8. The Structure of Argument

Learning the contexts of life is a matter that has to be discussed, not internally, but as a matter of the external relationship between two creatures. And relationship is always a product of double description.

It is correct (and a great improvement) to begin to think of the two parties to the interaction as two eyes, each giving a monocular view of what goes on and, together, giving a binocular view in depth. This double view *is* the relationship. (author's italics)

Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* p. 147

For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and all their pupils down to the present day, it was an article of faith that, in principle, a process of inquiry should converge to some unique, true answer. That in practice it might fail to do so was to be expected. Human limitations were as well known to the ancients as to us. And the Sophists knew well – and earned their livings teaching – that truth, for practical purposes, is what a clever speaker can make his audience believe. But against these teachers of rhetoric, Socrates insisted that questions did have wrong and right answers, and that this distinction was always meaningful, even when true answers could not be found. Until the very end of the 19th century, Western thinkers followed Plato in that belief. The scandal of post-modern philosophy, and of modern thought in general, has been our discovery that, for very many questions, the Sophists were right. It now appears that all of our most important ideas are matters of interpretation, to which the concept of truth cannot apply. The key problem of 20th century philosophy has been to see what can be saved from the epistemological debacle that follows.

One way to save a notion of public truth is to invoke revelation, tradition or some other special authority as warrant for your favourite story. A better way – for anyone who sets much value on the idea of reason – is to pin the idea of truth to the integrity of argument, while acknowledging frankly that the argument may not converge – even in principle, let alone practice. The point is really very simple: If an argument is conducted with bombs and bullets, or even with slogans and lurid images, its knowledge value will be negligible, however completely one side may prevail. On the other hand, if an argument is conducted soberly, with respectful attention to the positions of others, its knowledge value may be very great, even when no definite conclusion or consensus is reached.

My claim, then, is that a worthwhile conception of reason is still possible, provided we renounce the idea of "proving" the rightness of our beliefs to benighted souls who see things differently. What we can hope from reason is not a clear decision amongst rival cognitive positions, but a structured field of concepts, images, claims and arguments, developed through dialectical

processes of theoretical argument and practical politics. In such a field, argument is not (as in mathematics) an attempt to "prove" one's claim; nor is it a weapon for "winning" an argument through sheer rhetorical power. Rather, in keeping with the etymological meaning of the verb *to argue*, it is simply an attempt to make one's position "clear as silver" to one's self, first of all, and then to all stakeholders at the table.

It has long been understood that recognition of ignorance is the beginning of knowledge. Socrates made it the basis of his method to confess confusion about some vital matter, and invite his confident interlocutors to examine it with him. Francis Bacon, endorsing the method of science over revelation and faith, wrote "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."[1] It's easy to bluff – especially to one's self – and everybody does it, perhaps about more things than not. Yet the only hope of learning anything new is to ask a good question and be patient in one's ignorance while persevering in one's search.

The stronger point I wish to make is that the right kind of confusion and argument – especially internal argument within one's own mind – is already a form of knowledge. When we know how much we don't know, we already know much more than we did when we thought we knew everything worth knowing. When we understand that some questions do not have neat, formulaic answers, but only structures of argument, we understand much more than we did when we thought all questions factually answerable.

The faith of classical thinkers that patient inquiry will lead to certain truth has been irrevocably shattered; and we have learned that patient inquiry will lead to as many truths as there were viewpoints to start with. Stories and the practices these suggest will cluster into transmissible cultures, so there will be relatively few distinct truth cultures as compared with the number of individual seekers at the table of public discourse. Yet most issues that people really care much about will produce more than one such culture; and in these cases, a well-understood structure of argument will be the best we can expect.

8.1 The Purpose of Argument

Every argument begins with an *issue* – a failing of sureness and locus of dispute. The over-all purpose of epistemic argument, is to establish cognitive background for the (pragmatic) issues and their negotiated resolution. As we've seen, people may continue to differ in their understandings, but the negotiation of practical issues must eventually converge to a single collective choice. By this requirement, pragmatic disputes are tightly constrained, as

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[1] The Advancement of Learning, Bk 1, i, 3, Francis Bacon

epistemic ones are not. For this reason, as we've seen, it is desirable to keep the two types of argument well insulated from one another. Even from differing understandings and value systems, people may still be able to agree on common plans and policies, if they can negotiate their pragmatic issues without an ideological tug-of-war. The trick is to agree to differ while settling the business at hand.

Now, there exist several excellent books on the theory and practice of negotiation, written by people with much more experience of it than I have had. For this reason, I will say no more about pragmatic argument, except to note that the approach suggested here seems entirely consistent with that proposed, for example, by Fisher and Ury in *Getting To Yes*, among the best-known books on the subject. In effect, they too recommend separating the pragmatic issue from its epistemic context, so that negotiation can be treated as a problem to be jointly solved (in light of such common interests and understanding as can be found), and not as a contest of bicker and bluff. Indeed, this is precisely what we mean by "reason" in the context of pragmatic conversation. The aim is to reach working agreements on some concrete matter – the narrower the better. The less the negotiators allow themselves to be distracted and deadlocked by the cognitive issues dividing them, the more "reasonable" they are being, and the better their chance to reach a satisfactory deal.

So far as the epistemic dispute is concerned, its crucial task is to map the cognitive landscape on which negotiations take place. For example, the Intelligence Agencies of rival powers might work up an issue paper, along the lines of Section 5.3 as a background to arms-reduction talks, where a common pool of reliable information and a good map of the disagreements would be prerequisites for success. The epistemic problem here would be to argue out and document a joint statement of the realities of the situation, and to clarify the security needs and policies of their respective nations. The task of argument is not persuasion – at best, a by-product, if it occurs at all – but a building of tensegrity around the question(s) at issue: a critique and appreciation of understandings at the table. The goal is not to "convince," but to share divergent realities. What bitter adversaries can share is just the tensegrity of their argument.

8.2 The Conduct of Argument

As practised by Socrates, and almost the whole tradition of Western thought to this day, it was hoped that critical argument could establish truths (including ethical and aesthetic truths) by demolishing all but a single, true interpretation of reality, and a single, true system of values. Today it is clear that this *via negativa* – the method of arriving at positive truth by eliminating falsehoods – is blocked by the scandal of interpretations. Opinions will most often remain

irreducibly plural because understandings and the cognitive strategies behind them do not have negations or contraries in the sense that logical propositions seem to have. You can refuse or reject an understanding and its strategy, but what could it mean to *negate* it? Schelling and Hegel thought that every thesis must have some definite antithesis in correspondence to it but, in general, this is not the case. Typically, after an argument has chased itself around the block a few times, several interpretive strategies remain viable. For example, there is no singular "proletarian" understanding negating a characteristically "bourgeois" mode of understanding. There are a great many such modes. Inevitably, the cognitive strategies of numerous groups and individuals must coexist within the fabric of society, manoeuvring for influence in its political process.

Once formed and articulated, a cognitive strategy is rarely disposed of with finality. It may be discredited for a particular application. It may be supplanted for most purposes by some other strategy. It may go out of fashion, and be all but forgotten. But it can be revived at any time by anyone who cares to do so. In general, then, what emerges from argument is neither a single correct understanding, nor a mere plurality of different understandings, but a complex structure of competing understandings, mutually wary and adapted to each other's strengths and weaknesses.

In matters of interpretation, no absolute Truth will emerge victorious from the argument; nor can Truth be defeated and cast down. Nor will synthesis necessarily emerge from the clash of positions. Most great arguments go on forever. All the ancient disputes – between spiritual and secular sensibilities, between haves and have-nots, between image-people and word-people, between nominalists and realists – are still going strong, with no end in sight. Certainly, nothing will be "proven." The people who find a given position uncongenial (from whatever motives or reasons) will never find the arguments in its favour irresistibly persuasive. At most, opinions may get shaken a little – perhaps loosened up sufficiently to make for possibilities of change in the long run. And yet, much will happen in a well-conducted argument. Through the process, the protagonists will learn quite a lot about the issue and each other; and the pattern of their dealings will be altered.

The outcome of successful epistemic conversation is colloquially called a "*meeting of minds*" – a phrase to which we can now give fairly precise meaning: The expression is often used to mean "consensus," which is not the same thing at all. A *meeting of minds* as understood here is a state of mutual awareness, understanding and diplomatic *recognition* – of the diversity of positions at the table. It is a state of conversation in which the protagonists have understood, and agree that they have understood, each other's viewpoints. It signifies that they have reached a common understanding not of

the issues themselves, but of their respective viewpoints on the issues.[2]

Such common understanding represents a considerable achievement, valuable for its own sake and as background to any negotiation that follows. It deserves the name of public knowledge because it does the job that has always been expected of such knowledge: the support of intelligent, collectively advantageous public decisions.

This point holds regardless of the level of cordiality or hostility among contending parties: The interlocutors of any conversation need to make sense of each other's stances and moves, to better shape their own. They need to find intelligible meaning in each other's positions, intentions, actions and utterances; and this process of mutual sense-making is partly collaborative, even for deadly enemies: Trying to make sense of each other's moves, the parties will build a common infrastructure of *vocabulary* and *argument*, whether they intend to do so or not. They will build this structure because even hostilities, even total warfare, cannot be conducted without a context of mutual intelligibility.

Burden

As well as its purpose – no longer to establish the Truth, or to convince others that one has it – the burden of argument also changes. In a regime of Unitary Truth, the positive statement asks for absolute assent from everyone; and it is either true or false – that is to say, it either is or is not entitled to such universal assent. Initially, there is a burden of proof to establish that a proposition is True; but once a statement is generally accepted, the burden is on the dissent: If you disagree with the consensus, you must explain the grounds of your doubt. You must explain why you resist the majority wisdom, why you reject an understanding that has convinced everyone else. In polyphonic domains, by contrast, the positive statement merely puts a claim that a situation reasonably *can* be seen in a certain way; not that it *must* be seen so. There could be no authority for the latter claim. Prima facie, everyone has a right to his own preferred interpretations, to his own evaluative and perceptual strategies. To insist that one's own cognitive strategy is the only correct one will seem arbitrary and unreasonable.

Accordingly, the burden of argument is no longer on the heretic, to justify his eccentric position. It now falls on the authority who wants to assert

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[2] It will be seen that such a meeting of minds is only possible if the interlocutors are both reporting their concerns and perceptions in good faith (which is a matter of integrity), and prepared to stipulate that their opponents are doing likewise. For, obviously, if I believe (am committed to the view) that your position is merely a bargaining ploy, there will not be a meeting of minds. I must be persuaded that the concerns you are expressing are real to you – and therefore real for me to the extent that we share a world.

that some position is merely eccentric. Anyone proposing to restrict the range of acceptable cognition must establish a case for such restriction, and will have to show that no competent, responsible person could hold the views in question. If I believe some other person's commitments unworthy of reason, the burden is on me to show why my aggressive stance is justified. In practice, this will prove impossible to do politely: without giving offense to persons I have to work or break bread with, for example. Conversely, I have no obligation to justify my own understanding. Whatever consensus exists for a different one, I am entitled to my opinion.

In every case, the burden of argument falls on the person who wishes to marginalise or disqualify a given viewpoint from serious conversation – to represent it as unworthy to be taken seriously. Even then, reason places severe constraints on the claim he can make. Under polyphonic conditions, it is meaningless to say that a position or statement is "false." The most he can say is something like, "I wholly reject and despise your way of understanding"; and then it will be up to him to explain why.

The Force of Argument

The normative force of reason, as of any ethical value, arises from a tendency of social existence to become more difficult or dangerous when violations are common. When we say that "people *ought* to be reasonable, and to avoid damaging the integrity of their conversations," we are making an ethical claim of roughly the same kind as "people ought not to shit in the living-room." Nothing prevents them from doing it, but it would make a smelly mess that someone would have to clean up. The saying, "It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest" expresses the most universal of ethical norms, and is probably the source of all such norms. Indeed, it might stand as a version of Kant's Categorical Imperative.[3] Remarkably, as a bit of wisdom it manages to be absolute and relative at the same time. The statement itself has a strong claim to being absolutely true. In all cultures, and across the universe, we might expect agreement that a life form who erodes the pre-conditions for its own existence – for relationship to its own world – is in trouble, and probably needs to make some changes in its habits. At the same time, one's sense of what is "foul," the extent and nature of one's own "nest" and even the imperative of survival are largely relative. A similar relativity-in-universality characterizes the logic of conversation as a whole. It may be articulated, implemented and sanctioned in manifold ways. The essentials of integrity, however, are probably the same

[3] Kant's Moral Law: Always to act in such a way that you could will your choice as a universal principle. "Don't foul your own nest" expresses the same idea more tersely – to the extent you consider the whole world your "nest" It is worth noting that Kant's principle is already relative to what the individual can will – i.e. to his sense of the requirements of his own habitat.

everywhere.

It is the concept of integrity that saves argument from becoming a mere power game among competing rhetorics. To say that all argument employs rhetorical devices is not the same as saying that all argument is nothing but rhetoric. The confusion (created deliberately) between these claims was itself a flagrant abuse of rhetorical skill. Granting that language is rhetorical by nature, there are important differences of intention – of intention to reason closely and judiciously – between a Supreme Court decision and a cigarette commercial, let us say, or between a scientific paper and a political speech. All these are intended to influence perceptions, and will go beyond classical logic in doing so. Yet it is absurd to see them as equally careless and indifferent to reason; nor could any notion surrender more abjectly to the "spin doctors," and to the interests which can pay their fees.

Confusing reasoning with rhetoric is even more wrong-headed than confusing it with formal logic. There is indeed a sense in which "knowledge is power." Yet to imagine that intellectual anarchy might help the down-trodden is pure fantasy – and totally irresponsible, if not actually cynical, on the part of those French and American intellectuals who professed to think so. They should have known better: Anarchy, it has been well said, is a game that the most powerful will win. It is true (as Foucault insisted) that reason and knowledge are instruments of power, but they are also among the few effective checks on arbitrary, irresponsible power. Thus, the distinction we need is not between "hard logic" and "mere rhetoric", but between rhetoric that presents responsible reasoning in effective fashion, and rhetoric that is just cynically manipulative. This distinction may be conveniently overlooked, but it is simple enough to draw. We can do so by noting the availability of the rhetoric in question to the process of critical argument.

Every paradigm and every concept emphasizes some aspects of experience at the expense of others. It takes certain features of its subject as central and essential, while marginalising or overlooking other features – *glossing* over them, as we say. It facilitates some interventions, while leaving others impossible or inconceivable. Finally, it forces its proponents to expend time and energy in facing down its various *embarrassments* – both the serious critical arguments that can be raised against it, and the cheap rhetorical points that can be scored.

The word seems appropriate: Embarrassment is what one feels when a commitment must be repudiated because too onerous to maintain. Intellectual embarrassments are those warts on a cognitive commitment that offer ammunition to its opponents: the smoking gun in the hand of the murder suspect; Heidegger's Nazi sympathies; the moons of Jupiter for Ptolemaic astronomy; Becquerel's discovery of radioactivity for Newtonian physics.

They are not arguments in themselves, but awkward features difficult to explain away. In the long run, they make it difficult to defend one story, and increasingly tempting to abandon it for another. Thomas Kuhn described the process in his well-known book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, but much the same happens outside of science, as a feature of cognitive life in general. Understandings come with corresponding *glossing costs* – sources of material loss and cognitive embarrassment. When these costs become too steep, and/or the committed proponents die off, we exchange our understandings for others that seem to work better, though always with costs of their own.

Meanwhile, the force of reasoned argument, such as it is, derives from the embarrassment it is able to cause. On its receiving end, the crucial question is whether the understanding being defended is worth the embarrassments that can be raised against it. Reasonableness, among other things, is a disposition to feel and respond to intellectual embarrassment. Public reason depends on institutions that produce embarrassment in the authorities when the integrity of pragmatic conversation is violated. That is why parliamentary government and freedom of the press were great political inventions in their day, and why they are only partial answers to the problem of accountable and democratic government. They select for a breed of politician with real expertise in diverting, defusing and facing down embarrassments, but do not provide sufficient incentive to avoid embarrassment in the first place.

8.3 Value Argument

Differences of value and self-interest give the scandal of interpretations its bite: When no significant differences of this kind are present, we find it relatively easy to work out a common language of discourse; but when interests diverge, the players tend to rationalize their positions and to justify themselves by invoking different paradigms and, finally, by speaking seemingly different "languages." When interests and values differ sharply, all phases of epistemic argument, even those concerned ostensibly with "the facts," are very difficult.

Now, mere difficulty can be overcome, but reasoned value-argument is often considered impossible. "Of tastes, there is no disputing," the Latin proverb goes. Either they are conceived as God-given (or as biologically given, which, for practical purposes, amounts to the same thing), or else as arbitrary matters of personal or cultural taste. We can perhaps *negotiate* between conflicting values, it is thought. We cannot reason about them. For extreme positivists, only Aristotelian questions and claims of fact fall within the scope of reason. Such thinkers refuse to recognize values and "mere interpretations" as proper objects of cognition.

The wish for a clean distinction between (subjective) values and

(objective) reality stems from powerful motives. Classical liberals needed this separation to protect private interests from government intervention: To the extent that values are taken as proper objects of rational discussion, there may be movements to restrict you in the free pursuit of your own – e.g. in the name of public values and public reason. At the same time, the philosophy of science seemed to require the divorce of hard facts from sticky, personal values as a prop for realism: To protect the notion of an objective reality, the same for everyone, we had to admit innumerable subjectivities with private values of their own, to which public reason did not apply. Opinion and interpretation too are then beyond the pale of reason, which is strictly concerned with facts and instrumentalities: how to get more of what we want, and less of what we don't want. It can play a modest role in helping us adjust our ends to our means, and vice versa – our desires to our bank accounts, for example. But it can play no role at all in reconciling our competing ends. "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions," as Hume put it.

It is just this refusal to reason about conflicting values that makes Nietzsche's point about self-interested interpretation so catastrophic: Knowing, as we do, that cognition is an active, interpretive process, and that we receive sensory information already structured and coloured by personal values, we find no "objective" facts to reason about. If we cannot reason about values and value-laden personal understandings, we cannot reason at all. Thus, to recover a bare possibility of reason (and of a public world to reason about), it becomes necessary to show that personal and cultural values, as much as factual claims, are legitimate issues for reasoned argument.

Now, as a matter of experience, we are constantly engaged in reasoned argument about values – offering each other reasons for the values that we hold, and reasons why others should modify theirs. Let's just mention a few of the ways in which this is done:

A first device of such argument we might call *temptation* or *seduction*. "Try it, you'll like it!" is a form of argument, and perfectly legitimate when made in good faith. Certainly, there is nothing unreasonable, either in the suggestion itself, or in its acceptance – provided the one who makes it actually believes what he is saying, i.e. backs his suggestion with sincere commitment. Parents use this form of argument all the time, to get young children to try new foods: Just taste it. Just a little taste. You don't have to eat it if you don't like it! As Bernard Shaw wrote somewhere, "One should always succumb to temptation. The secret is to learn not to be tempted by things that are bad for you."

Prudential claims, positive or negative, are a second device of value-argument. Many of the things we like or dislike are linked instrumentally to prior likes and dislikes. In a thunderstorm, the desire to avoid getting hit by

lightening is a valid argument against the desire to continue fishing. Money itself is a prudential value for most of us – prized not so much for its own sake as for the discomforts it helps us avoid and the goods it helps us obtain. We were not born wanting small rectangles of paper with numbers and stuffy portraits. We had to be taught to want and work for these; and the method of this teaching – the explanation and demonstration of the uses of money – was a form of argument.

These types of value argument – seductive and prudential – are so common that we scarcely notice them. Through a third type, rather more subtle, we are directly influenced in our own values by the values of other people. More precisely, we are directly influenced in our own values by our awareness of their values, and by resulting expectations of what they will do and expect us to do. Such arguments are neither seductive nor prudential, but powerfully social in nature.

For example, warrior societies (and even modern armies to some extent) train their novices in a value called "honour" that civilians find unintelligible. Military honour has exerted a powerful attraction for many spirits; but it is the reverse of seductive, since self-denial and acceptance of suffering are of its essence. It is anything but prudential. Joining a cavalry regiment to wave sabres at cannon is just not something a prudent man would want to do.

More generally, man's search for self-esteem and status in all the ways these may be gained arise directly from our social participation. Specifically, they arise through a kind of tacit argument from everyone around us that their values are binding upon us, and that we *ought* to fulfil and gratify them. Fritz Perls' dictum: "I am not in the world to live up to your expectations, and you are not in the world to live up to mine . . . ," as worded, is clearly an over-statement. In fact, we are constantly living up to each others' expectations, and can scarcely help doing so if we are going to live among other people, or even with a pet cat or dog. What Perls meant was: we have a choice about whose and which expectations we live up to.

The general form of social argument goes something like this: "You would (or would not) want to do that, if you were what I would consider a good person." If you don't volunteer for the cavalry, you are a coward. If you sleep around, you are a slut. If you don't dress correctly, you are slob. And so on. We understand and are moved by such value-arguments even when they are not articulated. The lift of an eyebrow, the curl of a lip are more than enough. They appeal to and depend upon our nature as social animals.

These social motives are sometimes so powerful that people accept very severe penalties, including death, to gain honour by taking an unpleasant, dangerous or unpopular stand in the conversation. Socrates could easily have fled Athens, but chose to stay and drink the hemlock. Thomas More could

have endorsed the king's divorce and remarriage, but preferred the headsman's axe. At the other extreme of individual consciousness, but with similar personal results, there appears just now to be an endless supply of Palestinian and Iraqi candidates for glorious suicide in *jihad* against the enemies of Islam. Such martyrdoms have never been all that uncommon; and they can be quite rational, even in game-theoretic terms. The only condition is that stature in a conversation be held in greater value than continuation of one's mortal existence.

Yet a fourth type of value-argument occurs in the transmutation of personal interests and values into public *concerns* (as they are often called). What happens is that various overlapping private interests amalgamate and modify each other, giving rise to a kind of collective public interest shared by everyone and no one. I come to understand that I would be better off if X. You understand that you would be better off if X. Many other people understand that they would be better off if X. X is a private good for each of us, but collectively, we come to understand that some public good Y is the necessary condition for X: There must be Y for all of us together, if there is to be X for each – or even, the possibility of X for any.

For example, our private interests in personal security are re-figured as a public concern for peace and civil order. Our private interests in food, shelter and other economic goods are re-figured as a public concern for viable institutions of work and trade, and for a functioning economy. Our private interests in our own children's educations, the private interests of employers in a trained labour force, and the interests of government in its tax-base and the indoctrination of its citizens are re-figured as a public concern (albeit a highly contentious one) for the school system. And so forth. The question is, through what logic, by what type of argument precisely, does it come about that a public concern is inferred from private interests sufficiently widespread or powerful?

A textbook example: The men and women of a certain fishing village have a strong private interest in survival, and in the survival of their loved ones. This personal value is translated (essentially by prudential argument) into a public concern that a lighthouse be erected on the cape as an aid to piloting at night or in bad weather. There is a problem, however. Each fisherman also has a private interest in evading his share of the costs of building that lighthouse. Since everyone is in the same position, there arises a public concern for a fair but effective tax system, with provisions for compulsion to pay one's share. Each fisherman is best off if he and everyone else are forced to do (or pay for) their fair share of the work. Similarly, in Prisoner's Dilemma each suspect is best off if he can rely on a strictly enforced code against "ratting." Such concerns – to have arrangements in place that limit the freedom of each for the

good of all – is a very general feature of social existence. A prime function of government, reluctantly but almost inevitably assented to, is to enforce participation in the production of public goods.

The logic by which private interests are transmuted into public concerns is that of politics. It involves calculations of self-interest and instrumentality, of expectation regarding others, and of relative power, altogether too complex for discussion here. Such reasoning constitutes what we mean by *political* argument – through which we attempt to persuade ourselves and others that they should construe their self-interest in one way rather than another, that we share common concerns despite our competing private interests, that others can expect certain behaviours from us; and that, for all these reasons, people in general should behave in certain ways. As usual, such political arguments can never *compel* assent as a matter of pure reason; but they can be more or less well-founded, and more or less worth our credence.

Here we must note how the foregoing illuminates the notion of integrity as an epistemological value. Integrity of conversation is a public concern amongst others; and as such, it partially coincides with, but also goes against the individual's self-interest. We feel an interest in protecting ourselves from deceit, but we also share an interest – and a public concern as well – for the right of steering the conversation to our own ends.[4] The upshot is that conversational integrity itself is a public concern which partially accords, but also competes with our private interests in happiness, and with our public concern for the freedom to pursue it.

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We have reviewed four types of value-argument: *Seductive* argument has the form, "Try it, you'll like it." From assumptions about the world and the person to whom it is addressed, it draws a conclusion about that person's values in the future. *Prudential* argument has the form, "This is good (or bad) for you because . . ." It tries to show that the value argued for is instrumental to some other value already accepted. *Social* argument is a special case of prudential argument insofar as it seeks to persuade one to adopt a certain value for the "esteem points" to be gained. But it is *sui generis* insofar as social values are taken up by the individual as values in their own right. The general form is, "This is a value for you because it is a value for us, and because your personal identity is bound up with our collective one." *Political* argument seeks (among

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4 This concern is real, though its limits are debatable. Imagine how difficult life would be if we had to tell "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" on all occasions. See David Nyberg's book, The Varnished Truth, for a witty defence of deception, and for the limits of epistemological integrity as a social value.

other things) to generalize private interest into joint concern – a public interest for the group as a whole.

None of these argument-types can be formally valid in the classical sense, but each enjoys a certain informal reasonableness. Any sensible person would give them consideration; no sensible person would dismiss them out of hand. Yet none is so compelling that a sensible person might not reply: "I hear you; I understand you; but I'm not convinced." The conclusion is that although we remain incorrigible in our tastes and values – in the sense that we have a right to our own, and that no one can make us alter them through reasoned argument – yet tastes and values remain something that we can and must reason about.

In particular, the distinction between *interests* and *concerns* is vital to any possibility of reasoned encounter with persons whose viewpoints differ significantly from one's own. The difference is that *interests* are essentially private and divisive, while *concerns* are shareable, and often successfully shared. More explicitly, *concerns* can be thought of as *interests* that are felt to deserve the acquiescence and support of others – and that actually receive these to some extent, when there are no strong inducements to the contrary. Interests are bones to fight over. Concerns – admittedly, with their differing priorities – are public problems to resolve. The unemployed person's desire for a job and a decent wage is part of a vast public concern. The millionaire's desire for a few thousand in extra profit is just his private interest. Our law treats these motives symmetrically, but we can scarcely have economic justice until this obvious distinction becomes a matter of custom and law.

The main purpose of reasoned value argument, it must again be stressed, is not to persuade our opponents. Rather, the purpose is to collaborate with them in building a structure of an integrity as great as possible, and with one's own side therein as strong as possible. Though we point up embarrassments to our opponents' positions, and offer reasons why they should change their minds, we must concede their right to differ as a matter of respect. Here more than anywhere, we can see why public truth is a tensegrity of argument, and why tensegrity of argument is a kind of truth that even the ancient philosophers could not afford to despise. On matters of value and preference, how could there not be legitimate differences? On such matters, given such legitimate differences of opinion, what other public truth could be possible? And finally, how is it even conceivable that any social animal could function and flourish in a world where value and preference were entirely personal matters, devoid of cognitive content and beyond the reach at least of seductive and prudential arguments, if not of social and political ones?

8.4 The Structure of Argument

Encountering each other in the social and material world, divergent beliefs compete for influence. The means of this competition often have more to do with power or violence than with reason, but we call the whole process *argument*, taking this word in its broadest sense. In this situation, as we have seen, authentically public knowledge is possible because (or to the extent that) it is possible to reach agreement on a description of the argument's present state. Stakeholders, despite their differences, will form some common awareness of their dispute's structure and state. They may do this willingly, because they respect each other, and share interests and values deeper than their differences. They may do it unwillingly, while hating and despising one another, because each must understand the other enough to fight effectively, and then to negotiate profitably when it comes time for that. Like it or not, the structure of their argument is the situation they have in common. Of course, they will understand that situation differently but, of necessity, that difference will be smaller than the original one. At negotiation time, they have to agree on what they are fighting about, even when they can agree on nothing else.

On any controversial matter, the concepts of public truth and knowledge depend on its stakeholders' ability to build and sustain a mutual understanding of their disagreement, and of the argument around that disagreement. As the material result of this effort, they will produce numerous articles in scholarly journals devoted to the issue and shelves of books in university libraries. Most, but not all of these will take a partisan stance toward the matter. Others – the literature reviews and textbooks will take a judicious stance. The *structure* of their argument is a schematic digest of the issue between them, as represented in some judiciously prepared document, and/or in minds that elect to take a judicious stance. This structure has at least four levels, as we'll now consider:

The Structure of Interests, Claims and Concerns

In trying to get one's head around a structure of argument, the key question is that of motivation: As in a murder investigation, "*Cui bono*?" – to whose benefit? – is the first question to ask about some idea or belief. We do not really understand an idea until we know how and by whom it will be used. Even before we consider the details of opposed positions, or the merits of the respective arguments, we need to know where their owners "are coming from," what they are after, and how their ideas and beliefs may further their interests and plans. Unfortunately, however, people's real motivations may be opaque even to themselves. Certainly there will be motives they are unwilling to confess in public. Nonetheless, the first level of any argument's structure is its pattern of competing interests and claims. We must find some way to grasp and document this pattern if we would grasp the argument as a whole.

Usually, we begin with the opposing claims that people are making and trace back from there, as best we can, to what they really want. We might also proceed the other way, by trying to understand what a given faction *would* want if it could have its own way in everything, without regard to other wants or necessities but its own. Either way, and whether from a partisan or a judicious stance, it is a commonplace of skilled negotiation to recognize the depths of motivation beneath the surface claims being made.[5] It is likewise essential to recognize that the pattern of desires beneath the surface of argument are not merely personal and idiosyncratic. We want things because they are instrumental to other things we need or want, or because others want them, or because we want to be seen as the sort of person who wants such things. We want things because we have learned to want them, and have come to believe – not just intellectually, but on a visceral level – that our lives will be sustained or enhanced if we have them. Conversely, we do not want things because we fear they could harm or threaten us, because they would lead away from things we do want, or because we do not want to be seen (even by ourselves) as the sort of person who would want them. We want or do not want things not just as a matter of caprice, but for all sorts of good and less good reasons. Nor do motives remain static as the argument develops. Although we cannot, in any direct way, adjust each other's desires to render them conformable to our own, we do manage to influence the desires of others and, in turn, are influenced by theirs. Also, though we cannot get everything we want, we certainly cling to and defend the satisfactions we can get. Thus it happens that desires and interests, confronting those of others, undergo a transformation. What a person wants is one thing; what he asks or demands from others may be significantly different – expanded and hardened into a bargaining position, or moderated for acceptability or feasibility.

At the same time, even while values and interests are hardening against each other and the contest between them is sharpening, a contrary process, tending in the opposite direction, also gets started. The values and interests of opposing factions also bleed into each other – all too literally, perhaps – and, in doing so, give rise to generic public concerns that transcend the issue at point. Most dramatically, this happens in real war as the common experience of loss and suffering leads to a common desire for peace. Less obviously, it happens in peacetime when people are moved to notice and attend to areas of common interest, as well as those of potential conflict. Private interests merge and blend into public concerns.

The language of "rational self-interest" obscures the extent to which

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5 We speak of values and interests as these are thought or expressed in private, but of claims when presented in press releases or at the bargaining table.

people are driven by competing and complementary motives that impel us sometimes to combat, sometimes to collaboration. That structure of interest and motive is what we need to clarify as the first step in grasping what an argument is about.

The Structure of Positions

A second level of the structure of argument is comprised of competing paradigms and *positions* developed and cultivated by an argument's stakeholders to assert their claims and viewpoints. Each position has its own attractions, its applauding audience, and its domain of applicability. Each stems from a distinctive cognitive strategy – a characteristic approach to intelligibility in the world's "buzzing, blooming confusion." Positions are the poles of argument – the seemingly irreconcilable alternatives that seem to contradict and exclude one another so long as we are committed to an "excluded middle" logic. We might think of the positions as so many brightly coloured banners that the various factions rally around, and wave at each other.

To be sure, positions are sometimes mutually exclusive, but sometimes they are not. Sometimes positions provide complementary understandings, with the need to choose amongst them more apparent than real. Even where practical considerations[6] and/or prior commitments compel the individual to choose between positions, he need not think that one is more right than the others in any absolute sense. *Pace* Aristotle's "Excluded Middle," there is no *prima facie* reason why differing perceptions and "truths" cannot coexist quite happily, with each articulating some aspect of human understanding (or self-understanding). Except in those cases where metaphysical prejudices or intuitions seem to demand exclusivity, or until we have some interest in saying otherwise, alternative paradigms or strategies of interpretation can blend, shade into one another, provide complementary insights and, generally, remain the best of friends. But when we do have such a motive, our paradigms fall out and dig in against each other. At that point, they are no longer just interesting, potentially useful ideas, but have hardened into positions.

Though it is not inevitable, nor always desirable, that argument converge to a single position, such convergence is an important special case. When this happens, we speak of "facts." We might define the fact as a perception that no one can argue against effectively and with integrity, even given some motive to do so. Thus, it is a fact that, on a plane surface, the value of π to 5 decimal places is 3.14159. It is a fact (in spite of Holocaust deniers)

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[6] e.g. of limited time or wealth, or finite resources of whatever kind. For example, a finite research budget or the availability of materials might force a scholar to focus on one working hypothesis and not another.

that Hitler slaughtered millions of people – including about 6 million Jews – in his concentration camps. It is a fact that there is a mug of luke-warm coffee on the table beside me as I write this. A statement may be considered a fact not because it is written in eternity or held in the mind of God, nor because most people believe it, nor even (as in the case of π) because it is necessarily true on a plane surface, but because there are very strong arguments in its favour with only very weak ones, or no serious ones at all, against.

A *position*, then, is an interpretative strategy that has become entrenched and fortified against rival positions. To grasp the structure of positions means to understand how these rival ideas complement each other, and where and how they come into conflict. Thus, each religious and philosophical position clearly enriches our understanding of what it means to be human, but problems arise when ideas prompt in opposite directions.[7] Then one has a decision to make, and can either accept one self-definition and renounce all others – making what is called an *existential choice* – or just do what seems best at the time.

The Structure of Language

A third layer of argument's structure is that of language: a lexicon of words and concepts ready to the tongue or pen for use in further argument. For the most part, language is neutral. On the whole, language is a shared resource that partisans can use in putting forward their claims. This is not entirely the case, however. We also know that words can become a locus of bitter conflict in their own right. At the level of language, therefore, the structure of argument might be represented as a kind of glossary of loaded terms – displaying the meanings ascribed by each faction to the words whose meanings are in dispute. For example, the word *marriage* and the concepts of *sex* and *society* are at issue in the dispute over gay rights.

The word *person* is a bone of contention in political theory, since all discourse about rights, obligations and basic needs is at cross purposes until the interlocutors agree just which ideas of personhood are to be stressed or ignored.

But something interesting happens. The cognitive opponents in a running argument – at least, those who actually have dealings with one another

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[7] See Example 4 below. The idea of one's self as a happiness-pursuing agent collides with self-understanding as a role-player whenever self-interest interferes with duty. The liberal ideal falls into disrepute when solidarity is at a premium. No one has ever thought of training soldiers to think of themselves as pursuers of personal happiness. Similarly, the liberal ideal seems consistent enough with the idea of one's self as an evolved ape until one reflects that the ape needs a band and a habitat to be happy. At some point, happiness is not just a personal matter.

– will be exposed to each other's language. Puzzled and angered by each other's usage, in time they learn to make allowances, as it becomes clear that the meanings of words depend on who is using them, and that each position is deploying language in its own way.

Semantic strategies will clash, of course, but one does not resent that the opponent has a strategy of his own. One simply take steps to understand and counter. In doing so, the interlocutors learn each other's language. When it suits them – e.g. for purposes of negotiation – they learn to express themselves in neutral terms. They may work out "terms of art"[8] as needed for the purposes of a contract or a law. Politicians may prefer to leave their terms vague, for later interpretation by the courts. What is certain, though, is that the parties to a dispute will come to know which terms are relatively safe, and which are "loaded." They can make allowances for each other's use of language when it suits them to do so. Choosing to make the effort, they can at least understand each other's positions, however little love is lost between them. In this way, the structure of words and concepts developed through argument becomes a common resource for future experience and argument.

It is on this level, that argument appears to make a certain kind of progress, even when there is no convergence at all in the structure of interests or positions. In complexity and sophistication, the structure of language tends to evolve, whatever else is going on. We see this progress most clearly in the discipline known as "philosophy," which might be defined as the attempt at reasoned discourse on contentious matters across a cultural divide. On the great questions, we are no nearer to definitive answers than were the Greeks of Plato's time. Yet the positions have clarified and developed, precise vocabulary has been coined, and the arguments have sharpened. The actual standard of ethics remains at about the level of that character in *The Republic* who argues that justice is merely the self-interest of the powerful. Yet today the powerful are more careful not to say this in so many words. We have media that are quicker to cry "Shame!"and a citizenry that has learned to talk about *rights*; and to that extent, some progress has been made.

The Structure of Power

As competing interests organize to pursue their various objectives, a structure of power – a pattern of alliance and hostility – is developed, as a fourth layer of the argument's structure. I define power loosely here, as the ability to project influence and get one's way. It is enacted in two main ways – toward friends and enemies respectively. On one hand, power seeks allies whose loyalty must

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[8] A term that has been given precise meaning for the purpose of some particular discourse.

be sustained and organized, utilized to advantage, and deployed as necessary against opposing power. On the other, power seeks to crush or procure submission from its opponents. Either way, as promise of benefit or threat of injury, it is largely a psychic construct: a matter of interpretation. The powerful have power just because and so long as others attribute power to them. When the attribution of power is withdrawn or transferred, its substance goes with it.

Up to a point, power is highly centripetal – flowing toward those who already have it. Accordingly, its tendency is toward empire and the hierarchical structures of bureaucracy and government; and one might suspect that ideas of Monotheism and Absolute Truth merely reflect this political tendency toward universality and monopoly. Indeed, from one perspective, we can think of Monotheism as the essentially *political* fantasy of wholly benevolent, omni-competent despotism on a cosmic scale. Quite similarly, classical logic depends on an assumption that the "true" statement should have total authority, while its contrary should have none. In both stories, there is a fantasy of the infinite, the absolute, the non-contingent.

But power's tendency to concentrate encounters natural limitations. In dialectical fashion, the concentration of power provokes resistance and a counter-concentration. Also power grows decadent, losing in time its drive, its legitimacy and its nerve. Then too, its ultimate basis in violence is a fatal weakness. As the Americans are now learning to their cost, military superiority does not translate directly into political victory, still less into governmental authority and control. For all these reasons, the dream of unlimited power remains a dangerous illusion.

In the conflict of nations and peoples, it is seldom feasible to crush an enemy completely, at a cost acceptable to the winning side. Open warfare must end at some point; and what follows is some form of politics, however unequal and brutal. In time, the defeated population regroups and begins to find its feet again – as a resistance movement, a seething proletariat, a resentful province or a reconstructed nation. Whatever else it achieves, military victory rarely settles the terms of relationship between victor and vanquished. Typically, it re-draws their mutual involvement even more tightly than before, and raises more questions than it answers.

What remains is the familiar kaleidoscope of politics – a dynamic system of shifting coalitions, with rather more of a cognitive, and rational dimension than is often supposed. The military conquers, but the lawyers govern. The whole international system today and the internal make-up of any nation are examples of the mixed rationality and irrationality that evolve as power does its work. The structure of power around some issue is the pattern of law and lawlessness that we always find.

The upshot is that public knowledge always has a political dimension

that even philosophers should not despise. The structure and play of power has cognitive and epistemological significance for at least two reasons: First, the epistemic value of an argument – its soundness and utility as public knowledge – depends on the integrity of the underlying political process. To the extent that discussion and debate around some matter is open, uncoerced and relatively unbiased, its cognitive results will fairly reflect the cognitive possibilities around that issue, and the pattern of values in play. Each of the competing positions, each of the available modes of understanding will benefit – whether gracefully, or with reluctance and hostility – from the criticism and rival perspectives of the others. The whole structure of public understanding can be expected to benefit from the diversity of positions and the vigour of free debate. In effect, this is the standard libertarian defence of the right to freedom in thought and speech.

Second, as Hegel saw,[9] the political and even military dimensions of argument are not without intellectual significance. From a certain perspective, all human history is an argument about the meaning of human life – just as the pre-history of the species, going back perhaps three million years to the age of the earliest proto-hominids, is an argument about the biological nature and variances of human life. Today, meme theory suggests that we imagine cultures and societies as evolving in much the same sense that biological species do, through a process of transmission, variation, and selection. This theory holds that cultural expressions – like archery, belly-dancing, Christianity and Darwinism – thrive and propagate because they are successful at passing themselves, and taking up influential residence in human minds. Because they transfer from mind to mind (through the process we call *learning*), they can spread though huge populations, and survive in recognizable form for thousands of years. Because they are transmitted imperfectly, with unplanned and unpredictable variations, and because they may combine with other such expressions in interesting and serendipitous ways, they can change and evolve into new forms entirely. Because they compete for scarce resources – namely human memory, attention, time and energy – they are subject to a kind of natural selection. Those that survive and flourish will have a kind of pragmatic and ecological "truth" to them that cannot be simply ignored. An idea that endures, however silly or wrong-headed it may appear, is doing something for someone; and, in the long run, may only be overcome by some idea that works still better for those same people.

8.5 Argument and Choice

Here we come up against what is probably the strongest objection to the notion of truth as a structure of argument: When differing understandings point to

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[9] Cf. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.

mutually exclusive lines of action, it seems inevitable to ask which is really *true*.

Interpretations are free and can go anywhere – as the deconstructionists loved to point out. Understandings, to the extent they carry consequences, cannot afford to be irresponsible. They may be situational and perspectival; they may, therefore, be plural; but they must try to capture relevant features – all features relevant to the individual understander – of what is really going on. Choices have to be single-valued (as discussed in Chapter 4) because they entail an expenditure of scarce resources. We want the hard facts, not merely interpretations, of our situation because, when the chips are down, we cannot afford to choose wrongly. The scholar can afford a "polyphonic" approach to truth. The practical decision-maker wants univocal guidance and justification for his choices.

That he wants this is entirely understandable, but in a complex society and confusing world, it is hard to see how he might get it. Executives and especially politicians must expect a squabble of interpretations on any matter their constituents care about. Picking their way – and their constituents' collective way – through such a clamour is just the essence of their role; and, in the last analysis, they have only two alternatives: Either they buy into (and/or allow themselves to be bought) by one of the factions at the table ; or – as the wiser and more correct course – they preside over, and respond as best they can, to the whole spectrum of opinion confronting them. On the latter course, it is the full range of significant interpretation and argument that will inform decision. That is the game, as experienced players know: to balance interests, hedge bets, maintain political support and "spread the discontent." No one gets all that he or she wants, but vital interests are satisfied insofar as possible.

It is unfortunate that this necessary horse-trading has to be done behind closed doors, in a corruptingly cynical atmosphere. The notion of polyphonic truth – truth as a structure of argument – at least provides a philosophical rationale, and a basis for some rigour, in what must be standard practice anyhow.

Our crucial demand from knowledge, and from the cultural systems that purvey knowledge, is that they provide some context and basis for responsible decision-making in contentious situations. To the extent these institutions merely bicker over interpretations, they are not doing their job. By contrast, to the extent they provide decision-makers with a well-wrought, publicly acceptable structure of argument, they are doing all that can be expected – documenting existing patterns of contention, explicating constraints on the choices to be made, ruling out options that can be shown to be poor on widely agreed criteria, and displaying the scope for manoeuvre and compromise elsewhere.

Since, in general, the structure of argument will **not** point automatically

at an optimal choice, authorities still have some thinking, and some vital political work before them: They must select some concrete plan that meets all tabled concerns, including their own, in a defensible way. They must "sell" their plan to the public. Finally they must deal and live with the residual dissatisfaction – containing and compensating it as best they can. Working from a structure of argument, however, they will be released from interminable squabbles about the nature of reality. Of equal importance, they will be freed from the charge of acting on mere expediency, indifferent to the promptings of Truth. They can reply that they have based their decision on the best public truth available – on the structure of serious, respectful argument around the matter at hand.

Kings can leave debates about Truth to those whose business it is to understand and debate. They need not and should not strive to be philosophers, but can get on with their proper task – to make politically wise decisions, based on the structure of public argument, in good epistemological conscience.