

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Philosophy

12-2014

Reviewed Work: Why We Argue (and How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement, by Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse

Emily Esch

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, eesch@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/philosophy_pubs



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

This is the author's post print of a book review that was subsequently published as Emily Esch. "Why We Argue (And How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement, by Scott F. Aiken and Robert B. Talisse." *Teaching Philosophy* 37: 4, 540 - 543, 2014,

Why We Argue (and How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement

Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse

New York: Routledge (2014)

978-0-415-85905-9

152 pages

Paperback: \$24.95

Like many philosophy teachers, I spend the first two weeks of my introduction to philosophy course on what many of us call “baby logic,” covering topics like necessary and sufficient conditions, the difference between deduction and induction, fallacies, and soundness and validity. These concepts and skills are incorporated throughout the rest of the semester as we discuss various philosophical issues. This arrangement, common in introductory courses, has scientific and anecdotal support. The research of the educational psychologist Philip Abrami and his colleagues suggests that critical thinking skills are better learned when they are both taught independently of content and incorporated into the content. Anecdotally, many of my students mention in evaluations and end of the semester discussions how, in hindsight, they recognize the value of the first two weeks of the course.

The key word here is “hindsight.” During the first two weeks, some students struggle to see the point of learning the complicated and abstract concepts. Others struggle to understand the material. (Of course, there is overlap between the two groups). And like many philosophy teachers, one of my course goals is to instill epistemic dispositions that transfer to other parts of students’ lives. I’ve been worried that this goal is hindered by narrowly focusing on the formal aspects of arguments. So I’ve been looking for a book that introduces the technical topics important for mastering argumentative skills, but embeds them in a way that might help my students understand why learning the formal aspects of argumentation matters.

Why We Argue (and How We Should): A Guide to Political Disagreement, by Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse, does an excellent job of explaining why arguing well matters, though it spends little time on the formal aspects of argumentation. The book is divided into two parts. Part I, “A Conception of Argument,” is an extended discussion of how the authors’ conceive of “the nature, purpose, and significance of argument” (xv). One goal of this book is to broaden the way philosophers typically think about arguments. Aikin and Talisse explain deductive soundness and acknowledge the prominent role it plays in philosophical argument, but they argue that there are costs to using deductive soundness as the gold standard. As they state it, the world is “messy and complicated” and we are rarely in a position where we can settle our disputes with a formal argument. They urge us to recognize that arguments are used in different ways besides proving the truth of our conclusions; we argue to settle disagreements, discover new ways of thinking, and to push our investigations closer to an answer (xiii-xiv). After developing their notion of

argument, the authors use Part I to make the case that knowing how to argue well matters both to the individual and to society.

The heart of *Why We Argue* is the authors' commitment to explicating an understanding of argument that is fundamentally social. The book begins with a lengthy discussion of two Aristotelian claims: humans are inherently social beings and humans are motivated by a desire to know. This discussion sets the scene for the introduction of their conception of argument: "argument has an *inward-looking* and *outward-looking* aspect. On the one hand, argument is the attempt to articulate the basis for the beliefs we hold; it is an attempt to explain why we believe what we believe. On the other hand, argument is the attempt to *display to others* that they have reason to believe as we do" (11-12). This attention to the social aspect of argument – that most arguments are not developed in isolation, but among people – is central to one of Aikin and Talisse's main themes. As the subtitle of the book suggests, Aikin and Talisse are especially concerned about our political discourse and its effect on the health of democracy. This concern shows itself in the examples they choose, which are mostly drawn from contemporary US politics, and their extensive discussion of the role of argument in a democracy. They connect individual epistemic responsibility to social duties: "democracy is the social and political manifestation of our individual cognitive aspiration to be rational." These epistemic goals confer upon citizens "a duty to try to argue well" (38). Part I ends with a chapter on how arguing about issues of public concern confer different responsibilities from arguing about matters that affect the individual (52-55).

Part II of the book is a series of short chapters on different dialectical fallacies. This focus on dialectical fallacies is in keeping with the authors' interest in the social role of argument. Aikin and Talisse explain dialectical fallacies as follows: "An argument presents a dialectical fallacy when it fails to play its proper *social role*, most typically by failing to actually *address* those to whom the argument is purported to be offered" (xv). The dialectical fallacies that Aikin and Talisse discuss in detail in the second section include familiar moves that are not always covered in logic books: there is a chapter devoted to incredulous tones and another on spin and framing, both of which I found interesting and valuable for students. Another chapter likely to be helpful to students is on "the simple truth thesis," which is when the arguer repeatedly points out that her position is obviously right. Personally, though, I thought the chapter on what they call "pushovers" the most important; in this chapter, the authors discuss in detail the concept of "straw man" arguments. They locate three different versions of what frequently gets lumped together as straw men – the traditional straw man, the weak man, and the hollow man. In their taxonomy, the straw man fallacy is misrepresenting your interlocutor's position, the weak man fallacy is responding to the weakest argument of your interlocutor, and the hollow man fallacy is fabricating an argument on behalf of your interlocutor. The authors emphasize the social aspects of the pushover fallacies; engaging in any of them "undoes the intellectual trust required for discussion in good faith" (71). As pushover fallacies are among the most common dialectical fallacies in our public discourse, I appreciated the careful treatment of this topic.

Aikin and Talisse have written a book that presupposes no prior familiarity with philosophy and will engage the general reader. One illustration of this engaging style is their use of metaphor. For example, they repeatedly turn to a comparison between bodily and cognitive health: reviewing the connection between one's beliefs and one's evidence becomes an act of cognitive hygiene and maintaining one's cognitive health depends on periodically reflecting on these connections, just as flossing is required to maintain the health of one's teeth (13-14). Thinking about argumentation and epistemic responsibility in terms of cognitive health has two virtues; it is accessible, in that everyone understands the basics of personal hygiene, and motivating, in that most people want to practice healthy behaviors. I can see how spending time developing this metaphor in class could pay off in discussions throughout the semester as a shorthand way to refer to sound epistemic practices. More importantly, using this metaphor conforms to what we know about how people learn; building on conceptual structures students already have makes it more likely that they will retain the information in the future. As an added benefit, it is nice to see an alternative to the war metaphors that infect much of our discourse around argumentation.

For some courses, embedding a discussion of how to argue well inside a conception of the duties of citizenship will be a natural fit. I would highly recommend the book for these kinds of courses. But even for those who do not frame their courses in this way, the book has much to offer. Often, the discussion about the role of argument in democracy can be applied directly to other social realms, like the classroom. So, for example, in the chapter called "Public Argument in a Democratic Society," Aikin and Talisse argue for two argumentative norms: earnestness and responsibility (45). *Earnestness* requires that we argue in good faith: looking at the reasons before us, not getting distracted, and following the argument where it leads. *Responsibility* requires that we investigate all sides of an argument. Both of these norms are commonly found in philosophy classrooms and, if one wanted, much of the material on democracy could be adapted to talk about the role of argument in the classroom.

Why We Argue is not a replacement for more formal logic texts. For a straightforward, concise, and accessible guide to the basics of argumentation, it is hard to beat Anthony Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments*. My main reservation, for pedagogical purposes, about *Why We Argue* is that the formal logical concepts get just the barest mention in the introduction. These concepts are central to how many people conceive of their introductory courses, and for these courses *Why We Argue* would need to be supplemented with some other materials.

Why We Argue makes a compelling case for the significance of argument in our every day lives, but what sets this book apart is the insistence on the importance of what we owe to others when we are arguing. This emphasis on the social aspects is an important contribution to the literature on teaching the nature and purpose of argument.

Emily Esch, Philosophy Department, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's
University, 2850 Abbey Plaza, Collegeville, MN 56321; eesch@csbsju.edu