How to Argue Fairly and Without Rancor (Hello, Thanksgiving!)

Hauser, Christine . Hauser, Christine.

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Social psychologists and philosophers have tips on avoiding the pitfalls of emotionally charged discussions, and how to make them constructive.

FULL TEXT

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If the current state of politics has shown us anything, it's that it sometimes seems as if opposing views can never be reconciled.

And with American Thanksgiving upon us — as far-flung family members from all walks of life gather for a meal — the political and personal disagreements that crop up are as traditional as the turkey and cranberry sauce.

So this may be a good time to explore what psychologists and philosophers say are the most effective ways to argue. And by "argue" they do not mean "quarrel," but communicate without rancor or faulty reasoning with someone who has an opposing viewpoint, with the hope of broadening one's understanding of people and ideas.

Here are a few suggestions:

The aim of an argument should not be proving who is right, but conveying that you care about the issues, said Amy J. C. Cuddy , a social psychologist and associate professor at Harvard University.

Show the person with whom you are speaking that you care about what he or she says.

The goal should be to state your views and to hear theirs. It should not be: "I am not leaving until you admit that you are wrong, or here is what I believe, and I am not budging from this," said Dr. Cuddy, who has explored the question in Business Insider columns .

And when you listen, go all in. "Don't half-listen while figuring out what you're going to say next," said Gary Gutting, a philosopher at Notre Dame.

Some people start an argument by staking their position and refusing to budge, an impulse that Dr. Cuddy called "dropping the anchor."

Instead, try to understand the other person's point of view; it does not mean you have to agree with him or her, or that you are abandoning deeply felt objections to, for example, racism or sexism, she said.

"Think of it from a courage perspective: I can go in and I am going to ask questions that are truly, honestly aimed at increasing my understanding of where he or she is coming from," Dr. Cuddy said. "How did they get there, and what is leading to that?"

Your body language can send messages that are more compelling than the words coming out of your mouth.

Try to avoid gestures that are patronizing or defensive, like crossing your arms or clenching your jaw.

Maintain eye contact in a way that is not a stare-down.

Lean forward slightly to show you are interested.

And no eye-rolling, Dr. Gutting said.

Dr. Gutting says it helps to use neutral or charitable language when acknowledging opposing viewpoints, especially during arguments over politics. It lays the groundwork for a more effective argument on points of genuine weakness.

Don't think of an argument as an opportunity to convince the other person of your view; think of it as a way to test and

improve your opinions, and to gain a better understanding of the other side.
It is rarely productive to nitpick errors in your interlocutor's remarks or to argue just to "win."
"People do give up views because of rational arguments against them," Dr. Gutting said in the interview. "But this is almost always a long process, not the outcome of a single decisive encounter."
In "How to Argue About Politics," a chapter from his book "What Philosophy Can Do," Dr. Gutting writes that, in many political arguments, the people we think we "convince" almost always already agree with us.
A good argument is supported by evidence, but that is just a starting point. Sometimes, especially with political back-and-forths, one side will look only at evidence supporting its own position, conveniently leaving out the full picture, Dr. Gutting noted.
(This is called the fallacy of incomplete evidence. Here is an extensive list of fallacies , or unsound reasoning.)
"An effective argument would have to take account of all the relevant evidence," he said.
George Yancy, a philosophy professor at Emory University who has written extensively about race, was asked by a student this year why he even bothered to discuss race with white supremacists.
Dr. Yancy said he told his student there was a need to inform white people about how African-Americans think about race.
"This is a moment when we are not just talking past each other, but against each other," Dr. Yancy said in a telephone interview, speaking about the current national climate.
"So for me, the condition for a conversation has to be that you are unafraid to speak courageously, and you are unafraid to tell your partner exactly what it is that you think about the world."
But a two-way argument also requires fearless listening, "even if it is me talking to a white supremacist who is trying to tell me that I am inferior," he added. "One of the conditions for the possibility of a fruitful argument is to allow for some kind of opening up in myself to hear."
Sometimes it takes a painful step to find common ground, Dr. Yancy said.
"What you need to be able to do is to speak the same language," he said. "They believe in God, and you would say: 'You and I believe the same thing. How is it that this God who loves you can't possibly love me?' Is it possible that we can agree to disagree on some issues?"
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