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Reading online comments makes me want to give up on humanity. There is just so much racism and sexism and downright nastiness. I used to think it would be a great window into a lot of different points of view. Now I realize so many people are actually just mean and stupid and I want to shut that window and not look back.

—Student comment

A Window into Our Irrationality and Hate?

In chapter 2 we considered why someone like Eric or Cassandra might disengage from conversations about diversity because of their frustration with how others framed their identity. Given the limited and oversimplified categories of identity, Eric and Cassandra couldn't find the complexity of their own experiences in the context of the debate. For that reason each opted out, taking flight in the fight-flight dichotomy.

In this chapter we will consider those circumstances where people actually decide to get involved in conversations about social issues by "fighting" and giving and reacting to arguments. The term "argument" has two different meanings that often get tangled up together, especially when people discuss social identity and social differences. The first meaning involves an angry or heated disagreement, such as a quarrel or a (verbal) fight. The second meaning of "argument" refers to a set of statements including a reason (premise) in support of a conclusion (the arguer's point of view). This second meaning of argument is like a justification or an effort to make a case, in the legal sense of the term. Traditionally in logic and philosophy it is this second sense of "argument" that is the primary focus, and its connection to the fighting sense has been downplayed or dismissed.

It is important to understand that arguments in the second sense do not have to become arguments in the first sense. When we argue an issue and provide reasons for our beliefs, we don't have to become hostile or angry.

Similarly, when we express our anger or hostility we can do so effectively without giving reasons or justifying our beliefs. Yet in ordinary conversations and debates between people, the first sense of argument often gets tangled up with the second so that simply shouting or name-calling can wind up substituting for giving reasons and offering justifications. To add to this entanglement, we live within a culture where political blogs, talk radio, and cable news shows (across the political spectrum) engage extensively in insults, mockery, name-calling, and belittling as a way of "arguing" their political points.¹ In addition, a variety of researchers and cultural analysts report that incivility, bullying, and rudeness are on the rise in almost every area of our lives, including business, education, and interpersonal relations.²

When it comes to issues of social identity and social difference, it can seem particularly hard to find arguments that rely on reasons and justification rather than insults and hostility. As we have established so far, issues of social identity and social difference are personal and so can affect us on gut levels. At the same time, they are imbued with a history of inequality and opposition, which constrains not only our choices but also our concepts and our language. However, the fact that there are two meanings for the term "argument" and that these meanings often get tangled up is also a matter of history. While philosophers have long advocated for the "dispassionate evaluation of reasons supporting premises,"³ there has nevertheless been an adversarial element to arguing even in the logical sense.

In this chapter we will explore the adversarial history of argument and consider the ways it works in combination with the very personal and oppositional nature of social identity to raise the temperature in dialogues about social differences. When these "hot" reactions enter the sphere of anonymous online comment forums, a perfect storm of aggression and defensiveness develops, bringing out our worst argumentative tendencies. Like the student quoted above, we might come to the conclusion that the nastiness we read in online comments is evidence of a basically racist, sexist, bigoted culture that is hopelessly beyond reason and not worthy of our empathy or compassion. On the other hand, we could consider how the anonymous nature of online comments and debates poses particular problems for dialogues about social issues. What I hope to show in this chapter is that what we are reading in online comments is not so much a window into people's core beliefs but a distorted carnival mirror reflecting back some of the most limited and oppositional aspects of social identity discourse. Rather than it being a reason to give up on humanity, we should see it instead as a prime reason to transform our standard ways of discussing and debating issues of social difference and social identity.

The process of transformation, however, should begin with a clear understanding of the history of argument and its role as the very foundation of logic and critical thinking. Traditionally, argument in the second sense (providing a justification) involves examining the reasons or premises that arguers give to support and justify their point of view or conclusion. Trudy Govier, author of *A Practical Study of Argument* and a prominent scholar in argumentation theory, explains that a good argument begins with these three components:

- a. *Acceptability* or believability of the content of the premises as well as the source of the premises,
- b. *Relevance* of the content of the premises to the content of the conclusion, and
- c. *Grounds* or sufficient reasons for believing that the conclusion is true.⁴

So, for example, if I make the argument that we should lower tuition rates (the conclusion) because it will lead to all students getting A's in all their courses (the premise), you could object to my argument on the grounds that it is not an acceptable or believable premise (a). If I argued that we should lower tuition rates because it would give my friend Sam the extra money she needs for a fabulous vacation, you could object to my argument on the grounds that while my assertion is believable, it is nevertheless irrelevant to the conclusion (b). Finally, if I argued that we should lower tuition rates because so many students want lower tuition rates, you might agree that the premise is believable and even related to the conclusion but object that it does not provide a strong justification (c).

A good argument from the point of view of logic and critical thinking is, at the very least, one where the premises are acceptable, relevant to the conclusion, and able to provide grounds for the truth of the conclusion. Arguments in this sense differ from mere statements of belief or opinion because they are joined by the reasons used to justify the belief or opinion. If someone says "The current war is wrong!" he or she has not presented an argument but merely stated a belief or point of view on a controversial issue. To make it an argument, the speaker would have to add the reasons that justify her or his opinion. Once the speaker has done that, her or his opinion becomes a conclusion. Of course, as evaluators of the argument we have to judge whether or not the reasons (premises) presented are believable, relevant to the issue, and provide grounds for the arguer's conclusion.

These minimal criteria for a good argument are important to uphold and help to guide us in argument analysis. Yet when it comes to arguments that involve social identities such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc., these minimal criteria are often abandoned because the argument so quickly deteriorates into a hostile fight or disagreement. Rather than presenting believable, relevant, justifications for their point of view, many people resort to incredible statements, irrelevant reasons, and unjustified assumptions, even raising their voices (or writing in all capitals) with the intent of intimidating anyone who disagrees. We see examples of aggression posing as arguments when incredible or irrelevant claims are shouted by television commentators who yell in each other's faces, when people shout each other down in public debates and community forums, and especially in online comment sections following news stories and editorials about race, gender, religion, and other social difference issues.

These are arguments only in the first sense because the arguers make no effort to really engage with the issues and provide evidence and justification. *Pseudoreasoning*, which is the term we will use for persuasion that does not meet any of the criteria for a minimally good argument, makes it seem like evidence is being presented to support a conclusion, but on closer inspection, the evidence falls apart.

While a lot of pseudoreasoning involves appeals to our emotions, emotion is not the main problem. Even good arguments that meet all of the criteria above can get heated and emotional. As we said in chapter 2, anger can be a very rational response to injustice and unfair treatment. Similarly, more positive emotions such as compassion, empathy, and respect can all work productively with well-developed premises to create good arguments. Emotions in and of themselves are not the problem with pseudoreasoning. Rather, it is when emotions are used as a substitute for reasons and the emotions are irrelevant to the issue at hand that we get pseudoreasoning rather than a minimally good argument. When emotions work in conjunction with reasons and are relevant to the conclusion, they can do important work in emphasizing the significance of an issue and the consequences of accepting or not accepting a conclusion.

So, why do we often encounter pseudoreasoning in debates about social issues, and why is the emotion so often hostility and defensiveness? To understand why these emotions often arise in social difference contexts, it is useful to look back on our history of argumentation to assess what we have inherited from the classical and medieval periods of Western civilization.

available

emotional

Argument as an Adversarial Method

In his book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*, Walter J. Ong, a Jesuit priest and professor of English literature and humanities, chronicles the history of aggression in Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks through the rise of Christianity and monasticism in the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and then seventeenth-century Enlightenment.⁵ Ong's account begins with the Socratic method, which is the idea that if we put forth the utmost opposition to a reason, it will yield our best chances for getting to the truth. For instance, if my reason for believing that the war in Iraq was justified is because my history professor told me that it was, someone using the Socratic method would subject my reason to a slew of objections. Isn't it possible that my history professor could be wrong? Isn't it possible that I misinterpreted my professor? Is a history professor's opinion even relevant to the issue of whether or not the war was justified? If I cannot adequately answer these objections, my reason diminishes in value and thus fails as a justification for my conclusion. The more I am able to withstand these objections and provide consistent supporting statements, the greater my justification.

Ong points out that in the all-male monasteries and early universities throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, the predominance of the Socratic method created the conditions for an almost militaristic approach to reasoning and argumentation. Ong explains that during this time, young men considered eligible for intellectual study (women were considered unfit) were often forcibly taken from their families and cloistered together, facing brutal punishments for any infractions of the monastery rules. The hardships that these young men faced encouraged a mutual bond and an us-against-them adversarial attitude toward their teachers. Ong goes on to suggest that the centrality of oral disputation and examination pitted students against teachers as opponents engaged in a verbal battle favoring the most self-confident and aggressive disputant. While matters of relevancy, coherence, and consistency played a role in these battles, on their own they were insignificant if they were not couched in an overarching attitude of arrogance and disdain for one's opponent.⁶

Given that these early monasteries and the subsequent cathedral schools in Europe provided a model for higher education, the common style of argument became a model for reasoning in academia generally.⁷ It is important to remember that the only people eligible for arguing in this academic sense were the male children of European nobility and then male children of the rising European middle class. David Noble, a

historian of science, has noted that "The Latin Church is the great fact of modern civilization and it is here that the curious culture which shaped modern science took place. Here Orthodoxy invented heresy and then identified it with women, so that a world without women emerged. A society composed exclusively of men, forged in flight from women, and intent upon remaking the world in its own half-human image."⁸ Noble notes how scholarly men associated women with all the properties that were in opposition to reason, such as emotion, the body, subjectivity, particularity, and evil. This association was used as a justification for the exclusion of women from institutions of learning and power. So, if a woman demonstrated an aptitude for argument and disputation, she was viewed as a heretic or as hysterical and never scholarly.

Women were not the only people missing from this academic world. Men of color, particularly African men, were stereotyped in opposition to the apparently "civilized" nature of white European men. Kate Lowe, a professor of Renaissance history at the University of London, explains that in the mid-fifteenth century and through the early seventeenth century, a record number of sub-Saharan Africans were forcibly taken by Portuguese traders and transported to Europe to be slaves. Lowe notes that at the same time, the whole idea of civilization became critical to the European self-image. "It is paradoxical," she writes, "that in order for a definition of 'Whiteness' to crystallise among Europe's different identities, it may have been necessary for Renaissance Europeans to encounter Black Africans in the flesh. The timing of this encounter had serious detrimental consequences for black Africans (in addition to the brutality of slavery), since they were categorised and stereotyped in opposition to Renaissance standards and ideals."⁹ While women were deemed irrational, men of color were deemed uncivilized and so were excluded from the realm of academia and justified argument. When men of color attempted to argue in the intellectual sense, their efforts at disputation were taken as insolence and violent aggression. So, the overarching arrogance and disdain for one's opponent that was part of academic argumentation was only for those "rational" and "civilized" European white men of privilege. For anyone else—women, men of color, the poor—it was insubordination and hysteria.

Walter Ong and David Noble's work as well as the work of philosopher Janice Moulton and linguist Deborah Tannen have contributed to our understanding of how the seeds of aggression and opposition in arguments and debates have grown alongside the development of universities, the scientific method, and the rise of technology and the information age.¹⁰ This

aggression and opposition also constructed women and men of color in aggressive opposites to the ideals of intellectual life.

The very words we use to describe arguments and debates reveal these strong undercurrents of aggression and opposition. In their now classic 1983 book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist, and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, show how our use of metaphors influences the way we view and understand a variety of human experiences, including argument and debate contexts.¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson begin the book with the “argument as war” metaphor to show how the very term “argument,” even in the logical sense described earlier, is so often conceptualized as a battle. They note phrases such as “He attacked my idea,” “I defended my position,” “I countered her attack,” “I shot down his reasons,” and “I won the argument.”

✓ This “adversary method,” as philosopher Janice Moulton called it in her very important contribution to this topic, is problematic not simply because it favors particularly aggressive personality traits that are encouraged in privileged white men and discouraged in women and in men of color, but because the adversary method winds up getting in the way of a genuine effort at evaluating reasons and providing justifications.¹² Moulton explains that because the method relies on isolating and highlighting disagreements and examining individual claims, arguers must raise objections by citing counterexamples and inconsistencies to each individual claim. With the focus shifted to specific claims, the issue of the debate is narrowed to such an extent that it can often risk being disconnected from a whole host of important and related matters. Moulton notes how philosophers, for example, continue to revive ancient debates about the logic of claims for God’s existence while ignoring contemporary issues about the relationship between religion, morality, and politics.¹³ Similarly, pundits today who analyze arguments about climate change will often do so by isolating particular data or restricting the focus to a narrow range of conditions rather than considering wider systemic claims and implications. As a result, the isolated evidence becomes detached from a whole host of related data as well as the broader issue of environmental damage.¹⁴ To deny arguments about the increase in Earth’s temperature by saying something like “Well, 1934 was actually the hottest year on record so it can’t be that temperatures are getting hotter!” isolates one fact and fails to consider the broader systematic data. The record-setting heat of 1934 reflects temperatures in the United States and not global average temperatures, which is the relevant data set for proponents of climate change. One reason climate debates remain controversial is that the evidence for the increase in Earth’s

temperature and its link to human causes requires thinking about evidence in complex and systemic ways. This is unlike the traditional adversarial method of argumentation that treats premises in isolation and refutes by way of counterexamples.

Similarly, the adversary method discourages us as critical thinkers from coming up with ways to improve arguments rather than knock them down. ✓ Because we view those with whom we argue as opponents and not collaborators, we are not positioned to hear their claims with any openness or willingness that would enable us to see how their conclusions are related to our own. Our impulse when faced with opponents is to have them fail, so even if we recognize something reasonable in their view or we have ideas about how they might improve their argument, the adversarial method discourages us from making such moves because in strengthening my opponent’s position, I render myself more vulnerable. This is why the false dichotomies of victim-culprit, guilt-anger, and winner-loser seem to be our only options when social identity and social difference are at issue.

Philosopher and argument theorist Catherine Hundleby has raised significant concerns about how the adversary method, as it is employed in logic and critical thinking textbooks, actually undermines the development of logical and critical thinking skills.¹⁵ In her sampling of thirty textbooks published between 1998 and 2008, Hundleby concludes that an overwhelming majority go beyond recommending a minimally oppositional method (starting by dividing an issue into for and against positions), and instead actively encourage an “Adversary Paradigm.” The term “paradigm” refers to a broad encompassing view or set of ideas that work together to create a particular kind of interpretation. An “Adversary Paradigm” treats argumentation as a battle of wits with only two sides and one winner. Hundleby writes that “The Adversary Paradigm creates problems in philosophy. The broad influence of the Adversary Paradigm reinforces forms of social exclusion and dominance.”¹⁶

Hundleby’s point is not that opposition to an idea is always a bad thing. As she explains, oppositional stances have been rightly taken in response to injustice. However, a framework that takes opposition as the *only* viable method and treats those with whom we disagree as opponents or enemies winds up giving priority to the loudest and most aggressive voices in the room (or the online debate) rather than the ones that are most credible or true. Given that aggression and opposition have traditionally been encouraged as masculine behavior and discouraged as nonfeminine behavior and as being socially acceptable for those in assumed positions of authority and condemned when shown by those with less power, the adversarial

method can silence the voices of those who are not aggressive, who are not encouraged to be aggressive, or who would risk significant social losses for being aggressive. In debates about social differences that means silencing or shaming a whole host of people, including women, people of color, the poor and working class, the young, the old, and the disabled, all of whose voices are needed to effectively understand and assess social issues.

Arguments Online

Argument, along with its adversarial and oppositional history, have moved beyond the monastery and the university and into our social and political institutions. And even more recently, argument has moved into the virtual world with the advent of the Internet, social media, and online forums. On the face of it, these technological options for argument seem like they should create new opportunities for debate that are more inclusive and more democratic. Yet what many of us have discovered instead is that online comment sections produce some of the most hostile and poorly reasoned arguments we find anywhere. Some of this could be attributed to our increasingly hostile and “uncivilized” culture. Some of it could be the intractable nature of racism and sexism and social difference. Before we consider the causes, let’s consider some of the effects.

In a post titled “Why We’re Shutting Off Our Comments,” *Popular Science*’s online content director Suzanne LaBarre detailed how comments on the Internet are actually bad for science at large.¹⁷ LaBarre cited a study led by University of Wisconsin–Madison professor Dominique Brossard in which 1,183 Americans were given a fabricated story on nanotechnology and were asked how they felt about the subject, both before and after reading fake comments. By reading both civil and “vile-trolling” responses, the study found that people were swayed far more by negativity. “Simply including an ad hominem attack in a reader comment was enough to make study participants think the downside of the reported technology was greater than they’d previously thought,” wrote Brossard and coauthor Dietram A. Scheufele in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.¹⁸

Ad Hominem Arguments

The Latin phrase *ad hominem* means “to the man” or “to the person.” An ad hominem argument is an example of a *logical fallacy*, or an argument that fails to meet the ARG (acceptable, relevant, and

grounding) conditions of a minimally good argument. The problem with ad hominem arguments is that they target the person rather than the relevant issue. For example, someone with a disability says, “I think we should consider a different location for our event because this one will not accommodate people with disabilities.” I respond, saying “Oh, you’re just saying that because you’re disabled.” With this response, I have committed a version of the ad hominem fallacy. Rather than considering the evidence—that the location will not accommodate people with disabilities—I shifted to something about the person who presented the evidence. As we will see in chapter 5, there are a variety of ad hominem fallacies that have been chronicled through the centuries. We humans have been very inventive in coming up with ways to personally attack each other rather than focusing on the evidence.

Popular Science is not alone in trying to manage negative comments. The popular video site YouTube instituted a new ranking and personalized system of commenting to address what one journalist described as “a hot-bed of spam and idiocy.”¹⁹ The new system requires commenters to log on using a Google+ account, and commenters can decide who among their “circles” can see the comments. Video posters on YouTube can also edit comments, and readers can rank comments so that relevant issues stay near the top of the discussion. The goal of the new system is to reduce anonymity and add accountability and evaluation to YouTube conversations.

What most social media users know is that if an issue arises that has anything whatsoever to do with race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious differences, the online comments will proliferate and take on significantly negative and hostile tones. These comments can range from outright hate-filled speech to hostile biased accusations to inconsistent and faulty reasoning. Looking to online comments, then, for examples of good reasoning can be like entering a hornet’s nest to find a butterfly. The chance of one being there is not impossible, but it is unlikely. And as you search, you will be stung multiple times and have to absorb some very nasty venom. As a friend of mine once remarked after reading through more than one hundred comments following a news story about the mosque planned in proximity to Ground Zero, “I had to stop reading when my eyes began to bleed.” It can feel like that. Approaching online debates about social issues with an open heart and a presumption in favor of human rationality can be dangerous. These kinds of comments are not even attempts at ad hominem

or adversarial arguing; they are simply venomous outbursts. You are not prepared when you encounter comments such as

- “Trayvon’s mother is a crack ho.” (Comment on news story about Trayvon Martin’s parents.)
- “You are an ignorant hypocritical slut. I hope you get cancer.” (Comment in response to an opinion piece on a tech blog.)
- “The libtards keep saying that two faggots are ‘normal.’ If they’re normal why can’t they have kids.” (Comment on a story about gay adoption.)
- “Repuglicans are neo-Nazi facists.” (Comment on a story about Mitt Romney.)
- “When will Americans learn that Mooslims are psychotic terrorist f**ks who hate women.” (Comment on an article about American Muslims after 9/11.)

As people concerned with thinking critically about social issues, what conclusions should we draw from the prevalence of these kinds of comments? Like the student quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, should we conclude that open and public debate actually provides a window into the hatred and negativity hidden in the hearts of our fellow citizens? Before we jump to that conclusion, it is worth taking a look at some of the research conducted by John Suler, a psychology professor at Rider University who studies online behavior. Suler describes a variety of factors that lead people to respond very differently in anonymous online communications than they would in face-to-face interactions.²⁰ Suler’s research reveals that because commenters are not known or seen by their audience and since they are not obliged to remain in the conversation for any duration, they tend to imagine their audience as a set of characters with qualities and values that they (the commenter) creates. Given this made-up audience, Suler argues that commenters start to view their own participation in the conversation as a type of game where the stakes are not very high and the consequences are minimal to nonexistent.²¹ By treating commenting as a game with characters, commenters can try on different roles and take different positions with no accountability to anyone in their audience. In acting out this way, the commenter is never directly responsible because he or she always has the option of claiming “That’s not really me” or “I don’t really think that.” This kind of distancing between what people do and who they believe they are is what psychologists call *disassociation*.

Disassociation combined with the additional false belief that everyone who reads your comments is equal in terms of expertise and authority leads Suler to the conclusion that there is an *online disinhibition effect*. That is, people interacting online are likely to take on personas that they would rarely exhibit in face-to-face interactions. Since their assessment of who they are communicating with is often a caricature absent of the kind of sensitivity and nuance they generally apply to people in face-to-face meetings, they feel no accountability for their remarks. The online disinhibition effect means that we are most likely getting very little evidence from online comments about what lies close to the core of a commenter’s web of belief—that is, the kind of beliefs the commenter would continue to defend if he or she were engaged in a face-to-face debate. This is not to say that these comments don’t betray some ugly attitudes held by the commenter. However, their appearance in anonymous blog posts means that the low-stakes nature of the claims will not require any real defense. It is far more revealing in terms of core beliefs to see what lengths people will go to in order to defend in the face of disconfirming evidence.

So, are these anonymous comments giving us a window into people’s true beliefs or real self? Suler addresses this question directly:

Each media allows for a particular expression of self that differs—sometimes greatly, sometimes subtly—from another media. In different media people present a different perspective of their identity. The self expressed in one modality is not necessarily deeper, more real, or more authentic than another.²²

Returning to the metaphor of the hornet’s nest, one thing we can take away from Suler’s research is that the venom we find in many online comments may not reflect commenters’ true beliefs or real self as much as they reveal one aspect of people’s media self-expression. This is not to say that this aspect of self is false. Rather, it is important to recognize that the self expressed in an anonymous media comment should not be viewed as more real or more essential than the self expressed in other contexts. “We contain multitudes,” as the poet Walt Whitman said, and this means that we may express aspects of ourselves that are inconsistent and even contradictory. Anonymous online expression is a particular kind of context where people can try on risky personas with few consequences. Yet the question remains, why should this persona take on such a hostile and ugly quality when the issue is social identity and social differences?

To answer this question, we should start by recognizing the very oppositional and constricted nature of our social identity language. Because we have little opportunity to think and talk about the intersectional aspects of our identity, the very terms we use set us against each other. Add to this the adversarial history of dialogue and debate as well as the false dichotomies of victim-culprit, anger-guilt, and shame-blame that are inherent in our conceptions of social difference, and you start to see the conditions brewing for a perfect storm. Put these conditions in the context of anonymous public forums on topics having to do with race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious differences, and you get an explosion of vitriol and aggression that replaces critical thinking and analysis. The kind of hate-filled speech that caused my student quoted above to want to “shut that window and not look back” is, I believe, the result of people’s pent-up frustration with social differences and their lack of tools for thinking and reasoning effectively about social identity and social power. Rather than ignoring these comments or bemoaning the lack of intelligent life on the planet, I think it is important for us to see them as symptomatic of the structural and institutional constraints of social inequality and the personal and emotional costs of social divisions. When I read comments such as these, I see the suffering behind the hate. And I mean suffering not just in the sense of individual suffering but also in the larger sense of a social malady or affliction. Our language and our social and political systems carry with them a history of opposition, aggression, and inequality. This history impacts our beliefs on both conscious and unconscious levels. Yet the contemporary narrative of our society today is that we are better. We are apparently postracial and post-sexist and postinequality. Our public institutions celebrate this apparent transformation with such words as “diversity” and “inclusion.” So if you do not experience the world as “post” all those oppressive things, then there is some failing in you rather than in the institutions. This willful unseeing, to use Sara Ahmed’s phrase again, represses experiences of inequality and opposition and projects instead a happy and colorful image of difference. But these differences are not simply about color and race and a rainbow world. They involve the intersections of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ability (as well as other identities). They include social privilege and social disadvantage and estimations of winning and losing power as well as the need that groups have to preserve their identities and values. Given that all of these concerns challenge the happy diversity narrative, they have to be rerouted and expressed in alternative forums such as politically polarized news programs, satirical cable news shows, social media, and online comments sections. While these forums provide some

outlet for people’s frustration with the happy diversity model, they too contribute to the oversimplification and polarization of these issues by prioritizing adversarial styles of argument or treating the problems like impossible jokes with no chance for social change. Online comments in particular allow people to channel their own individual frustration in a public and still anonymous low-stakes forum.

Consider a recent case involving feminist blogger and media critic Anita Sarkeesian that illustrates the type of anonymous online response.²³ Sarkeesian was interested in “tropes,” or stereotypical portrayals, of women in popular culture and so started an investigation into different mediums. She decided to choose video gaming as one of the sites for analysis and mounted a web campaign to raise funds for a series of short films that she planned to produce on the topic. The issue was “Whether or not video games portrayed women in stereotypical or biased ways.” To answer this question, Sarkeesian needed to purchase or rent a wide selection of video games. In addition, she wanted to set up a poll to survey video game users’ attitudes about female characters. To do all of this she needed to raise some money for research, so she set up the web fund-raising campaign to introduce the project and her plan for researching the issue.

Sarkeesian’s web campaign was met with an avalanche of negative comments on her fund-raising site, the YouTube page where she posted the video announcing the project, and her online blog. The anonymous comments included ad hominem attacks and abusive language:

“You are a dumb bitch.”

“Stupid Jew!”

“If you are such a feminist why do you have long hair and wear hoop earrings?”

“You alienate guys for being guys. You are an ugly girl hiding behind feminism and trying to spoil other people’s fun.”²⁴

These kinds of comments targeted Sarkeesian herself and used name-calling, insults, religious and gender bias, and speculation about Sarkeesian’s motives rather than an engagement with the reasons that she gave for undertaking the project. Ad hominem and abusive attacks such as these, aside from being disrespectful and cowardly, are also significantly illogical, since they are not relevant to the reasons that Sarkeesian presented for why she wanted to undertake the research.

We can attribute some of these attacks to the disinhibition effect described above by Suler. That is, commenters have created bogey men (or bogey

women, as in Sarkeesian's case) with all the worst qualities the commenter associates with that particular social identity. So when Sarkeesian identifies herself as a feminist interested in analyzing the tropes about women used in video gaming—a still majority male activity²⁵—she is recast by many commenters as a man-hating shrew out to destroy a great source of pleasure and virtual community in the name of women's superiority. If much of the commenters' anger really stems from their fear of the monster they created, then why not express the fear instead of the anger? If the online disinhibition effect explains the tendency for commenters to take on a role and cast the people they are addressing as characters, couldn't the role be more compassionate and the characters more likable?

Given the lack of opportunities and tools for engaging in honest dialogues about social identity and social differences, anonymous online comments become the release valve for a frustrated segment of the society. As comments become less about presenting information and evidence and more about contempt and derision, participants shelter themselves within their own beliefs, and further debate becomes unproductive.²⁶ The anonymity of online forums masks not only the speaker but also the audience. This lack of face-to-face contact contributes to the dehumanization of participants in online forums, and dehumanization in turn fuels opposition and aggression. Research on social bias and prejudice shows that "dehumanized groups are thought not to experience complex emotions or share beliefs with the in-group."²⁷ Sociologists Margaret Zamudio and Francesco Rios found in their research that though "race talk" was viewed as socially unacceptable, "racist talk" was still widely practiced by individuals when they thought their conversations were in private.²⁸ Anonymous Internet forums with a focus on controversial issues of social identity present a strange new context. On the one hand, it is a relatively risk-free, unaccountable open space that encourages the dehumanization of opponents in a public debate while, on the other hand, commenters write from the intimate space of their homes and personal computers, lending a private quality to the experience.

So, rather than concluding that the hostility in online comments is evidence of the essential racism, sexism, etc., in the hearts of our fellow citizens, I would suggest instead that we see it as the result of a variety of interrelated and unique factors. First, that people are complex and multifaceted and what they say in anonymous online comments might only reveal some limited aspect of their web of belief. Second, the model of argument that we have inherited encourages aggression while downplaying other emotions, such as empathy and compassion. Third, issues of social identity and

social difference can only be adequately addressed when people in the discussion are accountable to each other. Trust is necessary for admitting and describing experiences of bias and discrimination and is also necessary for those who want to understand how they may be contributing to the problem. Immediate anonymous online communication cannot create that kind of trust if commenters can fly in and fly out without any responsibility to each other. Fourth, the strangely public-private nature of online discussions means that they can encourage our worst tendencies to dehumanize and publicly humiliate others while, at the same time, giving us the illusion that we are engaged in a private conversation. What we should conclude from these four factors is not that irrational hate-filled people surround us everywhere but instead that people are suffering from a history of adversarial argument and painful social injustices. What we lack are effective methods for thinking and reasoning about social differences. Given this, anonymous online discussion forums are probably the worst contexts for trying to work out these issues.

Moving from an Adversarial Model to a Cooperative Model

So, where does this leave us? If we view the prevalence of venomous speech on the Internet not as a window into society but instead as a distorted carnival mirror, this will hopefully restore some of our confidence in the possibility of public forums for discussion and debate about controversial social issues. We began this chapter by considering the two senses of "argument" (verbal fight and logical justification) and how they seem to blend when the issue involves social identity and social differences. We acknowledged the preponderance of poorly argued, aggressive, downright nasty comments that surface in public forums and online debates when social differences are the focus. Rather than seeing this as evidence of the pointlessness of debates about social issues, I am suggesting that we instead recognize the unique conditions surrounding these social issues, which ignite extremes of aggression and defensiveness. Getting a handle on the aggression and hostility in online debates about social issues is a first step toward understanding why most of these debates are not actual efforts at critical thinking or social justice. Ad hominem and abusive attacks are so common in these forums because they are the easiest form of adversarial reasoning. However, rather than seeing this as a hopeless sign for the future of debate, we should instead recognize the unique conditions that surround social issues in online forums. When the perfect storm of aggression and defensiveness

meets the worst possible context of anonymous commenting, our most hostile and disaffected tendencies are drawn out and highlighted.

Given that we can't change the history or the context, how can an intellectually empathic critical thinker work against these negative factors to promote constructive and effective dialogues about social issues? To answer this question, let's remind ourselves of the first two skills involved in intellectual empathy that we established in chapter 2: knowing that identity is intersectional and understanding that social privilege is mostly invisible to those who have it. Given the discussion we have had in this chapter about arguments, the adversarial method, and the climate of anonymous online forums, it is time to introduce the third skill involved in intellectual empathy: cooperative reasoning.

Cooperative reasoning involves thinking and reasoning cooperatively about social identity and difference, because when we reason in an adversarial manner, we fail to access the relevant feelings, experiences, and data that are all necessary for understanding the oppressive aspects of social identity. We need to think through these issues together, and this means hearing about how each of us experiences social systems and social categories. There are far too many structural pressures working against the opportunity for us to talk together. As we have noted thus far, history, language, media, and political and educational institutions, each in various ways, constrain and oversimplify our social experiences. Cooperative reasoning begins by acknowledging these pressures and reducing their impact on our dialogues and discussions.

Cooperative reasoning is the recognition that not all arguments have to be battles aimed at persuading and winning. Arguments about social identity and social differences should be efforts at establishing mutual respect. This would make anonymous online debates significantly less than ideal forums, since these contexts lend themselves to dehumanizing attitudes that are common with bias and prejudice. Arguments about social identity and difference should establish some base level of mutual recognition for each other's vulnerability and humanity in the face of social pressures.

Cooperative reasoning should also be sensitive to our experiences of cognitive dissonance, or the state of having contradictory beliefs as well as beliefs that do not seem to match up with reality. Paul Gorski, a professor at George Mason University, writes that

The most important revelation of my life as a social justice educator-activist is that I am a facilitator for people's cognitive dissonance. This realization has changed virtually everything I teach about

poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, nationalism, heterosexism, and other oppressions, not because I want to protect the feelings of those who are experiencing cognitive dissonance related to one or more of these issues, but because everybody experiences cognitive dissonance related to one or more of these issues.²⁹

Thinking and reasoning about social differences and injustice can lead to cognitive dissonance because of the strong reactions we may have to new information that conflicts with our sense of ourselves and how the world works. People who are experiencing cognitive dissonance often feel hostile, surprised, confused, or withdrawn. Gorski recognizes that though cognitive dissonance is difficult to experience and work through, it is nevertheless common for anyone who thinks and reasons about social privilege and disadvantage. This provides him and his students with the opportunity to think together about the experience of cognitive dissonance, since it is a state they will all experience at some point in their discussions and debates. If we can work to cooperatively manage cognitive dissonance together, we move past the impasses that can block our access to relevant social evidence.

Cooperative reasoning also encourages reflection, or metacognition. What I mean by this is the ability to think about what we think. Metacognition allows us to reflect on the obstacles in our own thinking so that we might get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Knowing that everyone has been shaped in different but predictable ways by living in a socially stratified culture allows us to face this reality while still working together to challenge its affect on our system of beliefs.

Finally, cooperative reasoning contributes to revealing the false dichotomies that constrain so much of our thinking about social identity and difference. Rather than seeing ourselves as winners or losers in a debate about social identity, cooperative reasoning instead positions us as collaborators working together to uncover and understand our social beliefs. Philosophy professor and argument theorist Michael Gilbert provides a very thoughtful and well-developed model of cooperative reasoning in his book *Coalescent Argumentation*:

Coalescent argumentation posits agreement as the goal of successful argumentation wherein the object is not to identify what is wrong with an argument, but what are the points of agreement and disagreement. Furthermore, coalescent argumentation views an argument not as an isolated artifact, but as a linguistic representation of a *position-cluster* of attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and intuitions.³⁰

In Gilbert's model of coalescent argument, the point is not to win but instead to wind up agreeing. If we think of our web of belief again, Gilbert's model seeks to find points of intersection between our webs as well as points of disconnection. The task of argument is to then find out the reasons for our disconnection by sharing our beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and gut reactions, all which contribute to what is in our web and where it is located. These beliefs and attitudes may not wind up being justified upon review, but if our goal is not to win but instead to reach a point of agreement in our arguments, then understanding in the light of evidence is the reward.

You are no longer a culprit and I am no longer a victim if we are working together to understand how we have both been shaped by history. Similarly, the adversarial move of challenging your claims by presenting one counterexample or attacking one reason is not reasoning cooperatively. Instead, we recognize that systems of belief are complex and intertwined with structural pressures as well as personal feelings. Reasoning cooperatively means that I look not for exceptions to your point of view but instead for ways that my views connect with yours. If your reasons don't add up for me, then I consider evidence that would strengthen your view. In other words, I work to make your view more rational for me, and you work to make my view more rational for you. This does not mean that we swap positions if we started with different views on an issue. What it does mean is that we work together to strengthen and support each other's views so that we consider different perspectives and the best available evidence.

To see how cooperative reasoning works in practice, consider an excerpt from a dialogue that occurred between two students in one of my classes. We will identify the students as Kim and Sara. The dialogue begins when Kim is asked to describe a belief she has about a social group other than the ones to which she belongs:

Kim: I work at a community pool, and I've come to believe that Arab American men are really arrogant. I think it has something to do with how they view women in their culture. Every time I remind them that they have to shower before going in the pool or that they can't bring food on the deck, they give me this look. They just seem really dismissive because I am a white woman.

Sara: So, Kim, I am assuming that you are not Arab American?

Kim: Yes.

Sara: Also that you see Arab Americans as not white?

Kim: Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I think Arab American men act dismissive toward all women but especially to white women.

Sara: Well, I am Arab American, and your generalization bothers me.

But before I say why, let me just say I appreciate you taking the risk of saying this. I know you could have said nothing and kept this belief to yourself, but you offered it up for discussion.

Kim: Thanks. I hope you don't think I'm a total bigot for saying this.

It is just a kind of stereotype I formed, and I wanted to see what other people thought.

Sara: Well, one thing I wonder is if there were some other things these men had in common. Is it the same men or different ones each time?

Kim: Well, they're all in their early twenties. It is usually the same group of guys. They just act really arrogant and dismissive when I remind them of the rules—like I am speaking a foreign language.

Sara: I could see why that would bother you, but do you think it might be more about their age rather than their ethnicity? Also, maybe they're acting like you're speaking a foreign language because they might not be native English speakers. Have they responded to you in English?

Kim: No. That is the problem. They are always speaking Arabic, and so I have never gotten more than a shrug and an eye roll from them.

Sara: I don't know. I mean, I think you can't really generalize from these young guys to all Arab American men. I also think it is easy in your case to attribute this to them being Arab rather than them being dismissive guys who may or may not even understand English. My concern is that if they were guys who looked like your friends or family, you would chalk it up to them being jerky guys, not jerky white guys.

Kim: Yeah, I get that. I guess I really don't have other examples of Arab American men except what I see on TV or in movies. You know, Sara, I want you to know that I appreciate you taking the chance to think about this with me, since I can imagine it must have made you feel uncomfortable.

Sara: It does, but it also doesn't surprise me. There are a lot of stereotypes out there about Arab American men that are unfair. You know, I had a friend visiting once from Lebanon, and I walked her past a tailgating party near the university stadium. This friend was Muslim, and she didn't drink or smoke. What she saw was a group of all-white fraternity guys drinking and swearing and knocking each other down playing football while a sorority group sat behind talking quietly amongst themselves. Her conclusion was that white

American college men were dangerous and dominant and the women were submissive. I had to talk through that one with her!

Kim: So, I guess it is a matter of who is seen as being different. I have to think about whether my judgment really was based on my not being able to see these guys as just guys and not Arab American males.

Sara: Yeah, I mean, these particular guys might be behaving badly. I'm not about to defend all Arab American men, because it is silly to try and defend an entire group's behavior on anything. But what I do think is that if these guys are being jerks, it is not because they are Arab American.

At a variety of points in the dialogue, Sara could have adopted an adversarial model of argumentation, chipping away at Kim's claims and reasoning. Sara could have said "Well, my father and my brothers are Arab American men, and they are not sexist!" Or she could have argued that Kim failed to consider other possibilities besides ethnicity rather than letting Kim consider age on her own. Kim also considers how her generalization is based on a small sample but is still reinforced by the wider culture. Sara supports Kim's point by noting the stereotypes that encourage Kim's way of thinking. Sara then offers the example of her own friend visiting from Lebanon to let Kim know that she understood how the 'othering' that Kim was applying to the men at the pool was not just something that a horribly biased person would do. Sara was letting Kim know that most of us are susceptible to problematic stereotypes and generalizations, even people we like. Both speakers found an opportunity to remind the other that they knew this kind of conversation was difficult and risky. Both offered some reassurance. Kim faces some cognitive dissonance but also recognizes that she has to engage in some metacognition to consider how her belief developed. Sara admits that Kim might be right that the guys were behaving badly but not because of their ethnicity.

In this dialogue, Sara and Kim wind up with better information and more developed reasoning skills. An adversarial dialogue would have shut down this conversation much earlier, confirming the worst assumptions that each had about the other. Cooperative reasoning, then, is an attitude of openness and a willingness to take in new information and consider how it might coexist with our firmly held beliefs. Approaching reasoning and argumentation not as a battle but instead as a cooperative process means that we could prioritize asking why someone might have come to believe something that seems contrary to what we know rather than immediately

looking for ways to show that it is wrong. We could offer information or evidence that would help to make sense of another's point of view rather than simply looking for any weaknesses or points of conflict. We could consider how our own web of belief might change if we incorporated new or different information, and we could reflect on our resistance to change our beliefs. This process does not mean that we have to wind up being persuaded of something that lacks good evidence. It also does not mean that we can't disagree or even have conflicting points of view. What it does mean is that we have to approach dialogues about social differences not with the intent to win but with the goal of relaxing our defenses and cooperatively assessing the relationships between our social beliefs and the social systems of privilege and disadvantage.

Approaching argumentation from a cooperative perspective rather than a combative one is not an easy thing to do. The topics are personal, and the beliefs associated with them are often tied up with lots of unexamined emotional content that we have inherited from our families of origin, the culture around us, and false information within our own web of belief. In the dialogue above, we can imagine that Sara may have felt initially defensive and was either angry or hurt by Kim's description. Yet if we remind ourselves that all of us hold social beliefs that could potentially anger or hurt others, we can relax our blame filters. We all get something wrong when it comes to beliefs about individuals and social groups. Some of this is the result of the ignorance of privilege, and some of it is just ignorance and a basic lack of experience and information. If we view each other as collectively imperfect and sincerely trying to learn, we can work at arguing more cooperatively. This does not mean that if Sara did feel defensive or hurt or angry that she is wrong for having these feelings. Instead, cooperative reasoning encourages us to examine those reactions in the same metacognitive way that we should examine our beliefs. Our reactions do not have to lead us to jumping to conclusions about others. Sara could be hurt without coming to the conclusion that Kim is a bigot. Sara could even describe her feelings while still seeing herself as collaborating with Kim. Similarly, Kim should be able to hear Sara describe her feelings without jumping to the conclusion that Sara is incapable of reasoning through the issue. To use Michael Gilbert's phrase, an argument is a "position-cluster," and while it contains feelings, it still contains beliefs and reasons, and we should be prepared to consider the complexity.

In the next chapter we will discuss some of the common biases that contribute to the errors and unprocessed emotions in our web of belief. For now, let us just appreciate that we have inherited a long history of

adversarial reasoning and understand that intellectual empathy is an effort to create alternatives to the argument as war metaphor.

So, we will be committed to dialing down the aggressive and poorly reasoned attacks and lifting up the standards for cooperation and consensus. In this way, intellectually empathic critical thinkers can help to create a new climate surrounding debates about social issues. By modeling this kind of cooperative consensus-based reasoning, we create new possibilities for public reasoning about social issues. However, once we reduce the hostility, we still need to work at identifying the common mistakes that occur when thinking and reasoning about social differences.

Questions for Review

1. What are the two meanings of “argument” that often get tangled up together?
2. Describe each of the three criteria for a minimally good argument:
 - Acceptability
 - Relevance
 - Justification
3. Is the problem with pseudoreasoning that it involves appeals to our emotions? Do emotions always get in the way of good reasoning?
4. What were the historical justifications for excluding women, men of color, and poor and working-class people from engaging in intellectual and academic arguments?
5. What is the adversary method? How does it get in the way of thinking and reasoning about large systemic issues such as social identity and difference?
6. What is an ad hominem argument? How is this different from adversarial reasoning?
7. What are the four elements of cooperative reasoning?
8. Describe Michael Gilbert’s notion of argument as a position-cluster.