Everyday Argument in A Polarized World

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Opening Remarks

- 4 Week Course: There will be reminders and callbacks, but not repetition.
  - Last Week: Polarization and Argument being Hard
  - This Week: Getting to Good Faith Argument
  - January 23\textsuperscript{rd}: How should we treat Emotion?
  - January 30: Structures of Power and Argument
Recall: Last Time

- We noted that political polarization is getting worse, and that translates to assumptions we make about each other.

- We also highlighted some basic strategies for breaking through:
  - Recognize you are not infallible or objective.
  - Cut against your own assumptions.
  - Work to defend your own opinions.
  - Remember that not all folks are worth engaging.
The Goal: Getting to Productive Argument

- Productive argument features:
  - Consent of those who are participating
  - Buy in to the eventual resolution of the object of disagreement (even if that isn’t “compromise”)
  - Willingness to change one’s mind
  - Minimizing argument tactics which “end” the argument but don’t solve the problem.
Animating Question:

- How can we ensure that we cut against our own worst tendencies and encourage others to engage in good faith argumentation?
The Goal: Good Faith Argument

- According to the Cato Institute, "Good Faith Argument" features both parties:
  - Agreeing on the terms on which they engage
  - Are honest and respectful of the other person’s dignity
  - Follow generally-accepted norms of social interaction
  - Genuinely want to hear what the other person thinks and has to say.
How do we get in our own way?

- We make assumptions about our partner’s intentions.
- We fail to respect why someone would conclude what they have determined.
- We violate the terms of engagement preemptively.
- We are not interested in what the other party has to say.
Bad Faith Abounds

How did we get here?
Why does it matter for argument?
What is this?

- Bad Faith refers to a discussion in which one or both of the parties has:
  - A hidden, unrevealed agenda—often to dominate or coerce the other individual into compliance or acquiescence
  - A lack of basic respect for the rights, dignity, or autonomy of the other party.
How did we get here?

- Argument is treated as a competition.
- Engaging in bad faith is not punished in any meaningful way.
- Engaging in bad faith is rewarded.
Consider:
How would this shape argument?

- Bad faith entails breaking a contract for some form of advantage; there is an incentive to break from established norms.
- Bad faith engagement is modeled because it is understood as a “preferable” mode of argument.
- Bad faith actors are under no obligation to take the whole enterprise of argument seriously.
Good Faith is Possible

What do we mean?
Why would we think that?
What are going to do about it?
What do we mean?
How can we conclude good faith is possible?

- Americans are less polarized than we think, and the average person does not claim to hold all (or even many) of the ideas that we tend to assume about them.

- Elite actors are pointing out the gamification of media environments.

- Family members can be pulled back from the brink.
So what are we supposed to do?

- Every class, we will isolate strategies which intersect with some of the problems highlighted for argument.

- There is no cure all, no perfect training, no uniform way to effect change. But there are habits and viewpoints that we adopt.

- Not every problem is solvable with (good faith) argument, but argument will be a way to figure that out.
How should understanding “good faith” change our behavior?

- We ought to presume that folks engage in good faith, while working to ensure we are as well.
  - Argument is about change; we must give folks the chance to change their beliefs, or at least understand the social consequences of their views.
  - Begin the argument not at the end (Stop Believing This) but the beginning (What is encouraging you to do/think this?)

- BUT that doesn’t require you be gullible.
  - When folks tell you who they are, you should listen.
  - Though a history of bad faith engagement doesn’t mean it will happen this time, we ought to remember history.
How can we act in good faith?

- Hold yourself to a high standard of evidence and decorum.
- Be realistic in your goals, and patient in their pursuit.
- Reject the “bait” thrown by those who would rather not have this conversation.
- Recall that most people are smart and have reasons for believing the things they do.
- If a person is clearly not willing to change their mind, seek changes which minimize the importance of their lack of acquiescence.
How can we encourage good faith in others?

- Model patience and reasonableness in your approach to an argument, and work to avoid becoming dysregulated.
- Work to empathize, even if full understanding is not possible.
- Offer space for objection but maintain focus on the “goal” of the argument.
- Don’t be gullible; if a person tells you who they are, listen and take them seriously.
Subsequent Days:

- How to treat emotion in argument, both your own and your conversation partners. (January 23rd)
- How to minimize the impacts of social structures which make arguments way harder. (January 30th)