bad arguments are pretty much the only arguments around.

But before things get too cynical, let's be clear about what arguing well is all about. The topic of the present chapter is the importance of arguing well. After examining this issue, we will be prepared to examine *how* to argue well, which is the subject of the remainder of this book. Only once we've gotten clear about what comprises a good argument can we really see what's going wrong with bad ones.

When you think about it, arguments—or at least what are *presented* as arguments—are everywhere. In our everyday lives we are constantly subjected to purportedly rational appeals that attempt to alter our beliefs or create wholly new ones. These come from our friends and associates, teachers, authors of books, news media, celebrities, talk-show hosts, advertisers, leaders, and governments. It is easy to see why this is so. As was already noted, our beliefs frequently guide or determine our behavior, and others care about how we behave. Thus they have reason to care about what we believe.

That we care about how others behave and thus what others believe is, as we emphasized in the previous chapter, a consequence of the fact that our social interdependence requires us to rely on each other in various ways. And, once again, this mutual reliance can give rise to troubling

complications. To put the matter bluntly, not everyone who cares about what we believe cares about our believing what the best reasons say we should believe. Not everyone who cares about what we believe cares about our cognitive health. Not all of those who care about *what* we believe care about *how* or *why* we believe. They just want us to believe the things that will make it most likely that we will act as they wish. They care about what we believe because they want to control us.

Thus we see one very important reason why studying argument matters. We want to avoid being duped or deceived. Wanting to avoid being duped is part of wanting to believe what is true and avoid believing what is false. Wanting to avoid being deceived is part of wanting to believe for your own reasons, to be in charge of your own life, to exhibit self-control. We might say then that skills at argument are like skills of self-defense—they protect against being duped.

This thought requires further elaboration. Again, some people care about what we believe because they wish to *manipulate* us in various ways. For example, advertisements often aim to generate buying behavior on the basis of reasons that are stunningly absurd. Crucially, the function of many advertisements is to cause us to lose sight of the quality of the reasons being offered. For example, we are encouraged by advertisements to believe that buying expensive sports cars will make us more successful, that drinking alcohol will make us more attractive and popular, or that smoking cigarettes will make us healthier. When baldly stated like this, we know better than to believe such things. However, when presented alongside polished and titillating imagery of successful and attractive people, we can be moved to adopt such beliefs, or at least act in accordance with them. Advertisements, that is, often attempt to get us to believe (and so to behave) on the basis of bad reasons by diverting our attention away from the quality of the reasons that are being offered. When ads of this kind are successful, we come to believe things on the basis of reasons that we have not taken care to evaluate. To use a phrase whose familiarity should strike you as revealing and even a little disconcerting, we are told to “just do it.” Our rational faculties are more or less circumvented.

Here is an experiment to try next time you are watching television. Take out a notebook and write down what is said in the commercials—just copy their linguistic content. Do this for several commercials. Wait a few days, or maybe a week, and return to the notebook. You will find that, once divorced in your mind from the accompanying imagery, often the linguistic content of television commercials does not even make sense, much less present cogent reasons for buying the product being advertised. This is hard to notice when watching television because the words are accompanied by highly stimulating images. The images are there for the purpose of diverting attention away from what is being said.

Now try another experiment. Try watching commercials with the sound off on your television. Pay close attention to the images. Again, we think

you are likely to find that the images and the way in which they are presented are attention-grabbing, but nonetheless they tend to be strange, erratic, and disjointed. Indeed, when it comes to the more stylized commercials, often it is impossible to discern what is being advertised on the basis of the images alone.

This is because the images and the words in commercials often serve different purposes. The images are intended to capture the attention of the eye, and the words are meant to give *the appearance of* reasons. Skilled advertisers know that when the images are especially captivating, good reasons are not really necessary. What matters is presenting you with what *sound like* reasons, but in fact are merely dressed-up versions of the command to “just do it.”

Diverting attention away from the quality of our reasons is not the only way in which people try to manipulate us. There is one particular kind of manipulation in which we are overtly encouraged to focus our attention on reasons, and, moreover, strongly urged to evaluate them. How could such a direction of our attention to reasons be a strategy of obscuring reasons? Here’s how. In these cases we are presented with a deliberately distorted or deprived image of what reasons there are. For example, let’s say that Jack wants Jill to believe that she should vote for Sally for president. One strategy he might employ is to present Jill with his reasons for favoring Sally over the other candidates. A different tactic would be to convince Jill that those who oppose Sally are stupid and uninformed. Employing this second strategy, Jack’s message to Jill is that there is no reasonable opposition to the view that Sally is the best candidate. So reasons are given, but those reasons, if considered seriously, block out all the others we should survey when making a decision.

One way to get someone to believe what you want them to believe is to convince them that all opponents of the belief are silly, stupid, ignorant, unreliable, or evil. The aim of this kind of manipulation, then, is not to circumvent our rational faculties, but rather to *channel* them in a specific, predetermined direction. This mode of belief manipulation is perhaps most popular in the realm of contemporary popular political commentary, where pundits often present their opponents as not merely mistaken, but irrational, ignorant, depraved, or demented. Hence they write books with titles like *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder* and *The Republican Noise Machine*. Authors of books like these try to convince you to adopt their favored beliefs by trying to convince you that there is no intelligent alternative to their own point of view.

The aim of this kind of manipulation is to encourage those who are like-minded to insulate themselves from discussion or even interaction with those with whom they might disagree. But there is a problem with this kind of insulation. When groups of like-minded individuals insulate themselves in this way, they not only deny themselves the cognitive benefits of hearing the considerations that favor opposing beliefs; they also deprive

themselves of the relevant information that those outside of their group might have. And, as we will see later in this chapter, there are other risks as well.

Thus far, we have claimed that one crucial reason why we should care about proper argument is that arguing properly helps us to avoid getting duped. We have called special attention to a particular way in which one can be duped, namely, *manipulation*. And we have identified two distinct forms of manipulation, which we can characterize as *diverting* manipulation and *distorting* manipulation. These two ways of getting others to believe what one wants are cases of manipulation because they both involve processes of belief production that are insufficiently attentive to reasons. To repeat, when we believe, we aim to believe what is true; and we aim to believe what is true by striving to believe what the best reasons endorse. This is why, for example, falsity is a *fatal objection* to a belief. To come to see one of your beliefs as false is to come to see the belief as defective.

Yet our ambition to believe only what our best reasons suggest is not explained solely by the importance of believing the truth and rejecting what is false. Truth is, to be sure, a principal goal of cognitive life. But it is not the only goal. We strive to believe in accordance with our best reasons because, in addition to the goal of believing what is true, we also aim to be *in possession of* the truth. We aim to believe in such a way that enables us to *see* the truth of our beliefs, to grasp *why* what we believe is true and *understand it*. And this is so because we desire not only truth, but also to *be in control* of our cognitive lives.

To get a feel for the distinction between aiming to believe what is true and aiming to be *in possession of* the truth, imagine the following scenario. Dr. Know has developed a truth serum. But let's say that Know's serum is different from the truth serum commonly encountered in spy novels and science fiction. Let us say that whereas the more familiar kind of truth serum compels those who take it to say only what they *believe* to be true, Dr. Know's serum compels anyone who takes it to say only what *is true*. That is, one who takes the serum will report that the capital of Spain is Madrid only if Madrid is the capital of Spain; one will report that there are exactly twenty people in Central Park right now only if there are exactly twenty people there now; one will report that the death penalty is unjust only if it is; and so on. Importantly, Dr. Know's serum does not enable those who take it to see *how* they're able to report the truth. When you ask one of Know's patients how she came to believe, say, that the death penalty is unjust, she can give no response. She believes sincerely that the death penalty is unjust, and can report confidently that it is true that the death penalty is unjust, but nonetheless she cannot see what reasons there are for her belief. The best she could do, perhaps, is to explain that she came to believe it by drinking the truth serum.

In one way, those who take Dr. Know's serum are in an enviable cognitive position. They believe only what is true, and do not believe anything that is false. But it is hard to see the development of the serum as an unqualified success. Those who take it have only true beliefs, but they have no access to the reasons which show why their beliefs are true. They unerringly believe what is true, but nonetheless they do not *possess* the truth. Their cognitive lives are in this regard less than successful.

Return now to our two kinds of manipulation. To believe without an adequate evaluation of our reasons is a kind of cognitive shortfall. Even if we wind up believing what is true, we reach our goal by luck, and luck is notoriously fickle. Maybe next time we won't be so lucky. Similarly, to believe on the basis of a trumped-up or distorted presentation of the available reasons is, again, to fail cognitively, even if we wind up believing the truth. In both cases, we satisfy the goal of believing what is true and rejecting what is false, but both cases nevertheless involve a kind of mismanagement of our cognitive faculties. In both cases, when we reach the truth, we do so by a kind of fluke. We get the truth, but, alas, we have not earned it.

Luck is what is problematic in these cases. When we say that someone has achieved a goal by way of good luck, we both praise the goal as worthy and take a critical stance toward that person's performance in reaching it. Consider a few cases. When someone hits an incredible shot on the golf course, that person may say, "I was just lucky." In so doing, he is not saying the shot was not successful; rather, he is saying that the success was not entirely his own doing. It was not the result of his skill and effort. It was luck. Alternately, when your neighbor wins the lottery, you might say she was lucky. You, yourself, may have bought a ticket and put the same thought into selecting the numbers as she did. Yet she won and you did not. When we call her a "lucky winner" we are on the one hand saying she certainly is a winner, but also that it was simply luck that made it so, not effort or skill.

When it comes to our lives, we do not want to be merely lucky winners. We want our successes to be the products of our efforts; we want to *deserve* the goods when they come. Those who diligently practice their golf swings are not simply lucky when they hit those fabulous shots. They are skillful and in control of their swing. And those shots are the result of the exercise of those skills. Similarly, those who carefully manage their finances, save their nickels, and make good investments are not mere lucky winners when they discover their bank accounts burgeoning. They are thrifty. And their financial success is theirs in a way that is very different from those we call "clearing house lucky," even if they end up in the same place.

The point is that we want success at reaching our cognitive goals of believing the truth and rejecting falsehood, but it is important to note that success consists in achieving those goals in a particular way. We want not only to achieve our aims, but to succeed in a sense that the success is *ours*. Only success that results from our effort, skill, and vigilance is success that

is truly our own. To put the point in a different way, we want truth, but we want to attain it not just in any old way. We want it in a way that enables us to possess the truth, to have command of what we believe. This is what those who take Dr. Know's serum lack.

These considerations put us in a position to make a distinction between the values of *cognitive success* and *cognitive command*. One can have a cognitive success by way of good luck—a lucky guess can still be true. But cognitive command is an understanding of an issue, a set of explanations for how and why things are one way and not another, and even an account of how others might have objections and what the replies to them are. Those who only have a correct belief have nothing to say back to someone who has doubts or needs an explanation, except to just say what they believe again. Having cognitive command, however, makes it so that success isn't just a matter of luck—it's the result of having done one's homework, understanding the situation, and having a story to tell. And so those with cognitive command have something to say when others have doubts or request more information.

Note, however, that cognitive command does not guarantee truth. That is, it is possible for those with cognitive command to be wrong. Experts, for example, have cognitive command of the subject of their expertise. That's what makes them experts. But experts sometimes disagree, and when they do, at least one expert is wrong. That doesn't mean that at least one purported expert isn't really an expert. It just means that at least one expert is wrong. So a pro golfer can hit the ball into the water hazard or into the thicket and still be an excellent golfer, and someone who has command of an issue can still get things wrong. Having cognitive command doesn't make us infallible, and this isn't too much of a surprise. We know already that with many issues, we can acknowledge that there are well-researched and impressively thought-out ideas that are nevertheless wrong.

That cognitive command does not guarantee truth or infallibility in no way undercuts its value. The reason why is that achieving cognitive command enables one to *rationally correct* oneself in light of countervailing evidence and counter-considerations. One who has achieved cognitive command of an issue understands how best to revise their belief should it be shown to be incorrect. Additionally, cognitive command enables us to *assess* new evidence, to *address* critics, and to *answer* objections. Cognitive command may not necessarily get us truth, but it does put us in contact with the relevant reasons and evidence. In this way, we come to understand an issue, and thus we are able to manage disagreement.

This point directs us back to the importance of argument. Achieving command of ourselves in forming and holding our beliefs is necessary if we are going to be able to defend our beliefs in the face of challenges to them. It is also necessary if we are going to be able to assess new evidence and unfamiliar considerations that bear on the truth of our beliefs.

Furthermore, having a firm grasp of the reasons why we hold our beliefs is crucial when we are faced with the need to change, revise, or amend them.

Argumentation—again, the processes of giving reasons in support of one’s beliefs, proposing considerations that tell against opposing beliefs, and assessing the reasons offered by those who disagree with us—is the activity by which we come into possession of our beliefs. If we argue poorly or carelessly, we may yet believe what is true, but we lose control of our cognitive lives. Often when we lose control of ourselves, there are others who are eager to take control for us, and, when they do so, they gain control of us. As we have said above, proper argumentation, or at least competent argumentation, is important as a matter of cognitive hygiene. But now we are able to see that proper argumentation is also a form of cognitive self-protection, a way of avoiding getting duped.

Much of what we have said thus far turns on the overall badness of getting duped by others. We have claimed that argument matters because we all want to avoid being manipulated. But it is important to notice that not all duping comes from other people. We can dupe ourselves. Maybe that way of putting the point is a little too dramatic. But it is clear that when it comes to our cognitive health, we can be our own worst enemy. Recall from the previous chapter Aristotle’s keen observation that humans are naturally sociable and desirous of knowledge. These two features can, in some contexts, come into conflict; and in other contexts, they can conspire against our cognitive aims. For example, our need for healthy social relations can sometimes render us especially vulnerable to peer-pressure; it can also prohibit us from speaking our mind in “mixed company,” when we are not sure whether our views will meet with agreement. In these cases, we engage in self-censorship. In other cases, sociability and the desire to know work together to subvert our aim of believing what is true and rejecting what is false. Sometimes social pressures forcefully encourage one to speak one’s mind, but only under the condition that one affirms a belief favored by the group. These are not cases of manipulation in the sense we identified above. Rather, they involve an *internal* short-circuiting of proper reasoning.

To get a sense of what we mean, consider what happened to Democratic pundits and other supporters a few months prior to the 2016 presidential election in the United States. They were all sure that the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, was going to win the election by a landslide. They were so sure of this that they systematically discounted and dismissed all reports showing that Donald Trump’s campaign was going well in many swing states. They repeatedly insisted that any polls showing an advantage for Mr. Trump represented statistical anomalies or flawed methodology.

Why would they say that? Perhaps because everyone they knew and talked with claimed to oppose Trump’s election. Or maybe because they overestimated the impact of the fact that so many stars and talk show hosts were publicly denouncing Mr. Trump—they just figured that

everyone thought that way. Consider the following predictions, all of which were made on the eve of the 2016 election:

- *Huffington Post*'s Natalie Jackson and Adam Hooper ran 10 million simulations of the electoral map with the very latest polling data and determined that Clinton was 98% likely (and Trump 1.7% likely) to win the Presidency.
- *Vox*'s Ezra Klein held that Clinton's win was "assured" and Trump's loss was "inevitable." He paused to note the strangeness of the situation: "We aren't used to this kind of victory.... Hillary Clinton has humbled Donald Trump, and she did it her way."
- *MSNBC*'s Joy Reid said that the Trump Campaign's plans on taking Michigan and Wisconsin were "weird," because she thought he had no chance in those states (which he won). And panelist Jamal Simmons said Trump was "being kind of a jerk" for campaigning in those states he was going to lose, because he should spend more time in states where his campaign could help senatorial candidates.

All of these experts were spectacularly wrong. Mr. Trump won the election with a substantial Electoral College win, despite Secretary Clinton garnering 3 million more popular votes. So what happened? For one thing, over the course of the 2016 campaign, it became more and more clear that polling for the election was unreliable for predicting results, and it was especially unreliable when it came to predicting how voters would swing for Mr. Trump. But these folks nevertheless made their predictions with what in hindsight seems appallingly disproportionate confidence. Importantly, this was not a case of *someone else* manipulating them, it was a case of them doing this *to themselves*. In these cases, in order to argue well, we need someone who can critically push back on our easy rationalizations. Again, argument is a social enterprise, and in these cases, the sociality of argument is that we don't just rely on each other for information, we need each other for critical pushback. If we're in an echo chamber of views we like, we are setting ourselves up for a fall.

We have presented a case for thinking that argument matters, and that it is important to try to argue well. But we have not yet said explicitly what proper argumentation is. Rest assured. We are on our way toward doing so. Before we turn to that issue, we must address a concern that one might raise with our account thus far.

A critic might claim that the views we have laid out are all well and good for those who do not know the truth. Such a critic might concede that the goods we have identified as attainable only by means of proper argumentation are indeed highly important. But she may then contend that the goods of argument pertain only to the processes of trying to *gain* knowledge. The critic might then claim that *once one has knowledge*, further argument is unnecessary. In fact, our critic could go further to say

that for those who have knowledge, further argument is not only superfluous, but also potentially dangerous, as it creates an occasion by which one might mistakenly exchange a true belief for a false one.

There is no denying that engaging in argument carries certain significant risks. When we argue, we exchange and examine reasons with a view toward believing what our best reasons say we should believe; sometimes we discover that our current reasons fall short, and that our beliefs are not well supported after all. Or sometimes we discover that a belief that we had dismissed as silly or obviously false in fact enjoys the support of highly compelling reasons. On other occasions, we discover that the reasons offered by those with whom we disagree measure up toe-to-toe with our own reasons and it seems as if the best reasons support equally two opposing beliefs. In any of these situations, an adjustment in our belief is called for; we must change what we believe, or revise it, or replace it, or suspend belief altogether. Typically we don't like having to make such adjustments, and in cases where the belief in question is one that is especially important to us, it pains us to admit that we are wrong. Indeed, with respect to certain especially important beliefs—such as moral, religious, and political beliefs—to come to realize that we are wrong is usually to invite a kind of cognitive turmoil. When we find that we must give up or change our beliefs of this kind, our lives change. In such cases, we often find ourselves wondering who we are.

Hence our envisioned critic is right to point out that argumentation is risky business. However, she seems to have overlooked the fact that risk assessment is always a *comparative* matter. That is to say, our estimation of the risks of engaging in argument must be informed by an assessment of the risks that are involved in resolutely *avoiding* argument or *declining* to engage in argument. The line of criticism we have been considering claims that once one has a true belief, there is no need to consider the reasons promoted by those with whom we disagree. After all, if you believe what is true and your neighbor holds an opposing belief, then it is clear that your neighbor is mistaken. So why should you bother listening to the reasons she can offer in support of her (false) belief? You know in advance that she believes what is false, and so the reasons she has for her belief are defective, incomplete, or misleading. As you already have the truth, engaging with those who oppose you promises no gain and can only occasion error. Better to just let it go, right?

It may seem that our critic is obviously correct here as well. But, as it turns out, she's not. There is overwhelming and continually growing evidence that shows that those who decline to engage with those with whom they disagree, and instead talk only with those who are like-minded, are prone to a phenomenon called *group polarization*. The phenomenon is this: *When one exchanges reasons about an issue only with those who agree, one's beliefs regarding that issue imperceptibly shift to more extreme versions of themselves.* For example, when pro-life activists discuss abortion

only amongst themselves, over time each person involved in the discussion comes to adopt a more extreme version of the pro-life view than the one he or she held prior to the discussion. The same goes for those who hold the pro-choice view. That is, reason exchange among only like-minded believers produces a change in belief. Again, it doesn't matter what the view is (right or wrong). If you talk about the view only with people you agree with, you become more extreme. And as a consequence, you don't hold the view you started with in the first place.

Let's say that Alfred holds the belief that abortion is morally permissible only in cases of rape, incest, and where it is necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman. We can use the variable P to refer to Alfred's belief. It should be clear that P lies on a spectrum of pro-life views about abortion. One could, for example, hold a more permissive pro-life view, call it Q, according to which abortion is morally permissible in cases of rape, incest, or where it is necessary to avoid certain severe health risks to the pregnant woman (including but not restricted to her death). Or one could hold a more restrictive pro-life position, which we may call R, according to which abortion is morally permissible only in cases where it is necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman. There is of course the even more strict view, S, which holds that abortion is never morally permissible, but sometimes excusable; and there is the maximally restrictive view that abortion is under no circumstances allowable and never excusable. There are several other positions on the pro-life spectrum as well.

Now let us suppose that P is true. (Note that we are not claiming that P is true, we are only supposing that it is for the sake of argument.) The group polarization phenomenon means that if Alfred were to discuss his views about abortion only with others who hold views on the pro-life spectrum, over time his belief would shift from P to some more restrictive view on that spectrum (as would the beliefs of the others he discusses abortion with). He would come to hold R, or some such view. But recall that we have stipulated that P is true, and this entails that R is false. So, in declining to engage the issue of abortion with those on the pro-choice side of the debate and electing to discuss the matter only with those who are like-minded, Alfred loses the truth.

It may seem that our appeal to the group polarization phenomenon presupposes the claim that more extreme beliefs are always false beliefs, that a shift to a more restrictive view from a more moderate view is always a shift in the direction of falsehood. But our argument makes no such assumption. The important feature of group polarization is that the shift toward more extreme versions of one's pre-discussion belief is not caused by the introduction of new or better reasons. Group polarization is caused by group dynamics, not reasons. Accordingly, by discussing abortion only with those who share his general perspective, Alfred has not only lost his true belief, he has done so on the basis of something other than reasons. The group polarization phenomenon threatens our cognitive command, even if it may be that one reaches the truth by means of it.

Recall now the objection posed by our imagined critic. She claimed that when one has the truth, argumentation is unnecessary, superfluous, or even dangerous. We now see her error. Argumentation is not merely a process by which one forms and revises beliefs. Argumentation is also a process by which one maintains one's beliefs. Earlier, we analogized cognitive and bodily health. Like muscles and physical health in general, cognitive health requires us to engage in activities that exercise our capacities. Argumentation is the process of exercising our cognitive muscles, so to speak. Consequently, argumentation has value even to those who already have true beliefs. It is a way to inoculate oneself against group polarization. The group polarization phenomenon shows that by declining to exchange reasons with those who disagree, one runs the risk of losing the truth, *even when one already has true beliefs*. Argumentation is the way we should go about forming our beliefs and ridding ourselves of false beliefs; but it is also what we must do if we want to hold on to our true beliefs.

Thus far, our account of the importance of proper argument has been formulated primarily in individual terms. We have claimed that arguing well is important if one is to maintain control over one's beliefs and avoid being duped. Yet our discussions of manipulation and group polarization both point to the inherently social dimension of cognitive life. We want now to deepen this element of our account by picking up on a thought expressed at the close of our first chapter.

To put the point succinctly: Democracy is a mode of political association that significantly heightens the importance of argument. However much argument matters for our individual lives, it matters even more for those who are also citizens of a democratic society. It may be obvious why this is the case, but the point deserves to be stated explicitly. People living together under any political arrangement must rely upon each other in various ways, but in a democracy, citizens wield collective power over their lives together. Through familiar activities such as voting, campaigning, participating in political organizations, donating to social causes, volunteering in community initiatives, and attending local school board meetings, democratic citizens contribute to the processes by which our collective lives are managed. Laws are made, offices are filled, and policies are enacted by citizens. Just as we as individuals want to believe the true and avoid believing what is false, we collectively want to be governed by institutions and policies that can recognize good reasons and reject bad reasons. In fact, it could be said that democracy is precisely the attempt to live together according to our best reasons.

This is why democracy involves such a broad variety of collective activities. Although perhaps it is common to think of democracy simply in terms of elections and voting, it really is much more than this. To take a most obvious example, elections are preceded by campaigns. And, as we all know, candidates on the campaign trail do a lot of talking, and much of this talking is conducted in the mode of argument. Indeed, a lot of

political talk in a democracy is explicitly presented as a debate, where candidates, pundits, journalists, and citizens speak more or less directly to each other in an attempt to exchange reasons. Yet democracy also involves more than campaigns. In addition to voting in regular and fair elections, democratic citizens are called upon to serve as jurors, to achieve a certain level of education, to uphold the laws, to hold public officials accountable, and to participate in the life of their communities. Indeed, many of the rights and entitlements that we most closely associate with democracy—free speech, a free press, due process, and much else—are directly tied to the social aspiration to have our collective lives managed according to our best reasons. It could be said, then, that democracy is the political and social expression of our aspiration to cognitive health and rational self-control; democracy is, as it is more commonly put, a system of *self-government*.

Given what the real world of democratic politics is like, our claim that democracy is committed to rational self-control will probably strike many readers as utterly incredible or as some kind of joke. Not so fast. Imagine a society in which collective decisions are made by an elaborate system of coin-tosses in which every option is given a fair chance of being selected as the group decision. Does such a system appeal to you? If not, why not? The imagined arrangement is defective because it does not allow collective decision making to be guided by what citizens believe; it rather decides on the basis of chance.

Imagine next a society which makes collective decisions by picking pieces of paper out of a bowl. Imagine that in this system, each citizen is allowed to write on a small sheet of paper his or her opinion about what the government should do, but imagine also that this system does not allow citizens to discuss their views with others. A question is put to the electorate, each citizen is asked simply to write down her opinion on the question, citizens are forbidden to share their views, and a decision is made according to whatever slip of paper is drawn.

Such a system is surely an improvement on the first in that it does allow collective decisions to be guided by what citizens believe, and, furthermore, it gives to each citizen equal input into the decision-making process. However, we suspect that this arrangement will strike our readers as ultimately defective. Why?

Here's the answer. What's missing in this imagined society is the connection between collective political decision making and our individual and collective reasons. A crucial part of democracy is the attempt to reason with each other about what we, collectively, should do. Democracy depends not simply on citizens voting on the issues of the day; it relies also upon citizens sharing their views and their reasons with others, prior to casting their votes. Again, democracy is the aspiration to conduct our collective lives according to our best reasons. And so, we think a *deliberative* conception of democracy is best.

At this point a serious problem for our account comes into view. We have identified democracy with the aspiration to be governed by our best reasons. However, we have yet to mention a central component of democracy, namely, majority rule. It seems there is a tension between the aspiration to be governed by our best reasons and the system in which collective decision making must track the beliefs of the majority. To explain, it has long been a favorite strategy among philosophers who oppose democracy to criticize the idea that majority opinion should determine collective decisions. Collective decisions are often focused on very complex questions, and finding rational answers to complicated questions often requires one to have a high degree of expertise. So why place the power to decide in the hands of the majority? Why not instead have experts rule?

This is the thought driving Plato's magisterial work of political philosophy, *The Republic*. In fact, the common interpretation of *The Republic* has Plato arguing that justice demands that political power be placed in the hands of those who are the most knowledgeable. Believing that philosophers are the only people who actually know anything, Plato draws the conclusion that philosophers should rule as kings. Hence Plato's famous idea of the idea of the *philosopher-king*.

The chutzpah manifest in Plato's view is often noted by his critics. However, one can feel the force of this argument against democracy by simply considering, first, that it matters what we collectively decide to do as a society. When a government acts, it can commit grave forms of injustice; it can waste precious resources, squander opportunities, unduly constrain freedom, and ruin lives. Most decisions made by a state are high error-cost decisions. They are the kind of things we don't want to get wrong. Next consider that we know that the majority of our fellow democratic citizens are not experts in matters of justice. In fact, it is common for democratic citizens to have an especially low regard for the cognitive capacities of their fellows. What then could possibly support the idea that collective political decision making should be determined by majority opinion? That's Plato's challenge, and it's serious.

This is admittedly a very difficult matter, and we cannot provide a full response to the challenge here. But we do have a two-part reply that will bring us back to the main topic of the importance of argument.

For starters, it is worth noting that history supplies a staggering number of examples of kingship gone terribly wrong, and few (if any) cases in which kingly political power has been exercised according to the best reasons concerning justice. To put the point in a philosophical way, Plato makes the mistake of comparing (what was in his day) real-world democracy with ideal-world kingship. You don't get to rig the comparison by saying: "my ideal version of kingship would do better than your real version of democracy." Of course it would! It's an *ideal version*, after all. A proper argument would have to compare either ideal-world kingship to ideal-world democracy, or real-world kingship with real-world democracy.

This occasions a further historical point about the real democracies Plato was looking at and the democracies in the world today. Democracy as Plato describes it is in many respects far removed from modern day democracy. Plato sees democracy as unconstrained and direct majority rule. In modern democracy, by contrast, the majority will is constrained by a constitution that identifies individual rights that constrain what even a vast majority can politically decide. Moreover, modern democracy is non-direct in that it involves a system of representation, where elected office-holders are largely charged with the task of reasoning about policy on behalf of those who they represent. Finally, in modern democracy, those who hold the greatest power are nevertheless constrained by a system of constitutional checks and balances. In short, although modern democracy has majority rule as one of its central elements, it is not merely rule by the majority.

Our second response to Plato's challenge is more philosophical than historical. Recall the distinction we drew earlier between the aspiration to believe the truth and the aspiration to possess the truth. We argued there that we aspire not only to have true beliefs, but also to see why they are true—we want not only cognitive success, but cognitive command. These two aspirations of our cognitive lives permit us to make a handful of replies to Plato.

A Platonic order where an expert makes all of the political decisions is one in which we could not see our collective and cognitive lives as ours. Such an arrangement would be the political analogue of the individual who takes Dr. Know's serum. Perhaps there could be a morally incorruptible expert who always decides political questions in a way that corresponds to what justice requires. A society in which such an individual possesses complete political power would no doubt be by some measure successful. But, like the beliefs of those who take Know's serum, it would fail to be a success attributable to the citizens of the society. In fact, it would be a society in which justice doesn't really matter to anyone except the expert ruler. Citizens would live according to rules required by justice, but could not *see* the justice of the rules, because all they would know is that they were decreed by the rulers. Consequently, they could not see their society as the product of their own collective efforts to reason together about their lives. They could live in a perfect society but not understand it as such. That seems a tragedy, a kind of shame. Or, if that's too dramatic an assessment, it's at least disappointing. And, remember, that's supposed to be an ideal society.

Perhaps most importantly, the Platonic arrangement causes us to see our cognitive lives as fundamentally disjointed. In a Platonic kingdom, citizens must rely on their individual and collective cognitive skills in order to form beliefs about the full range of non-political matters—from how to cook their dinners, clean their clothes, and fix their cars to what books to read and how to spend their free time—but they must nevertheless decline

to apply those faculties to Big Questions about their social and political lives. They must see their social existence, along with their political beliefs and political activity, as *alien*. This seems to us a most severe kind of injustice, one that undoes whatever moral advantages the Platonic kingdom might seem to embody.

Here a critic might object in the following way. It seems that some good challenges to the idea of a Platonic kingship have been raised, but it is still not clear that majority rule can be defended. Even when constrained by the constitutional mechanisms of modern democracy, majority rule still seems to be in tension with the aspiration to believe what is true and avoid believing what is false. Moreover, majority rule is far too often the rule by those with little cognitive command, but who nevertheless want to give commands.

This is a worthy objection. Here's our response. Just as we must rely on others in our individual lives, our collective life in a democratic society involves a similar kind of reliance. Democratic self-government is rooted in a commitment to the cognitive soundness of a system in which individuals are permitted to freely exchange information, ideas, reasons, and arguments. The thought is that under such conditions, the belief that can win the assent of a majority is the best available guide to collective decision making that is consistent with the other values embodied by a modern democracy, including equality and liberty. This is of course not to say that in a democracy citizens must always regard the majority view as correct or even best given the available reasons. It means rather that over the full range of cases, a belief that has won the assent of a majority is the best guide to what our reasons say we should decide. It is important to emphasize that it is open to democratic citizens to hold that in a particular case, the democratic process has failed to track the best reasons and consequently has produced a seriously mistaken result.

This point about democratic error is why, in a modern democracy, collective decisions are understood to be revisable. In fact, many of the individual rights recognized by modern democracy are aimed at enabling those who object to a policy to challenge it, even after it has been validated or selected by properly democratic processes of collective decision making. That is, a basic commitment of modern democracy is that citizens must be permitted to engage in acts of critique, protest, resistance, and dissent. This provides an additional consideration that favors majority rule. Political majorities are not set in stone. Groups of dissenting individuals, even if they begin as a tiny minority, can continue to debate and criticize a given political decision, and at least in principle transform into a majority and bring about significant social change.

In our individual lives, we can do our best to believe in accordance with our reasons, and yet still fail. Similarly, even a properly functioning democracy composed of sincere and intelligent citizens can err. No method of collective decision making can guarantee correctness every

time. Majority rule is simply the best decision procedure available, in that over the range of cases (even if not in every individual instance) it promises results that reflect our best reasons, while respecting the other values that democracy holds dear. The hope with democracy is that over time the truth will out, and when it does, we will not only have a truth, but we will possess it.

Although this response to Plato is incomplete, we think that it can be developed into a rather powerful defense of democracy. However, as with success of almost every kind, philosophical success comes at a price. As you probably noticed as the discussion developed, our defense of democracy places significant demands on democratic citizens. For example, our defense of majority rule—even the kind of majority rule that is constrained by the rights of individuals—calls for a democratic citizenry that is responsive to the ongoing arguments and criticisms presented by dissenting groups, even when such groups reflect tiny minorities. In addition, our entire discussion of democracy has presupposed that democratic citizens are fundamentally interested in reasons and arguments rather than raw power. That's pretty idealistic on our part. Some might call it dangerously optimistic.

We recognize that actual democracy is not so rosy. We realize that the politically powerful often dismiss the arguments of those less powerful without much thought. And we are not blind to the fact that democratic politics is most frequently driven by power in various forms—including money, class, status, pedigree, and so on—rather than reasons. But we also think that our account does not require us to deny any of these facts about real-world democratic politics. Here's why. The view that we have presented thus far identifies what we take to be the *aspirations* embodied in our individual and collective cognitive lives. We do not take ourselves to have been *describing* actual democracy any more than we took ourselves in our first chapter to have been describing how actual people go about forming and evaluating their beliefs. What we have been trying to do is present a model of cognitive hygiene—in both individual and social aspects—that is worth trying for.

Importantly, this model is not plucked from thin air by a couple of armchair academics. We have tried to identify and make explicit the aspirations that inhere in the everyday practices of people. It may be true that the proverbial man on the street often fails to believe what his best reasons say he should believe, but, crucially, the man on the street does not *take himself* to hold unfounded or otherwise defective beliefs. Rather, he takes himself to be successful in tracking his reasons. Otherwise, he would not believe as he does. Again, the man on the street may in fact believe on the basis of what barely could count as a reason, but he does not evaluate himself in this way. Instead, he sees his reasons as sufficient.

Consider again the political experts we mentioned earlier. They expressed unmistakable confidence in their predictions about the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Yet they were all wrong, and stunningly so.

But now notice that, even though it is clear to us in hindsight that they suffered from a form of group polarization driven by wishful thinking and social pressure, in offering their predictions, they were still talking about the reasons they had. Ezra Klein invokes his expertise, and the *Huffington Post* team insist they are looking at the available data objectively. Importantly, they do not say of themselves, in the midst of it all, “My views are all the product of a self-imposed intellectual echo chamber.” Nobody ever says that kind of thing about his or her own beliefs. And here’s why: in every case of belief, we take ourselves to have *not* been duped. To hold a belief is to take it to have been adequately formed. Even in the depths of profound error, people uphold the aspiration to proper cognitive hygiene. That’s cause for modest optimism.

There is a further, more general consideration that is worth mentioning at this point. The prevalence of ongoing and persistent disagreement, of actual dispute among people over political and moral questions of the day, shows that people in general see themselves as beholden to the aspiration to believe on the basis of the best reasons they have. If this were not the case, it would be difficult to explain why the man on the street is in the least inclined to criticize those who disagree with him. It would similarly be difficult to make sense of many of the staple institutions and practices of our political lives, from newspapers, blogs, and political talk-shows to the hundreds of books published yearly by political commentators and pundits. In none of these cases do we allow people to assert that reasons do not matter. In fact, we demand that they provide us with reasons and are responsive to our objections.

In short, argument expresses our commitment to the aspiration to believe in accordance with the best reasons we can find. It reflects the pull we should feel for cognitive command. That argument so pervades our social and political lives demonstrates the widespread commitment to this aspiration. We have argued here that democracy is the political manifestation of the aspiration to conduct ourselves according to our reasons. As an aspiration, democracy requires us not to succeed always at rational self-government, but to sincerely and earnestly try to live individually and collectively according to our best reasons. We of course often fall short. But the fact that we fall short doesn’t mean this aspiration is silly or worthless. We shouldn’t give up on the aspiration of self-rule and autonomy so easily. That would be tantamount to seeing ourselves as deserving nothing better than to be ruled by others. It would be to resign ourselves to being subjects of a king or cabal of oligarchs whom we could at most hope are inclined to rule in accordance with the demands of justice. Rather, given what we have outlined here, we all have a deep aspiration to be individually and collectively rational. In this respect, we are all idealists about argument and about democracy.

Democracy is the project of self-government among free and equal citizens. Self-government among free and equal citizens inevitably involves

collective decision making amidst ongoing disagreement among citizens about what should be done. In a democracy, we try collectively to decide on the policies and actions that enjoy the support of our best reasons. Accordingly, democracy calls for vibrant but reasoned public discourse and debate; the activity of trying to root out in dialogue what reasons one has to believe one thing or another is central to democracy. We may say, then, that democracy is self-government by means of public argumentation. Hence it matters how we argue, and that we argue well rather than poorly. Caring about arguing well about public matters is among the central duties of democratic citizenship. In our next chapter, we develop an account of what proper public argument involves.

For Further Thought

- 1 Early in the chapter, it is claimed that engaging in argument helps us to better understand our own commitments. Arguing helps us to gain a kind of command over our own beliefs. Is this plausible? Doesn't argument often result simply in greater uncertainty and doubt?
- 2 How might Plato respond to the defense of democracy offered in this chapter? Does the fact that anti-democrats feel compelled to provide arguments against democracy provide an unintended kind of support for democracy?
- 3 The conception of democracy defended here seems to place significant demands on ordinary citizens. The democratic citizens envisioned here are highly active participants in the political life of their communities. But surely there's more to life than democracy and the duties of a democratic citizen. Some people quite reasonably prefer to spend their time in other ways, including in more or less solitary pursuits. Can the view developed in this chapter accommodate this fact?
- 4 In the chapter, there were two kinds of manipulation proposed: diverting and distorting manipulation. Are there other ways arguments (or pseudoarguments) can manipulate?
- 5 Is the value of cognitive command undone by the fact that one can have command of an issue but still be wrong?
- 6 How could the phenomenon of group polarization create the illusion of cognitive command?

Key Terms

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| Deliberative democracy | The attempt to collectively govern our shared lives according to our best reasons. |
| Group polarization | The social phenomenon of intellectually homogenous groups to progressively hold more extreme versions of views. |

Cognitive command An understanding of the complexity of an issue, the capacity to explain why something is true, and a cognizance of objections and counter-considerations.