

Argumentation Democracy 101: Deliberative Norms Made Easy

This chapter—an adaptation of the first chapter of my book in Danish De svarer ikke (“They are not answering,” 2011)—sets forth in everyday terms a theory of democratic debate: what its constitutive conditions are, and what ideal requirements it ought to fulfill in order to serve its democratic function best. Along the way, some current theories of democracy and the roles of rhetoric and argumentation in it are invoked as either supports or targets.

In Western democracies, political debate is—fortunately—intense. Especially when an election is drawing near, hopeful candidates as well as incumbents find themselves busy with pronouncements, signals and branding. Attack and counter-attack fly back and forth. Moreover, there is vigorous debate between opinion leaders who aren’t politicians themselves. Unlike politicians, they are not running for office, but like politicians they seek acceptance of their positions from citizens and voters.

Particularly in regard to what politicians say and do the media delivers commentary and evaluations. This often takes the form of judgments of what strategic intentions may have motivated a given pronouncement, and whether its actual effects are likely to be desirable from the strategic point of view of the politician who made it, or his or her party or block. In other words, these assessments concern how well this politician is doing from his or her own perspective. Will a given move win votes? Which voter segments or factions will like it? Is it clever?

Below, a different perspective will be taken. It, too, serves to render a qualitative assessment of public debate—but from the point of view of *citizens*.

While the media’s political commentators tend to pontificate—often as self-appointed authorities, without supporting reasons—on whether and how the politicians’ contributions to the debate benefit the politicians themselves, the question in this essay will be whether the politicians’

contributions to the debate are of any use to citizens; that is to say, whether they deliver what *citizens* need.

According to a widespread view, politicians themselves are exclusively or primarily driven by a need to strengthen or consolidate their power positions by pleasing other persons of power and, most of all, by pleasing the voters. But citizens—voters—what do *they* need? What should political debates deliver in order to meet their needs? And do they get it?

Even if we assume that all politicians aim merely to strengthen their power positions as much as possible, as political pundits tend to assume (but this is a very questionable theory), then that is not likely to give citizens what *they* need. In fact it is impossible for the simple reason that all the competing politicians cannot strengthen their positions at the same time.

What Norms Should Count?

If one aims to make qualitative evaluations of political debates from citizens' point of view, then one must have a set of norms on the basis of which this can be done. That is, norms that deal with what citizens, not politicians, actually need.

Think about the public debate that takes place in a Parliament or in Congress. It probably has to be there according to the Constitution or tradition. But why do citizens need it? What good does it do? What good *could* it do? What is its purpose?

One would think that a Constitution, for example, would say something about these questions; or perhaps other rules or statutes or treatises of constitutional law. But, on the whole, this is not the case.

That one can, from the citizens' side, formulate requirements and norms for political debates—norms that reflect citizens' needs and not just the strategic interests of politicians—is nevertheless a perspective that is slowly gaining validity, even in the media. One can see this in the way several websites, TV/radio stations and newspapers have begun fact-checking claims that politicians put forward, especially during election campaigns.

We must go further down this road. Indeed, politicians' arguments should not distort or misrepresent facts—but that is just one of the norms in political debate that reflect what citizens need (and do not need). There are other needs we should also wish to see fulfilled if a debate is to be useful.

The main thesis here is simply that we citizens should be able to use public political debate as *a basis for making decisions*. It is, for example,

for this reason that we should demand that we are neither lied to nor given misleading representations of facts that leave out important information and thereby lead us to believe things that aren't so. As citizens we need debates that help us acquire a view of reality that is, as they say in the auditing profession, "true and fair." More generally, debates fulfilling this and other quality standards are needed in order for us to judge who we think has the best approach to the political problems and what should be done about them. Based on such a judgment we can each take a position on who deserves to be elected. And between elections we can influence our politicians by communicating with them or letting our voices be heard in the political debate in other ways.

If this is citizens' primary purpose in hearing (and reading) political debate, then our first and most elementary requirement as citizens, all things considered, is that we deserve debates containing *arguments*—that is, *reasons* why given policies under consideration are right or wrong.

This is not the only purpose we citizens can have in attending to debate. Debate can also be entertaining, suspenseful, exciting. We may sometimes withdraw to a position as mere observers and wonder "who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out," as Shakespeare's King Lear said to his good and virtuous daughter, Cordelia. Who is the frontrunner? Who makes outrageous claims? Who makes gaffes? Who is in a tight spot? There can be a particular satisfaction in following a debate where the side one roots for does well while the others embarrass themselves.

Another important purpose in having debates, such as those held in a Congress or Parliament, is that by learning elected politicians' public reasons for their decisions, we can afterwards hold them accountable for those decisions. We can say, for example, "You supported this because you thought it would bring such and such a benefit—but now look what has happened."

But the primary purpose must still be a forward-looking one: we need debates so that we can each take a position on what should be done—*before* it is done. What are the exigencies, problems and challenges we face? What can be done? What proposals are there? What will be best? There are issues enough: economic crises, taxes, unemployment, health care, schools, the environment, immigration, the climate, terrorism, military involvements ... Taking positions on such issues may help us take positions on whom to vote for. And our votes are not our only means of influence. Politicians can be influenced by opinion polls, by debate pieces in newspapers and on blogs, and by direct contact via, for example, e-mail or the social media.

We need debates to provide us with input we can use to take stands on all the issues facing our society, and to decide, on that basis, whom to vote for. Perhaps we even want to interfere in ongoing debates and raise our voices ourselves. This input that we need for all this consists of several things. There should be alternative *proposals* or policies for our consideration. These policies should be supported with *arguments*²⁰, and those arguments should be good ones, which means, among other things, that they should not be untruthful, deceptive or misleading. In addition, debates should offer *counterarguments* and criticisms of proposed policies and their supporting arguments, and all these too must meet certain critical standards. And finally, debates should provide good *answers* to counterarguments and criticisms, for it is only by hearing opposing arguments *and* the respective answers to them that we are really in a position to evaluate them.

But all this, which we as citizens need and require from political debates, is something we aren't getting in any satisfactory measure. We get personality contests, performance, spin, slogans, talking points, one-liners, and we get mutual accusations and mudslinging. All these things are what political analysts, commentators and "pundits" like to analyze and applaud or disparage in their commentaries, where they pontificate on "who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out"; and sometimes, when these analysts are hired as communication consultants, as they often are, this is also what they teach politicians to be good at. As a result, we often know little more about a candidate we have voted for than a slogan, a few one-liners, a party affiliation and how he or she looks on a lot of identical posters. Communication consultants know that superficial and casual impressions and expressions are often the only input that many voters manage to receive before an election. True enough, more and more media compete for our limited time. The result is that "so much political rhetoric today looks more like advertising than like deliberative argument," as political theorist Bryan Garsten has noted (2011, p. 160).

There is nothing wrong in itself with one-liners, slogans, TV commercials and snappy advertisements on buses. It is in order, after all,

²⁰ The expression "an argument" will be used as synonymous with "a reason," i.e., a statement that is seen as given in support of some conclusion (a proposition or proposal). Thus, "an argument" is *not* used in the sense often heard of "an exchange between disagreeing people." Nor is it used in the sense often found in scholarship of "a constellation of reasons and the conclusion they support." When something like that is meant, the term "argumentation" will typically be used.

that there are short, to-the-point messages; and color on a campaign poster is better than if all is black, white and grey. But things have gone wrong if we get all this *instead* of proper debates with arguments that can help us find our positions.

And such arguments we are hard pressed to find. The fact that commercials, one-liners, etc., play a big role is not the main focus here. Rather, the concern is with much of what is put forward as being proper debate with usable argumentation in it—because usually it isn't.

To be sure, there is a great deal of debate. But, first, much of the debate is marked by the fact that it contains no real arguments; instead a range of techniques are used to get us to buy policies and assumptions that are *not* backed by arguments (many of these techniques are the ones known from advertising). Second, many of the arguments (and counterarguments) that we do get are *bad* ones. And third, the *answers* that should be given to the counterarguments and criticisms are often of miserable quality, or they aren't there at all.

This is why we need to evaluate the quality of public debate from the point of view of the *citizen's* needs. Citizens should think of themselves as *critical consumers* of debate. We should hold public and political debaters responsible for giving us input that serves *our* needs as citizens. The important question about political communication is not how well it serves *politicians'* purposes. We are consumers of debate because we *need* debate; but we should also be critical monitors of what we get. We should learn to detect and identify the typical shortcomings and tricks in political communication by which we citizens get shortchanged.

A covering term for these tricks and shortcomings that tend to make much political communication useless or even stultifying could be *vices*. Below I try to sketch the principal criteria that we, as critical consumers, might apply to the political communication we get; that will enable us to define the principal types of vices that occur when these criteria are disobeyed. These vices can be placed under the three main categories I have indicated: *no* arguments—*poor* arguments—*poor answers* to arguments.

What we have a shortage of in our public sphere is not talk about problems, it is not debate, nor is it proposals for solutions; what has been lacking is rather real elucidation of the problems and of the proposed solutions in the form of good argumentation.

We need to specify what that is. One cannot begin to criticize someone or something without making clear on what basis one is doing it—that is to

say, without identifying and motivating the criteria for evaluation that one claims are not being met.

But Can Voters Be *Bothered* with Argumentation?

A critical question might be raised in response to what I have said so far: are citizens and voters really *interested* in argumentation? Don't they already know what they want, and don't they just expect politicians to give it to them? And in that case, what would they need argumentation for?

That the individual voter merely wants particular policies, period, and is therefore not much interested in argumentation is a widespread assumption that is firmly held by many political scientists, but also by politicians themselves and political journalists. Arguably, a majority of political reporting and analysis in the media is based on the understanding that the electorate is composed of certain "segments," all of which have given interests at heart, and to have those interests satisfied is what they care about; so all a politician can do to win voters' support is simply to make them think that he or she gives them what they want—not to try to *change* their views on issues or policies by means of argumentation.

An important political initiative in the United States springing from this notion was the so-called "Contract with America," a document written by Conservative politicians before the mid-term Congressional election in 1994, in which they set out very specifically a long series of promises that the Republican party were to enact if they were to gain a majority in the election. It was signed by all but two of the party's members of the House of Representatives and all its non-incumbent candidates. In the election the Republicans gained 54 seats in the House and 9 seats in the Senate and won a majority in both houses. This set a trend in the US, and in other countries as well, that has sometimes been referred to as "contract politics." It is a way of political thinking according to which voters know what they want, so that the role of politicians is to say, "We promise to give you what you want, and in return you vote for us."

It is also a way of thinking where argumentation plays a very small role. There is, on this view, no need for it, precisely because voters are already supposed to *know* what they want, and what could change that? Politicians' hands, on this view, are tied by the promises that get them elected: if they make good on those, they may be reelected, and if they don't, they can be thrown out in the next election.

It is clear that when such a view of politics dominates, politicians see no reason to present much in the way of argumentation for what they intend to do, or to answer counterarguments. More nearly the opposite is true: counterarguments and critical considerations should simply be passed over and ignored, because even mentioning them, let alone answering them, would just give them attention and media coverage that one doesn't want them to get. And certainly if one considers one's policies to be fixed by a "contract" with the voters, and if voters are not likely to be swayed by arguments, one need not argue for those policies. Instead, one is simply bound to do what the contract says. To even enter a debate or argument about one of them can be interpreted as if there is doubt about it. For that reason "contract" politicians tend to discourage such debates.

So, even though it is an advantage of "contract politics" that politicians are obligated to say in advance what they intend to do, and also to some extent to stand by what they have said, a problematic side of contract politics is that it tends to suspend or sideline open debate and argumentation. That is precisely because it is based on the presumption that each individual voter wants something quite definite that is not debatable—and that debate therefore cannot affect or change what voters want. In other words, here again we have the underlying notion that voters have fixed, given positions ("preferences" is the term often used by political scientists)—so they will not let themselves be moved by arguments.

This way of looking at things not only lies beneath contract politics, it also, as pointed out a moment ago, lies beneath a great deal of political debate and journalism. And it is reinforced by some of the prevalent tendencies in political science—a discipline in which increasing numbers of politicians, journalists, commentators and administrators are schooled.

Democracy as Cutting up the Cake

A connected and deeply entrenched view in political science is that politics is purely and simply the fight over the distribution of society's goods. Democracy, on this view, means that goods and influence in a society are distributed among social segments in proportion to their relative strength. On this view, the citizens of a society only care about their own wishes in the distribution process; to them politics is to promote their own and their segment's interests. Everyone, by this interpretation, is a "utility

maximizer”—to borrow a phrase from classic economic theory, which assumes that individuals are (primarily) driven by one motive: getting the maximum value (“utility”) out of all the choices they make. Democracy is likewise seen as a system in which everyone’s concern is to maximally satisfy his or her preferences—and in principle the preferences of all individuals are then channeled (“aggregated”) into an authoritative decision procedure; that procedure is how democracy works.

A problem in this connection that is of concern to many political scientists aligned with what they call “Social Choice Theory” is that in principle no system seems to exist that can accurately and unambiguously transform the aggregate preferences of all citizens into policies; depending on which voting procedure is used, various contradictory policies may result from the same set of voter preferences, and politicians have ample opportunities for manipulating what happens in this process. In other words, even in systems where citizens have the right to vote as they wish, “democracy” in the sense that the state is ruled by the will of the people does not really exist, because the notion “the will of the people” has no clear and unambiguous meaning. The work of the political scientist William Riker has been very influential in stating this view (see, e.g., Riker 1982).

But perhaps the dominant mode of thinking in political science is that “democracy” is a notion that does have a clear meaning: it means that citizens get their preferences satisfied and are allotted their proportionate share of society’s goods according to their strength. Democracy is cutting up the cake of society between competing groups that all want the biggest possible slice. The Canadian political scientist David Easton (1917-2014) proposed a general theory of political “systems” that has been widely adopted to the degree of being considered the basic doctrine for a whole generation of political scientists. It includes, among other things, a famous definition of politics as the “authoritative allocation of values for a society” (1965, p. 50). In this lies also the idea that we citizens are basically seen as consumers who are always trying to get the political system to apportion us values—and the system tries to give us what we want because then we will support it and thereby secure its continuation. Easton’s “systems” model has for decades been a staple in what we might call “Political Science 101.”

Another leading political scientist, Anthony Downs, whose theories have long been part of academic curricula, says it as follows: “Because the citizens of our model democracy are rational, each of them views elections strictly as a means of selecting the government most beneficial to him”

(1957, p. 138—an article that political scientists have cited thousands of times).

But if people think only of maximally fulfilling their self-interest, then their political attitudes will depend only on what they think will benefit them most, as viewed from their position in the social structure, and—according to this line of thinking—they tend to know this already and be firmly convinced of it; in which case they will not set much store by any arguments they hear, or feel much need for arguments in the first place. For example, pensioners will want their public pensions to at least stay the same, or, better, to be increased; they will want more money for home-care, and probably less for education. In short, people from a particular segment of society want to have precisely this and that. And a lot of debating won't change what they want. This is how a dominant way of thinking goes.

A Less Simplistic Picture

But it is, in the first place, a simplistic and false idea that people seek only their own “maximum utility.” One might get the impression that scholars in the emergent field of Political Science seized on theories by thinkers like Easton and Downs because they offered views of the political world as beautifully clear and rule-governed as the view of the universe offered by Newton's laws. It is a fact that theories that inject this kind of beautiful mathematical simplicity in a murky and complicated field exert a tremendous attraction to some scholars. Interestingly, Adam Smith, the father of another beautifully simple theory, classical economics, was also a rhetorician, and he was very aware of this effect (we might call it the “Newton effect”). He defined the Newtonian method as follows: “we may lay down certain principles, primary, or proved, in the beginning, from whence we account for the several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain” (1971, p.140)—and he added: “It gives us pleasure to see the phenomena which we reckoned the most unaccountable, all deduced from some principle.” So, if this is right, we may assume that theories like Easton's or Downs's reduction of politics to one grand, materialist principle have gained acceptance partly because their quasi-mathematical simplicity provides *pleasure* to people with a certain mindset.

But the fact that these theories are wrong in their seductive simplicity doesn't mean that they are *all* wrong. Most people probably do think about their self-interest and their wallets a lot of the time, such as when they consider whom to vote for. But most voters *also* think about a wider range

of issues than their personal economy. Other values than economic ones do influence the positions they take on concrete issues. It is not for nothing that in the last few years there has been considerable talk about “value politics,” for it reflects precisely the view that politics is about much more than economy: citizens believe in certain values that they want legislation and other public action to reflect, so, for one thing, citizens’ “preferences” are not exclusively determined by what benefits them most economically. Also, research shows that voters do not choose a standpoint on policy solely with a view to what they think will best serve their special interests and preferences, but also to a significant degree with a view to what they think is best for the community.

In the second place, the assumption that people’s standpoints on all sorts of concrete issues are fixed is also a simplistic and mistaken idea. Many people in many social segments (to use the accepted terminology) actually change or modify their standpoints after they have heard arguments. Granted, it is no doubt true that most of us have rather fixed attitudes on several issues; but no one has fixed views on *every* issue. For one thing, for most people there are many issues on which they have no views at all. They may not even know that an issue exists until a pollster asks them to state their opinion on it. Or they will have views on it that are very superficially informed, undecided and volatile. Many people will tell the pollster that they support one or the other of the views he presents to them, but only because they feel they have to choose something and may not want to appear stupid. The pollster will then put them down as having taken a stand, and only those who didn’t choose any of the suggested options will be put down as “undecided.” If, for example, a referendum is upcoming (as in Britain on EU membership in the summer of 2016), those who have told the pollster what option they support will be put down as having taken a stand, and only the rest will be referred to in the media as those who have not yet decided. But the truth in such situations is that a large proportion of those who have declared a stand in a poll are *also* undecided; they may well change sides before the voting day, perhaps several times. Unfortunately the way the media, and pollsters themselves, tend to refer to opinion polls does not reflect this. But the fact remains that even on issues where an individual might have a rather firm view it is still possible—and often seen in practice—that this individual changes that view after having some experience, or hearing some argument. All this goes to show that citizens *can* be affected by argumentation—and, by the same token, that they *need* argumentation.

What Is Good Argumentation?

If it is assumed that citizens do need to hear arguments on political issues, then the question arises as to what sort of arguments. As already said, often those arguments that are in fact used in political debates, if any are used at all, are, unfortunately, bad ones. But what does that mean? When are arguments bad, when are they good?

A starting point in regard to this is the observation that *there are often good arguments both for and against a particular decision or policy*.

From this it follows, among other things, that “good” arguments are not the same as what philosophical logic calls “valid” arguments; it is necessary to say this because a good number of textbooks in argumentation and logic still build on this concept.

In logic the meaning of a “valid” argument is an argument that *entails* the conclusion it supports. This amounts to saying that if the argument is true, then it follows *necessarily and automatically* that the conclusion is also true. One authoritative formulation of this understanding of “valid” is this: “For a valid argument, it is not possible for the premises to be true with the conclusion false. That is, necessarily if the premises are true, then the conclusion is true.” (This is from the article “Argument” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) This kind of argumentation is best known from geometry and other branches of mathematics. For example, if a is longer than b , and b is longer than c , then it follows necessarily that a is longer than c ; or if it is true that a given triangle is right-angled, then it follows necessarily that the square on its long side equals the sum of the squares on the two shorter sides. This insight is called the Pythagoras theorem; proofs that demonstrate its truth were known centuries before Christ.

Logic textbooks tend to equate a *good* argument with a *valid* argument, and they like to show examples of bad arguments like this one: “All birds lay eggs; this animal lays eggs; so this is a bird.” This is of course an *invalid* argument, and every schoolchild probably knows that. It is clearly important that when someone in a political debate claims that the policy or claim he advances follows necessarily from argumentation like this—and that does happen—then that kind of argumentation should be exposed as false. Invalid arguments should not be allowed to pass as valid.

But using “validity” as a yardstick in political argumentation is a problem if it is our *only* yardstick. The problem is that in politics a lot of the

relevant arguments that we would all agree are “good” in some sense are not valid—the conclusion they argue for does *not* follow necessarily.

Take for example this argument that has been used a great deal in the debate about Britain’s membership of the EU: “If Britain leaves the EU, then it has more freedom to pass its own laws.” This is surely true, and one cannot deny that it is a relevant argument. Surely for a country to have more freedom to pass its own laws is, taken in itself, a good thing—no one would call it a bad thing or an irrelevant thing. So as an argument for leaving the EU it surely is relevant and has some weight. However, the conclusion it argues for—that Britain should leave the EU—does *not* follow necessarily from it. And why not? Because there are many other considerations that are relevant in regard to the issue. For example, what will happen to Britain’s foreign trade if it leaves the EU—and to its economy generally?

Practical vs. Epistemic Argumentation

The issue of whether Britain should be a member of the EU or not is an example of what is sometimes called a *practical* issue: it is about *what to do*. The issue of whether a given animal is a bird is different; it is an example of what is sometimes called an *epistemic* issue: it is about what is true. To put a crucial difference between practical and epistemic issues in a simple way we can say that an epistemic issue is *one-dimensional*: it concerns one dimension only, namely this: what is the truth. Here the validity yardstick helps us a long part of the way. That is also the reason why in logic textbooks the examples used to illustrate good and bad argumentation are nearly all drawn from the epistemic realm—they are mainly or exclusively issues about what is true, not about what to do. Practical issues, on the other hand, are *multi-dimensional*: for example, in the case of Britain’s membership of the EU there is a dimension that has to do with national independence, but there is also the economic dimension; and there are many more. This, essentially, is the reason why, on political issues (and other practical issues), we cannot expect that arguments should be “valid” in the sense that their conclusion follows necessarily from them. They can be good without being valid; in fact it is arguable that arguments on practical issues can never be valid in the strict logical sense. However, they can still be good—and they can certainly also be bad.

To sum up: in regard to political argumentation (and practical argumentation generally) we cannot use the logicians’ “validity” yardstick as our only normative evaluation tool. It is not for that reason superfluous,

though. In politics we can, among other things, use the logical measuring stick to expose and criticize people if they try to fool us into thinking that their political views follow as necessary conclusions from their arguments. Conclusions do this extremely rarely where politics are concerned. Even though there may be good arguments for something—for example, in Britain’s case, for either leaving the EU or staying in it—then there are, as a rule, also good arguments for the opposite view. Therefore, on the whole, that something or other is to be done is arguably never a “logical” (that is to say, necessary) consequence of there being good arguments for it. And for that reason we cannot criticize debaters for not bringing forward arguments which logically *entail* that we must agree with their policies; we can, on the other hand, criticize them if they try to make us *believe* that they have such arguments.

This brings us back to the initial point made a while ago: in politics there are typically both good arguments *for* a course of action—and good arguments *against* it. One cannot conclude that we *must* undertake a certain action—nor that we *must* refrain from doing it. This kind of situation is an everyday experience both in our daily lives and in politics, but validity-based logic cannot really account for it; according to it, there cannot be “valid” arguments on both sides, since two opposite courses of action cannot both follow by necessity from the arguments brought forward.

Added to this is the fact that in relation to every problem one would like to *do* something about, there are not only several arguments both for and against any proposed action, but also there are often several alternative possible actions. And even if one of them can be said to be good, this does not exclude the possibility that another alternative action is even better.

What Citizens Need from Debates

For this reason the matter of judging what is a good argument in politics (and in practical argumentation generally) is much more complicated than in the logical world. Among other things, what we need as citizens (and voters) in relation to political debates is two things:

The first thing: we need to *hear* the arguments on both sides of a given issue—pro and con.

(In fact we need to know the good arguments for *all* the different, alternative actions. But it is simpler to say that we need to hear the arguments both for and against every policy or action.)

The second thing: we need to *weigh* the arguments on the two sides. (Remember that the term “weight” popped up a while ago in relation to the argument for Britain’s leaving the EU that this will give Britons more freedom to pass their own laws. By contrast, no one would say that one of the steps in the proof of the Pythagoras theorem has a certain “weight.”)

As a general rule, no argument or set of arguments arguing for a certain action may entail the *necessity* to undertake that action. So we must “weigh.” And our most important help in weighing is that those who defend a particular policy must *answer* the arguments on the other side.

Now back to the initial question, whose complications we have just tried to disentangle: if we cannot use “validity” as our sole yardstick, how do we judge whether an argument in a political debate, for example, is a good one?

The answer to be given here relies mainly on work within the philosophical school that calls itself “Informal Logic,” in particular work by the philosopher Trudy Govier. Not everything in this chapter aligns completely with Govier and the other Informal Logicians, in particular not the rather essential distinction advanced above between epistemic and practical argumentation, but an important point of agreement is that it is useful to consider the following three dimensions of what a good argument is. Here they will be designated as follows:

1. Accurate
2. Relevant
3. Weighty

Accurate—it means, in simple terms, that one can answer *Yes* to the question, “Is that so?”

Why not just say that any arguments used should be *true*? The answer is that the word “true” says at the same time too much and too little. It is “too much” in the sense that the concept of truth in itself is one whose meaning philosophers have never stopped arguing about. It is better to avoid getting entangled in a philosophical quarrel about what it means that something is “true.” An eminent contemporary philosopher, Donald Davidson (1996), has written an article titled “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth.” Most people, on the other hand, have a commonsense notion of what it means to say something that isn’t so. Aristotle said: “To say of that which is that it is and of that which is not that it is not is true” (*Metaphysics* 1011b). What someone says about reality must not mislead others about reality so that they do stupid things, such as walking off a cliff that they have been told

wasn't there. We need statements about the world that we may reliably act upon; if that is the case, then they do not have to include every last detail, and there may even be a few minor errors in them. In that sense a strict notion of truth may be too much to ask.

In another sense it is too little. Auditors and lawyers use the expression "true and fair." A company's annual accounts must be true *and* fair. What this means is among other things that the numbers and other information given must provide a *good and trustworthy picture* of how things really are—one that may be acted upon. It does not just mean that the information and the numbers given, taken in themselves, are "right" or "true"—but also that the accounts present a *full* picture, meaning that no important information and numbers are left out so that we're misled about how things really stand.

So one thing that is suggested by the word *accuracy* is that statements used as arguments should not just "say of that which is not that it is," but also they should not tend to make us *believe* that it is. This is worth emphasizing because there are ways of saying things that are true in themselves, but in a "fudging" way that will make some people believe something untrue.

Regrettably, numbers are precisely one form of argument where a lot of fudging is going on, both in the selection and the presentation of them, as well as with the terms used, etc. So what we get in political debate is often a very foggy or even misleading picture of how things are. It is a sad fact that it has come to this, because if we do not have reliable numbers and other factual statements about reality we cannot have a reliable political debate. A concern about accuracy in argumentation implies, among other things, that one must look out for fog-mongering, obfuscation and fudging with numbers.

Next, what does *relevant* mean? One can also say "pertinent to the issue." It is no doubt pertinent to the issue of whether Britain should remain in the EU that this will give the country greater freedom to pass its own laws. On the other hand it is also relevant to the issue if it seems likely that leaving the EU will negatively affect much of Britain's foreign trade.

A crucial problem with an issue like this is that there is no way one can objectively weigh and balance these two arguments against each other. It is not just that the notions involved in these arguments are all rather vague and uncertain. Just how much freedom would Britain actually have, in practice, to pass its own laws outside the EU? On the other hand, just how certain is

it that its foreign trade would be affected, and how much? None of these questions can be answered with any precision.

Over and above these problems, however, there is the overriding problem that there is no “official” way to determine how much the “freedom” consideration weighs against the “trade” consideration. And there are any number of additional considerations besides these—all relevant to the issue.

Besides the relevant considerations on issues like this there are, of course, a great many others being advanced that are clearly *irrelevant*, or whose relevance is much less clear. An example from a different debate is the view that if an American President wants to restrict people’s ability to buy automatic firearms, then many opponents of such a step will argue that the President’s motive is really to completely take away *all* the American citizen’s constitutional rights to have guns, and in a sinister next step, to suspend all individual freedoms. This is, in all probability, not true, so this argument fails the “accuracy” criterion; but moreover, even if we were to assume for a moment that it were true, it is arguably still irrelevant: such a President would not have a chance to have his way with a plan like that, and it could be stopped a hundred times before ever being implemented—so the argument that the President has this hidden motive really has little or no relevance in regard to his actual proposal to limit the accessibility of automatic firearms somewhat.

A related type of bad argument is the *straw man* argument. If the President proposes to put certain restrictions on the sale of automatic guns, then to claim that he has proposed to ban *all* guns altogether is a straw man. To make a straw man is to attribute a claim or a proposal to someone who hasn’t made it. One can also make straw man versions of other people’s arguments. This is what happens when someone attributes an argument to someone who hasn’t advanced it. An example would be to say that the President in our example argues for his proposal by saying that it will completely eliminate homicides in the US. Probably no one, no matter how strongly in favor of gun control, would advance such an extravagant argument, and if a spokesman for gun ownership claims that his opponents argue like this, then the debate is quickly turning absurd. Nevertheless arguments of the irrelevant types just exemplified are heard much too frequently—usually from both sides (or all sides) on any given issue.

Weighty: this concept, which has been mentioned a few times already, becomes crucially important in practical argumentation precisely because there are more than one dimension to them, and probably several

considerations belonging to each dimension. How much weight an argument has becomes worth considering if it is deemed accurate and relevant. (If it is not accurate or relevant, it can, of course, not have any weight either.)

It is a peculiar complication in considering the weight of an argument that one cannot do it for that argument taken by itself; one has to do it in relation to other relevant arguments on the same issue—and of those there are, as we saw, usually several on both sides. *Weight* therefore really means *relative weight*. All the arguments on both sides are in play when we are out to “weigh” an argument.

The weighing of all the arguments against each other will be additionally complicated by the presence of interpersonal variance—or, in a word, “subjectivity.” For example, on the topic of Britain’s EU membership, some will hold that freedom for Britain to pass its own laws without any interference from “Brussels” carries a tremendous weight and outweighs all other considerations. Others, however, will feel that this aspect of national freedom is in practice pretty restricted anyway, and that on the whole it doesn’t matter all that much; economy is more important.

Here we see in a nutshell the difficulty in weighing arguments in politics: there are no objective truths about relative weight.

We can *criticize* and *evaluate* arguments, and debaters and experts can help us understand what, for example, certain facts and numbers mean, and how certain they are. On these points there is much that is objective, and subjective views will not all be equally plausible; some factual claims simply *are* inaccurate, not to say false or untrue. It is not the case that “everyone has a right to his own statistics,” as an American politician is reputed to have said. And some arguments really *are* irrelevant in a way that should be exposed.

However, the *weighing* of arguments is another matter; everyone must somehow weigh or balance the arguments for him- or herself, and in that there is considerable room for different subjective perspectives.

This is because, for one thing, arguments are of different *kinds* (or dimensions, as we said above). Should the economic argument trump the “freedom” argument? We have no physical pair of scales on which we can literally “weigh” the arguments on an issue against each other; the weighing is not a literal, physical and hence objective one, but is basically characterized by subjectivity. The philosopher Carl Wellman (1971) was aware of this; he not only coined the term “conductive reasoning” for the

situation where we try to balance the pro and con arguments on an issue (that is, we bring those arguments together, so we “con-duct” them)—he also used the old term “hefting” for what we do when we “weigh” arguments against each that cannot be weighed in an objective sense.

But despite all these complications and despite the ineradicable presence of subjectivity on the scene—or precisely because of it—it is still the case that an individual trying to take a stand on a disputed issue needs all the help he or she can get in the form of good arguments on both sides. And in order to be able to weigh them against each other one especially needs the debaters on each side to *hear* and *answer* the arguments from the other side.

A Public Debate Based on Common Values

Let us imagine to ourselves an argument about Britain’s EU membership in which someone says: “We bankers have really made a bundle with Britain in the EU, so let’s remain so we can continue to rake it in.” Is this a good argument?

Many will say: No—it may be true, but it is not good, because it is not a relevant argument for staying in the EU—for the rest of us who are not bankers, that is. Or take this argument: “We Conservatives believe Britain should leave the EU because if we don’t say that a lot of our voters will go over to UKIP” (a party whose main platform is that Britain should leave the EU). That kind of argument would also jar the ears, and in fact one rarely hears politicians say such things—in public, that is.

The reason is that both these arguments are built on *special interest*. The first argument builds on the fact that a certain group of voters (bankers) have a selfish interest in preserving a state of affairs that they profit from. The second is built on the idea that a given political party would rather gain than lose votes—and we can well understand that, but it is nevertheless something that the rest of us voters need not care about. Both arguments are probably accurate enough because they both invoke something that is probably a fact; but neither of these facts appears to be really relevant to the voter who is about to choose a standpoint.

The point is that arguments that are put forward in public debate should be related to *the common good*. To put it simply, arguments in *public* debate should refer to concerns that matter to the *public*. They should refer to values or effects that everyone, or a lot of people, recognize as important. This is just a special case of the principle that if you want to persuade someone you should refer to some belief that this person or group already

shares. Most citizens don't believe it is very desirable in itself that bankers make a bundle—in fact a lot of citizens probably think that if they do, then some change is called for, because it isn't really *just* that one profession should rake it in while many others in our society are in dire straits.

The principle we are dealing with here is essentially the same that has been stated in Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* (1969) as the necessity of there being some "common ground" that serves as a "starting point" for anyone's attempt to convince someone of something. In democracy theory, Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson have formulated the principle of "reciprocity," which means, essentially, that "a citizen offers reason that can be accepted by others who are similarly motivated to find reasons that can be accepted by others" (2009, p. 53). Note how it is implied here that a debater is *motivated* to find such reasons—because they constitute his chance of having his conclusion or policy accepted by others. But the fact that debaters find—and *need* to find—reasons (arguments) that can be accepted by others does *not* imply that others will necessarily accept their conclusions—for example, the policies they argue for; as Gutmann and Thompson also emphasize, reciprocity does not always produce agreement.

To argue on the basis of the common good can also be defined as arguing with reference to values that are commonly shared. They have to be values that others share, *including* those who do not agree with the policy one argues for; if they don't somehow share a value invoked in the argument we make, then our chance of persuading them is nil. That a particular group or a particular party wants to protect its self-interest has nothing to do with common values. And for that reason such an argument has no place in *public* political debate. It is something that may be said in closed groups, behind closed doors. The argument that bankers will continue to do well if Britain stays in the EU will have traction among bankers, but not much outside that segment. Similarly, a Muslim fundamentalist (or a fundamentalist Christian) probably (and hopefully) would not get far in a public debate with an argument to the effect that we should ban homosexuality because the Koran (or the Bible) condemns it. These books are not expressions of common values, at least not if they are interpreted literally and in a fundamentalist way.

Here we have one of the advantages of public debate (there are disadvantages too): in public it is a bad idea to argue with reference to self-interest; one must do it with reference to values that are held in common—if not by all, then by most. Purely group-related arguments have little or no

public traction. To promise financial payments to members of a particular group if they cooperate in getting one elected is not argumentation at all, but more like a business transaction. “If you give me this, then I will give you that. You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.” Said in a private context something like this is sometimes called “log-rolling.” Said in a public context to a broad group it is sometimes called “pork barrel politics.” One could also call it political marketing.

It is a fact that in political campaigns nowadays we do see a great deal of political marketing. Political campaigners and their consultants are becoming increasingly adept at using current technology to home in on carefully selected segments of the electorate and appeal to their particular self-interest in communication that only they receive. This kind of selective communication will become ever easier, in part because of the new digital media and advanced databases in which citizens are divided into segments this way and that. For example, a politician running for a seat in a constituency with many well-off homeowners may distribute flyers or send out emails to this group of people saying: “Here in our district there are many homeowners for whom the freeze on property taxes proposed by Party X will save thousands every year. If you want that, then vote for me, the candidate for party X.” If a candidate were to argue to the population at large for a freeze on home-owner tax on the ground that it would particularly benefit owners of big houses, it might cost him votes rather than win them. He would instead have to defend this policy with reference to “common” values—for example, financial security for *all* homeowners, or the social desirability of a general tax freeze.

In these times of precisely targeted political marketing appealing it becomes increasingly important that there should be public argumentation appealing to common values. There are many divisive forces at work that will pull us apart from each other for the sake of placing us in separate segments or interest groups. To go down this road is to approach a society of mutually isolated “parallel societies.”

Answering as Crucial in Argumentation Democracy

In public debate in a democracy it is important, not only that those who argue for a candidate or a policy try to live up to the three criteria: accurate, relevant, weighty—it is equally important that those who debate with others, or who are asked to defend their policies in the media, attend to arguments and criticisms coming from others and *answer* them. It is

arguably the real acid test of useful democratic debate that debaters in principle *answer* arguments from others.

But what does it mean to answer? Not every reply is an answer. What is required?

The obligation to answer can in principle be satisfied in two ways—and in two ways only:

– *Either* one explains why the opponent’s or questioner’s argument is bad. It can be bad in two ways—by having a problem with accuracy or with relevance (possibly with both).

– *Or* one acknowledges that the opponent’s argument is good enough (i.e., it fulfills the accuracy and relevance criteria); but then one explains why one doesn’t think it is especially weighty, that is to say, why the arguments *for* one’s own position still outweigh the opponent’s arguments *against* it.

It is this final comparison of pro and con arguments that constitutes weighing. It is what every single voter must do for him- or herself. The weighing has to be a kind of “comparison,” since it cannot be an actual physical weighing in terms of pounds or kilograms or some other objective unit. (For that reason let us put “weighing” in quotes from now on.) And because of this we need to do the “weighing” ourselves and assume the responsibility for it ourselves. We cannot call in experts to do it for us. There *are* no experts that can do it for us.

This does not alter the fact that in advance of this personal “weighing” of arguments there is a great deal we do need—both from the politicians who want us to adopt a particular standpoint and from people with experience on the issue as well as experts of all kinds. By listening to all of them we may hope to acquire a basis for our own “weighing” of the arguments. This will help us get an overall view of what the issue involves, what arguments pertain to it, which arguments from each side are accurate and relevant, what the other party has to say in answer to them—and how much “weight” we then feel we can assign to them, in relation to the other relevant arguments.

Perhaps the fundamental principles of public debate that have just been sketched sound obvious, almost banal. But they imply a number of not-so-banal consequences:

– Democracy is not just the principles that people can vote, and the majority rules. There also has to be public debate in which the parties give relevant arguments for their standpoints and answer opposing arguments.

– Consensus, i.e., complete agreement on an issue, cannot be expected to arise, and no one can expect to win over all the others to his or her side.

– There will be *some* individuals on both sides who will change their standpoints, but only some.

– Some of those who did not have a standpoint initially will choose a standpoint.

– All who participate in the debate, or listen to it, will, however, become better informed about the issue. Even though most of those who have a standpoint will probably continue to hold it, many of them will be likely to find additional support for it, extend it, modify it or attach some qualifications to it.

– Arguments should appeal to shared values; arguments based on the arguer's personal value system or on his or her pure self-interest have no weight for those who do not share that value system or that self-interest.

– Answers to an opposing argument must include either a reasonable criticism of it or an acknowledgment of it, plus a “weighing” of the arguments for and against.

A democracy that has public debates like these can be called an *argumentation democracy*. A current term used by an increasing number of thinkers and scholars is *deliberative democracy*. Its key notion is *deliberation*, which is simply a Latin word that means “weighing.” One could say that what has just been described is one notion of what a “deliberative” democracy implies.

A related concept is that of a “conversation democracy” (or “dialogue democracy”). This term was used in a book written in 1945 by a forerunner of the deliberative democracy strand of thinking—the Danish theologian and educator Hal Koch. For him the central features of democracy were not just that general elections are held and that the majority decides, but also that there is ongoing debate. The rules and principles for such a debate are similar to those outlined above.

Importantly, “conversation democracy” does not mean that the discussants must necessarily come to agreement but only that through conversation one “seeks to get the matter looked at from all sides and that the parties to the conversation strive to ... reach a more correct and reasonable understanding of the problem behind the conflict” (1945, p. 16).

Koch's thinking has been criticized because it was thought that he was beating the drum for a kind of *consensus* democracy—a democracy in which it is expected that all will come to agreement if only they continue to

talk reasonably with each other. Such an ideal is attributed—rightly or wrongly—to the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. But that was not what Koch meant, and a conversation-based or argumentation-based democracy does not build on this idea at all. There are many good reasons why a group of people will not necessarily come to an agreement, no matter how much and how well they argue. To believe that deliberation or argumentation or conversation is essential to democracy does not entail the view that argumentation must lead to agreement among the debaters. It *can* do that, or at least bring it closer—but much of the time the debaters continue to hold exactly the same positions after the debate that they did before it. However, even so, debate is essential to democracy; it is, after all, not for the sake of the debaters that debates are held but for their audiences (citizens, voters).

Debates should be held and evaluated with a view to what citizens need. What they need is open discussion of what is best for the society—discussion that brings bring accurate and relevant arguments onto the stage, and makes sure that citizens are helped in their attempts to “weigh” them—which requires that they are properly answered.

That ideal has become increasingly distant in debates in contemporary Western democracies in the last ten to twenty years. This essay tries to set up a yardstick that can help us assess what we get—and be conscious of what we lack.

REFERENCES

- Davidson, D., 1996. The folly of trying to define truth. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 93.6: 263-278.
- Downs, A., 1957. An economic theory of political action in a democracy. *The Journal of Political Economy*, 135-150.
- Easton, D., 1965. *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Vol. 25. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Garsten, B., 2011. The rhetoric revival in political theory. *Annual Review of Political Science* 14: 159-180.
- Govier, T., 1987. *Problems in Argument Analysis and Evaluation*. Dordrecht: Foris.

- Gutmann, A., and D. Thompson, 2009. *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Koch, H., 1945. *Hvad er Demokrati?* Copenhagen: Folkevirke-Serien.
- Perelman, C., and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca. 1969. *The New Rhetoric: Treatise on Argumentation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Riker, W. H. 1982. *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. San Francisco: Freeman, 1982.
- Smith, A. 1971. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. J. M. Lothian (Ed.). Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.
- Wellman, C. 1971. *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.