

A USER'S GUIDE
TO CONSTRUCTIVE
DIALOG

ARGUING FOR OUR LIVES

ROBERT
JENSEN

CHAPTER 2 Intellectual Basics: Simple but Not Simplistic

To make the case that everyone is capable of critical thinking is not to suggest that all contributions from everyone have equal standing or that there are no guidelines for good intellectual practice. We all should weigh in on questions, but our contributions should be scrutinized according to agreed-upon standards. In this chapter I offer not a detailed technical approach to critical thinking, but rather a series of framing questions that can help us tackle the important issues we face in the realms of social, economic, and political policy.

Let's start with suggestions for examining the claims we all make. As we engage intellectually to deepen our understanding of the world—whether it be the physical world of which we humans are a part, or the social world that we humans create—we should always be asking four basic questions about a claim being made:

- What are the unstated assumptions behind the claim, and how do those assumptions affect our understanding?

- How are terms being defined, and might those definitions favor one position over another?
- What is the quality of the evidence being offered, and is the full range of evidence being acknowledged?
- Does the evidence lead in logical fashion to the claim being made?

All arguments are not created equal. Upon examination, some will be stronger than others and some will be without merit. These four basic questions provide a starting point for that assessment, yet they are routinely ignored, not just in everyday argument but in mainstream political discourse. People are tempted to avoid that intellectual engagement, perhaps in part because they want to avoid the conflict that might follow, but also perhaps because intellectual work takes effort. The more complicated and confusing the world gets, the more seductive it is to believe that all claims are mere opinion. From that perspective, one isn't obligated to evaluate another's argument but can simply dismiss it as inconsistent with one's own beliefs. Reducing all arguments to the exchange of opinions is the lazy way out. That's why I stop students any time they begin a contribution in class with, "Well, this is just my opinion, but . . ."

"What do you mean by 'just your opinion?'" I ask. "Did you pull this opinion out of thin air, or is it the product of some research and thinking? Can you defend your assumptions, define your terms clearly, offer evidence and reasoning to support your opinion? If you can, why undermine your argument by suggesting it is 'just your opinion,' which invites others not to take it seriously?"

I press these points because we live in a culture in which

the skills of intellectual and political engagement are atrophying. Too many people equate "argument" with the inane shouting matches between pundits on cable television talk shows, rather than with the careful defense of a position and a response to challenges. In a hyper-mediated culture awash with people pontificating, it's easy to abandon the work of assessing arguments—to give up on what seems like an endless task of evaluation—and shrug off opportunities for critical engagement with "Well, that's just your opinion."

Yes, everyone has opinions and we all have a right to our opinions. However, opinions are meaningful to the degree that we make it clear to others why we hold those opinions and give them good reasons to consider our ideas. All of life is not a formal debate, and students exploring their ideas in class shouldn't be expected to articulate a fully formed defense of every claim made. But in a healthy classroom students should be encouraged—even pressed—to sharpen, articulate, and defend their opinions. In a healthy democracy, the same can be said of citizens.

What will help us move forward in this goal? There are many books about argumentation and rhetoric, about formal and informal logic, about the fallacies that are used in constructing bad arguments.¹ The goal here is not to summarize those traditional approaches but instead to frame our critical thinking at this moment in history, as we face vexing problems in our attempts to create a more just and sustainable world. I begin with suggestions about how we should approach these questions, and then remind us of our limits before sketching a way to think about what we can achieve.

I want to start with the most basic of questions, one we all struggle with when young and which most of us never

completely resolve: Who am I? Wrestling with that basic question of identity can easily turn self-indulgent and narcissistic, but it also can be a path to greater understanding not only of self but of the world. Let's think about the question at three levels:

- Ecological: On what principles should my relationship to the non-human world be grounded, and how does that relationship define me?
- Societal: On what principles should my relationships to others be grounded, and how do those relationships define me?
- Personal: What aspects of my unique personality are most central to who I am?

On the ecological: Asking about our relationship to the "non-human world" rather than to "nature" reminds us that we are part of nature, not separate from it. Nature, in this sense, is the whole living world, of which humans are one small, but significant, part. This change in terminology shifts our frame of reference and asks us to think about ourselves not as the center of the world, but as one component of it. How we define ourselves personally will depend in part on how we understand the human family in relation to that living world.

The same is clearly the case in societal terms; our sense of self is connected to how we understand our relationship to others. Just as we aren't beings who float above and apart from the world, we don't exist outside social groups. Before we ask "Who am I?" in the most personal sense—the focus on what makes us individual and unique—we should situ-

are ourselves not only in society but in the living world. The personal question is important, but it is better understood when we begin at a level that provides context.

When we evaluate the social, political, and economic systems in which we live—which is essential if we are to construct a more just and sustainable world—we will find ourselves often trying to ask very detailed questions, drawing on the theories and tools from specific disciplines. But in doing that, we should always try to understand our complex world from three standpoints:

- Philosophically: Seeking knowledge and truth that is (potentially) universal.
- Historically: Recognizing the different ways people over time have understood human nature and organized their societies.
- Sociologically: Identifying patterns in the distribution of power in our society today.

Philosophy has many branches and can be approached in many different ways. But the word, from the ancient Greek, simply means a love of wisdom or knowledge. The quest to expand our knowledge and develop wisdom is rooted, at least for me, in the elusive search for truth, in the most expansive sense of that word—true for all people in all places at all times. Perhaps that desire is unhealthy, but I can't seem to shake it. The possibility of that kind of universal truth is intoxicating.

But we have too many examples of people who, drunk on the belief that they had found that universal truth, imposed it on others in brutal fashion. So we also need always

to be thinking historically, recognizing the myriad different ways that human truth claims have played out over time. Even if we might want to proclaim some assertions as true, history teaches that there are different ways to live a truth. Only with a sense of history can we responsibly manage that desire to understand what may be true about ourselves, our society, and the world.

Finally, we also should always be thinking sociologically, a term I use here to describe the search to understand patterns in a society's distribution of power and wealth. We use gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, and other identity categories not simply to identify and/or celebrate our differences, but to understand where real power lies and how it operates. We are interested in understanding who is in charge of determining and pronouncing the truth, because those who hold that power typically control resources.

Just as the first set of questions about identity reminds us not to focus merely on ourselves in understanding identity, this set of guidelines reminds us not to focus on only one aspect of our reality. Although at any given moment we may focus on a narrow question that we try to answer in very specific ways, we always want to return to thinking at multiple levels. The answers we find to narrow questions matter only when placed in a larger context.

As we work to understand ourselves in those contexts, we also move among different types of inquiry with different goals:

- Empirical: Producing data through our inquiry.
- Analytical: Organizing that data in meaningful fashion.
- Normative: Articulating social norms to guide our lives.

In empirical work, we search for the facts, the data on which we build our attempts to describe the world. We recognize the tentative nature of human understanding—even when it comes to relatively simple assertions of fact, we humans are working on sand, not bedrock. But the facts matter, and though our methods are imperfect we don't abandon the quest to build the most trustworthy databases possible. This empirical inquiry can take the form of an experiment or observation, reported as "qualitative" data that offers descriptions of the world in words or "quantitative" data that creates categories with words and then uses numbers to report results within those categories.²

Whichever form of inquiry and whichever style of reporting is used, this data is "information organized for analysis." While the empirical inquiry may tell us things that are interesting on their own merit, we typically collect data toward the goal of analysis, our attempts to explain how the world works. Those analytical efforts can include physicists' attempts to explain the fundamental rules of the physical universe or political scientists' attempts to explain how voting patterns in a particular election correlate with income. Since analysis is built on our always tentative determination of the facts, our claims about how the world works will be tentative as well.

Coming to understand how the world works does not answer deeper questions of how we should organize human societies and what rules should guide those societies. Every human community establishes social norms, the rules that govern behavior, and so in-addition to making claims about the world as it is, we will make normative claims about how we believe the world should be. A rule against cheating on

an exam is a normative claim, based on an argument about what education is for and how we can best educate students. A democratic political system is based on a normative claim about how power should be distributed.

Although we are identifying these three levels of inquiry separately, they are connected in some important ways. We may want to tell a simple story about how we collect facts, analyze those facts to offer our best explanations, and then use those explanations to inform our judgments about how best to construct social norms. But it's never that simple. The existing social norms in a society or group will affect which questions we ask and how we understand the relevance of the questions. The existing analytical framework we start with will affect how we go about looking for empirical evidence. There is interplay between all these aspects of our investigations into, and assertions about, the world. As the Talking Heads song puts it, "Facts all come with points of view."³

One more way to say this: No knowledge is pre-theoretical. We can never engage the world without some existing idea about how the world works that will guide our inquiry; what we might call a "theory." We can't collect data without an existing theory about the question we are seeking to answer. The way we think about a question organizes the way we go into the world to answer that question. Like all the other cautionary reminders about the contingent nature of our knowledge, recognizing this doesn't mean there is nothing we can know, but simply reminds us that nothing is simple.⁴

I have waited to use the terms "theory" and "theoretical" until now, to avoid the confusion that comes from how those terms get used in everyday language. When someone says, "That's just a theory" to counter a proposed explanation,

what they typically mean is "There are not strong reasons to accept that particular theory as our best explanation." In conversation, "just a theory" usually translates into "I think you're wrong."

All theories, in this sense, are just a theory, just a proposed explanation. Some theories are well supported, others more speculative. Given the limits of our knowledge, all theories should be offered tentatively, but the contingency of our understanding doesn't mean it's all just opinion. Over time we develop ways of testing our theories, both through formal scientific methods and informal practical ones. Some theories are better supported than others.

This comes up in contemporary culture most often around the theory of evolution by natural selection. Critics, usually citing religious beliefs, contend that it's "just a theory." Fair enough, but the real question is how compelling a theory it is. We know that evolution happens; we have plenty of evidence that organisms experience genetic change over generations. What is the best way to explain that evolution? The vast majority of biologists, and lots of other laypeople who have studied the subject, have concluded that the theory of evolution by natural selection is the most compelling explanation and that no other explanation yet offered is plausible. That doesn't mean that a new theory might not emerge in the future that is more compelling, but it does mean that of the theories on the table today, evolution by natural selection is by far the strongest.

More recently, a similar debate has arisen around the role of human behavior in climate change. Virtually all climate scientists agree on the basics: The planet is warming because we are adding heat-trapping greenhouse gases to the atmosphere,

primarily by burning fossil fuels. While exact predictions are impossible, we can expect rising sea levels, more extreme weather, and other changes that will disrupt business-as-usual for humans. That's a theory, which means that, as with any theory, it could be wrong in part or whole, but it is the strongest theory we have today. That so many people reject that theory says more about the deniers' politics and theology than it does about an evaluation of the evidence.⁵

This is the nature of human inquiry—always exciting in what we learn and always frustrating in the limits of what we can know. This is captured in the philosopher Karl Popper's definition of theory, these systematic attempts at explanation that we humans create: "Theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world': to rationalize, to explain, and to master it. We endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer."⁶

Complex questions await when one delves deeper into the philosophy of science or the specific methods of a discipline. Making the mesh finer is both wondrously, and maddeningly, complicated. My goal has been to sketch an approach to intellectual work that is simple without being simplistic, that captures the potential and the limits of our knowledge. From here, we will confront the inevitably political nature of our attempts to understand the world.