

# Debate and the Value of Discussing Opposing Viewpoints

## WHAT IS A DEBATE?

“a formal discussion on a particular topic in which opposing arguments are put forward.”

## WHAT IS AN ARGUMENT?

1. “an exchange of diverging or opposite views, typically a heated or angry one.”
2. “a reason or set of reasons given with the aim of persuading others that an action or idea is right or wrong.”

The word argument has some negative connotations (angry, fighting), but in an academic context, it simply means using logic and evidence to establish a point.

Here is a famous quote about the importance of considering multiple perspectives on any topic:

- “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion...”

*“...Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them...he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form.”*

— John Stuart Mill, [On Liberty](#)

We often figure out or clarify our own views by pitting them against opposing opinions—even views that you are pretty sure are misguided or wrong.

- *“If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”* —John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

To prepare for an important legal case, lawyers will prepare both sides of the argument.

Why would they do that?

- One reason is so that they will be able to anticipate all of the points that the other side will make, so they will be ready to respond to them.

Here is a chart depicting low-level “arguments” versus high-level academic ones:



## MONTY PYTHON'S ARGUMENT CLINIC

### ARGUMENT CLINIC VIDEO

**Man:** Oh look, this isn't an argument.

**Mr. Vibrating:** Yes it is.

**Man:** No it isn't. It's just contradiction.

**Mr. Vibrating:** No it isn't.

**Man:** It is!

**Mr. Vibrating:** It is not.

**Man:** Look, you just contradicted me.

**Mr. Vibrating:** I did not.

**Man:** Oh you did!!

**Man:** An argument isn't just contradiction.

**Mr. Vibrating:** It can be.

**Man:** No it can't. An argument is a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.

**Mr. Vibrating:** No it isn't.

**Man:** Yes it is! It's not just contradiction.

**Mr. Vibrating:** Look, if I argue with you, I must take up a contrary position.

**Man:** Yes, but that's not just saying 'No it isn't.'

**Mr. Vibrating:** Yes it is!

**Man:** No it isn't!

**Man:** Argument is an intellectual process. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of any statement the other person makes.

*(short pause)*



**Mr. Vibrating:** No it isn't.

**Man:** It is.

Debate and argument are one of the ways we sort “truth” from falsehood.

This process has evolved over centuries, and involves the use of logic.

- Jonathan Rauch, in the book *Kindly Inquisitors* calling this truthseeking process “Liberal Science.”

2 Rules of “Liberal Science” – acc. to Rauch

1. **No one is completely immune from error.**

No person, no matter who s/he is or how strongly s/he believes, is above possible correction. No one, and no belief, therefore, is above criticism.

2. **Any belief may be wrong; hence, no one can legitimately claim to have ended any discussion—ever.** In other words, no one gets the final say or gets to be the final authority on a subject.

Central to Liberal Science is the role of evidence, debate, discussion, and persuasion.

Liberal Science contrasts with the authoritarian system that dominated before it—in which kings, priests, and others with power decide what is true, and then insist that others must agree...or else.

In other words, Liberal Science means that:

- *Might does not make Right*

Intellectual advancement has traditionally progressed through disagreement and dissent, as the clash of competing views ensure that ideas survive because they are correct, not because they are popular

- Truth-finding is also not a democracy
- Truth unfolds according to evidence, not majority. We don't vote on truth

Ex.) 99.9% of astronomers and theologians once agreed that the sun revolved around the earth.

But then, of course, Galileo came along with evidence that proved without a doubt that they were all wrong.

This process is how discussions proceed, knowledge advances, and truth unfolds.

Adhering to liberal science and tolerating open debate is why our society has been incredibly creative, successful, and productive.

## 2 CRUCIAL ATTITUDES THAT ACCOMPANY LIBERAL SCIENCE

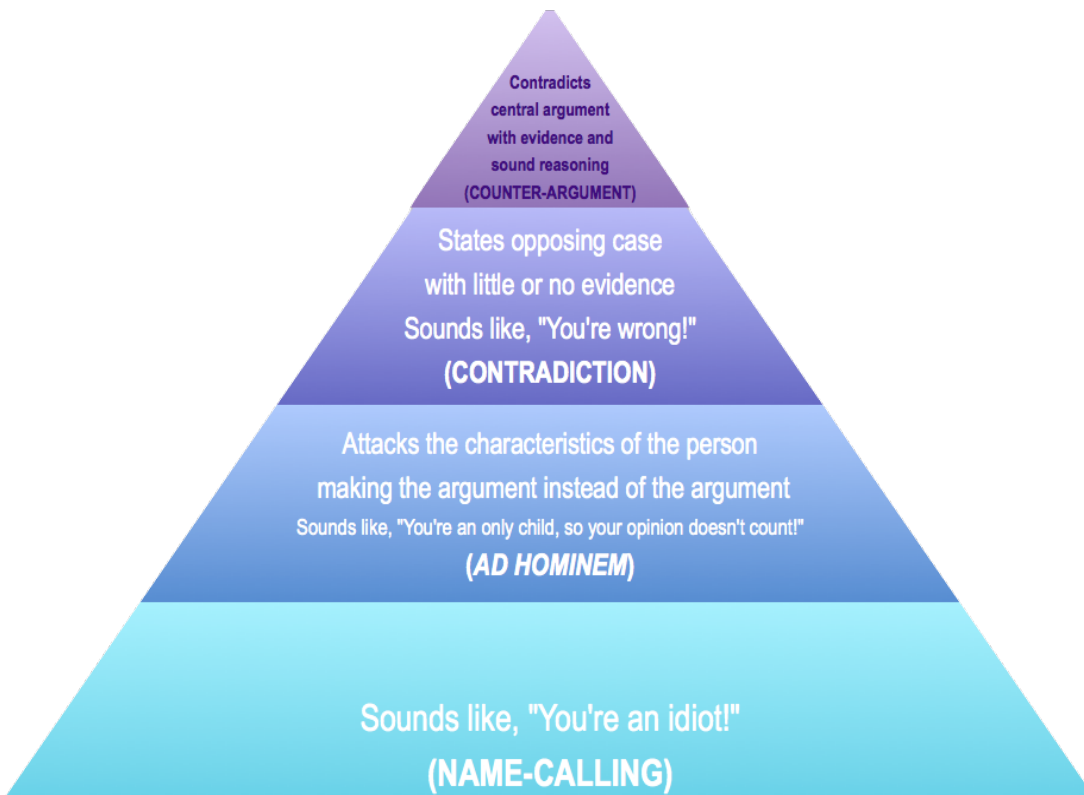
Humility (you might be wrong), and

Tolerance (the other person might be right.)

To learn more about logic and how to spot or avoid logical errors in an argument, search for examples of “logical fallacies.”

The more practice you get in subjecting your own arguments to criticism, the better you will get at identifying flaws or errors in others' arguments.

Remember that useful academic debate occurs at the level of counter-argument. Anything below this would be below the level of academic discourse or formal logic.



“Debate” and “argument” provide opportunities to develop your communication and persuasive skills, while refining your own views and correcting any errors in your reasoning. It is a welcome, productive academic exercise.

## VOCABULARY

Debate  
Argument  
Logic  
Connotation  
Clarify  
Clarification  
Fallacies  
Authoritarian  
Discourse