**Week 6: Lecture 1 - Ethical Standards in Argumentation and the Presentation of Ideas**

American pragmatist John Dewey believed that conflict is an ordinary trait of life, not a defect or a negative, antagonistic experience that we should try to avoid. By conflict, Dewey is referring to the infinite number of oppositional forces and concepts in our world and in our minds. For example, ‘personal versus national’ is a conflict, as is ‘easy versus difficult’, ‘hot versus cold’, ‘past versus future’, and so on. Conflict is not fighting, but the interface of a multitude of things naturally in opposition. These conflicts perpetually create new situations that we need to understand, process, and respond to. Our inquiry into these novel situations is essential, and what we learn from them is never absolute and always open to revision. Furthermore, how we respond to new situations also occurs in conflict. Our response to any situation is always a social response; it is never in isolation from others (whether those others are people, animals, or the physical universe).

Since most of those situations, therefore, involve social interaction, our responses to them are, at some level, informed and governed by morality. Ethics, Dewey suggests, describes our informed determination of how to respond to those novel, morally puzzling contexts – contexts that arise multiple times every day. Ethics, for Dewey, is about the everyday choices we make (from the seemingly mundane and insignificant to the life-altering, and highly consequential).

Okay, you don’t have to remember all of that! In fact, you might be wondering why a lecture about ethics would begin with Dewey, a man known primarily for his role in education theory. Put simply, the main reason Dewey serves as the entry point into this lecture about ethics is his view of the role of critical thinking and inquiry.

Critical inquiry essentially represents a ‘problem’; problems need solutions. This is the basis of all scientific investigation, of invention, of engineering, even of a lot of public policy.

Dewey recognized that critical inquiry is driven by the problems *conflicts* present. Dewey’s own concept of the ‘problem’ is complicated and a bit unclear, but basically it is a ‘disruption’. A disruption can be many things, including something we are not sure about and want to understand. Critical thinking (critical inquiry) is the process by which we solve that problem. Indeed, it is what you have been practicing throughout this course.

So…what does *ethics* have to do with this? Again, Dewey teaches us that, because problems or disruptions happen in a social context, our response – and our presentation of that response – are governed by morality, by ethics; they impact others. If we are making an argument – whether for a budget increase at work, or for a judgment in a criminal court, or to our parents about why we should have more freedom to do what we want – we need to be ethical.

This applies to your work as a student as well. Academic honesty and integrity are important dimensions of education for many reasons. We learned this as children: “Cheating is wrong!” That childhood lesson applies to all ages and all levels of education. It is unethical to have someone write an essay for you and pretend it is your own work; it is also unethical to present ideas and information from others without giving them proper credit. That’s one reason why we cite our sources in our papers and presentations - to acknowledge the hard work and intellectual property of others. That’s right, **plagiarism** (failing to acknowledge thoughts, ideas, and information from others), whether purposeful or not, is theft; it is also a violation of academic honesty.

It’s OK to be persuasive, whether that’s in a persuasive essay for class, in a speech at a public event, or in a conversation at home. But persuasion is not enough; we also have to be *ethical*…

Watch the following video; it makes some very clear connections to some of the content and concepts we’ve covered in this course already: <https://youtu.be/e_-O4m_0IqY>

Vasco Correia – the author of the *Ethics and Argumentation* article you were assigned to read this week – suggests that the rules and theories for argumentation are not sufficient for ensuring that our arguments – especially our persuasive arguments – will be correct, objective, or fair. Despite our efforts to avoid logical fallacies, adhere to logical construction, and establish solid premises, we may (and indeed we do) develop unsound arguments. Our reasoning, it is suggested, is not informed by logic and rationality alone, but also by emotion, internal bias, and subconscious motivations, each of which can distort our reason.

What? Just when we figured out all this stuff about inferences, premises, and conclusions, and explored models for analyzing and constructing arguments, and absorbed lists and lists of questions that we need to ask to make sure that what we write and present is accurate, and that what we hear and read is legitimate, now we have to wonder if emotion, bias, and shadowy motivations lurking in the depths of our grey-matter are messing that up?

That’s exactly right: “arguments may be correct from a logical and dialectic perspective and nonetheless “unfair”” (Correia, 225).

What is needed, Correia and others suggest, is ethical guidance in argumentation. Drury (2020) defines *argumentation ethics* as “Guidelines for moral conduct in argumentation” that “guide how arguers ought to generate and exchange arguments as moral members of a community” (47).  Alongside this, Drury also suggests that our approach to argumentation is important. Our “*argumentation stance*” consists of our attitudes and intentions toward one another, and the consequences of those attitudes and intentions. What we’ve learned in this course about argumentation (again, broadly defined as those everyday persuasive activities at home, at work, and so on) focused primarily on the ‘what’: what is our problem, what is our evidence, what is our logic… Argumentation ethics and the argumentation stance focus on the ‘how’: how we approach our question or problem, how we present it, how we research it…

Drury suggests a set of five ethical guidelines for argumentation and the presentation of ideas. The essence of each of these is highlighted below, but Drury (49-53) goes into far greater detail:

1. Honesty: accurate representation of information; candid and direct about intentions
2. Respect: treat receivers as equals; be sensitive to other cultures and perspectives; avoid discriminatory and exclusionary language; assume and acknowledge audience intelligence and competence.
3. Consistency: avoid self-contradiction; practice what you advocate for.
4. Accountability: try to avoid mistakes, but take responsibility; apologize and correct.
5. Courage: argue in the face of adversity; argue for what you know to be the right thing.

These guidelines are as applicable to debates and speeches as they are to project proposals, college papers, and everyday conversations. Any persuasive act should be governed by ethical standards. Remember, persuasion is not just persuasion, it’s *just* persuasion.

Reference

* Drury, J. P. M. (2020) Argumentation in everyday life. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

**Week 6: Lecture 2 - Objectivity, Neutrality, and Bias**

The previous lecture briefly mentioned the role bias can play in the construction of our arguments, and suggested that, because of our tendency to be influenced (subconsciously, at times) by internal biases, we need some set of ethical standards to help us argue and present with soundness, validity, and *fairness*.

In argumentation, objectivity is important. But is it possible? Being objective is not as easy as it might seem. This excellent Ted Talk by Lee Ross introduces the objectivity illusion and explores some of the challenges to our attempts at attaining objectivity:

“We can’t escape our own perspective.”

To be truly objective is to be detached, dispassionate, and totally unbiased. But we each evolve within our own contexts, and develop our own worldview influenced by our experiences, environments, abilities, limitations, values, norms, and so on.

Every argument we construct or analyze, every claim we propose and defend, every problem we attempt to solve is always bound within and influenced by…our*selves*. In a way, it is fair to say that *we* are *why* we employ the tools of reason, logic, and argumentation. It is equally fair to say that *we* are also the*source* of our logical fallacies, both willfully and unwittingly. So how can we move toward objectivity and neutrality in our arguments? How do we guarantee that our persuasive acts will be ethical, will be just? The guidelines from the previous lecture are a good start.

Entrepreneur, investor, and startup enthusiast John Rampton addresses a variety of cognitive biases that impact our decision-making and action, and provides a number of valuable resources for managing our personal cognitive biases in the workplace. Check out his article here and see what you think: Rampton, J. (2020). [7 Ways to Remove Biases From Your Decision-Making Process.Links to an external site.](https://www.entrepreneur.com/living/7-ways-to-remove-biases-from-your-decision-making-process/351497) *Entrepreneur.*

You might have noticed that most of what Rampton offers as suggestions for identifying and addressing our cognitive biases is rooted in critical questions directed at the self. This is critical self-awareness; critical thinking is directed internally onto the self.

How might you apply critical self-reflection in your work, or at home? What questions could you ask yourself to help you identify your own cognitive biases, and to help you construct sound, ethical persuasive arguments and make ethical decisions?