Everyday Argument in A Polarized World

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Opening Remarks

- 4 Week Course: There will be reminders and callbacks, but not repetition.
  - Two Weeks Prior: Polarization and Argument
  - Last Week: Getting to Good Faith Argument
  - Now: How should we treat Emotion?
  - January 30: Structures of Power and 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 pre-emptively.
- We are not interested in what the other party has to say.
Animating Question:

- What role, if any, do emotions have in productive, good faith arguments?

- The question is doubled barreled, in the sense that:
  - We ought to consider the role our emotions can/should have in argument.
  - We ought to consider the acceptability of other’s emotions within arguments.
Emotion and Rationality

What assumptions do we make?
Why does it matter for argument?
“So much of the structure and animating ideals of Western democracy are based on the idea of reason and rationality—the enlightenment ideal that man (sic) is rational and thus capable of self-governance.”

- Emotion is often understood in opposition to rationality.
  - Rationality concerns (arguably) universal or largely agreed upon contentions; emotions are contextual and idiosyncratic.
  - “Emotion,” broadly construed, misleads actors by keeping them from understanding stakes of the dispute.
  - Emotion is also treated as uncivil, meaning a violation of standing social decorum.
How did we get here?

- Enlightenment ideals on the nature of “Truth.”

- Contemporary actors suggesting that “facts” are sacrosanct in debate spaces.

- Insistence on specific forms of civility.

- Emotional regulation has gendered and racial dimensions.
How would this shape argument?

- Emotion becomes something to limit and regulate, rather than experience within or even supplement argument.

- Emotion is regulated in a lopsided way; marginalized individuals are often in a difficult-to-impossible situation.

- Evidence based on emotions or affect are discounted or neglected, often at the expense of those bringing them.
Is there truth to emotional differences?

- Very limited evidence of biological difference in intensity, frequency, or intellectual dominance of emotion; socialization likely accounts for meaningful differences.

- King & Gordan (1998) suggest women do exhibit more emotions but could not conclude they experienced emotions differently.

- Men exhibit “restrictive emotionality,” often as a survival tool to navigate social spaces (Jansz, 2000).

- Men also experience hormonal fluctuations daily (and monthly) which have physical and psychological impacts.
What do we do about this?

- Recognize that even if emotions are valid as part of argument, there are social stakes and regulations which concern their expression.

- As such, understand the stakes of emotional portrayal; is this a person who is safe to emote in front of?

- If your emotional expression appears to be valid, and another person is working to exclude it; ask why and encourage them to defend their stance rather than abandoning the discussion.
To what end, civility?

- Emoting in argument is sometimes viewed as a violation of decorum and is therefore uncivil.

- Productive questions:
  - What about this presentation of emotion is disrespectful or disruptive?
  - What are the parameters of "civil" discourse, and are they predictably applied?
  - What parties are calling for civility, and how might their position be impacted if we weren’t civil?
Alternative: Emotion can be effective

What do we mean?

Why would we think that?

What are going to do about it?
Emotion and Affect

- Emotion is fundamentally logical, “illogical” is likely a question of degree
  - Sadness is a reasonable response to external stimuli.
  - Anger is a (dis)proportionate response in the same vein.
  - Happiness and Joy are traceable and understandable within their contexts.

- Affect, though not following the same “logical” pathway, still matters.
  - Affect, or the precognitive intensity of feeling, can clarify the baggage or difficulty of a present argument.
How can emotion work in argument?

- Emotion is a pathway to empathy, which is not fundamentally manipulative but an articulation of the stakes.

- Anger is a justifiable response to some precipitating events or causes of argument. Though blind rage precludes effective argument, directed and clear anger can ensure that impacts of policies and decisions are better understood.

- Some arguments rely on abstraction, and emotion clarifies why that abstraction may be damaging.
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.
What do we do with our emotions?

- Practice grounding techniques and bodily regulation. Our bodies freak out, but we can reel them in.

- Acknowledge that you are not infallible, and that means you are able to (even encouraged to) have personal stakes in conversations.

- Recognize that your emotional expression, even if valid, may activate stress responses in others.

- Remember there is no shame in encouraging folks to take a break.
What should we do with the emotions of others?

- Give folks space to feel their emotions. Sitting with a feeling for a few minutes doesn’t invalidate the other arguments.

- Remove “you are being too emotional” from your vocabulary, and don’t allow that dismissiveness in others.

- Delineate between the kinds of emotional engagement which subvert argument (like vitriol, anger, or profound dysregulation) versus those which contribute meaningfully to them (investment, non-directed anger, appeals to tangible impacts).
Subsequent Days:

- How to minimize the impacts of social structures which make arguments way harder. (January 30th)