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## Reflections on the Limits of Argument

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An item comes up for discussion at a meeting. You and a few others have strong arguments on your side of the question: you know you are right. The rest of the people there seem to be decent, well-meaning and intelligent. But your case makes no impact; you are overwhelmingly defeated. For many people, and particularly for many leftist academics, this is a familiar experience. What do you conclude? That your case isn't strong after all? That you should have put it more effectively? That your impression of decency and intelligence was mistaken? Or that you have overestimated the power of argument?<sup>1</sup>

On a wider political scale, this kind of experience is usually magnified. Leave aside for the moment those ideas for which there are long-standing, powerful arguments but where counter-arguments are still plausible: socialism, basic income, participatory democracy, even climate change. There are other cases where the consensus is entirely on the wrong side of the argument, for example the belief that equal opportunity is possible in very unequal societies. The case against that belief is unassailable, but it remains stubbornly in place. What keeps it in place is clearly not the arguments on its behalf.<sup>2</sup>

If we turn our attention to how beliefs change, it is far from obvious that they move by means of argument. For example, in most western societies there has been a substantial shift in people's beliefs about gender over the past forty years (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004), even if we are still a long way from gender equality. I think one would be hard pressed to maintain that these changes were brought about simply because feminists came up with some good new arguments. For, first of all, it's not as though we didn't have any good arguments for equality before the 1960s, even if the arguments shifted in character and sophistication. And, secondly, if it really were a matter of argument, why wouldn't there have been more of a change, and a more secure one? Any account of social change that is even minimally informed sociologically has to recognise that there is a lot more to it than the availability of some good arguments. On the contrary, the arguments themselves seem to be stimulated by broader social changes that open people up to new ways of thinking and acting (ibid.).

It is in fact a truism that the determinants of belief extend well beyond argument. We take it for granted that people who are brought up as Christians tend to remain Christians, while those brought up as Muslims tend to remain Muslims. It is common knowledge that people's beliefs initially

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jurgen De Wispelaere, Axel Gosseries and Yannick Vanderborght for suggestions about this paper.

<sup>2</sup> There is a body of academic literature about the precise relationship between economic inequality and inequality of opportunity, as measured by social mobility (for a recent overview see Torche 2005: 425-27), but all of this is premised on data showing that 'in all modern societies, significant associations between class of origin and class of destination prevail' (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002: 36).

depend on what their parents believe and continue to be influenced by the emotional impact of the parent-child relationship (cf. Cohen 2000: ch. 1). Political beliefs are strongly influenced by people's social networks (see, for example, Kenny 1994). People tend to be biased towards arguments and evidence that confirms their beliefs and to ignore arguments to the contrary (Nickerson 1998). The power of rhetoric and artistry more generally to influence belief has always been recognised; the power of images, music, fiction, film and personal narrative is undeniable (McGuigan 2005; Walzer 1999). More generally, it is a fundamental presupposition of political psychology and political sociology that political beliefs are determined by a wide range of factors (Cottam et al. 2010; Weakliem 2003). None of this suggests that people don't change their beliefs: it simply reminds us that the causes of those changes are wide-ranging. Just having a good argument is a pretty small part of the picture.

Even among political theorists, I often wonder (and not just about other people) whether how convincing we find particular authors is based on their arguments, as distinct from strictly 'extraneous' considerations like whether we are drawn to them as people, whether we see them as political or intellectual allies, and our aesthetic reaction to their style. How these biases may express themselves could be that we give some authors a sympathetic reading but make no such concession to their critics. We laugh at their jibes about their opponents but take offence when the tables are turned. Professional political theory is shaped a lot more by personality, emotion and political loyalties than many of us would care to admit.

In the rest of this paper, I want to reflect on some of the implications of these commonplace observations for the work of political theorists. Although the issues have a general import, and in particular raise serious questions about the plausibility of certain types of consensual approaches to theories of justice (e.g. Nussbaum 2000; Rawls 1993) and of models of deliberative democracy (e.g. Bohman 1998; Habermas 1996), I shall focus on arguments about equality. In terms of the broad distinction between the arguments we address against our opponents and those we enter into with our allies – a distinction illustrated by, respectively, Cohen's refutation of Nozick (Cohen 1995) and his discussion of rich egalitarians (Cohen 2000: ch. 10) – my interest is in the former: in the power of argument to change people's general political orientations. My aim here is not to demonstrate that political argument has limited power – that much is obvious – but to reflect on the implications of that fact for the practice of political theorists.

Political theorists make a living by arguing, and by teaching students to argue. So these familiar facts about the limits of argument raise an acute personal question, particularly if we hope, by means of these efforts, to contribute to egalitarian change. Is all of that arguing a waste of time? If you want to change the world, is argument really where the action is? If you're an egalitarian, why are you devoting your life to *arguing*?

One response might be to distinguish between different kinds of justification. The suggestion might be that what's problematic are the more 'moral', 'philosophical' or 'ideological' forms of argument that political theorists typically make, where there are no hard edges and there's a lot of appeal to intuitive responses. What really cuts the mustard, on this view, is solid empirical evidence. You may not be able to convince people that equality is intrinsically just, but you can show, as Wilkinson and Pickett do in *The Spirit Level*, that societies with greater equality of income have, on the whole, higher levels of health and life expectancy, better educational attainment for all sectors of society,

stronger feelings of trust and greater social mobility (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). If we observe, however, how eagerly the opponents of equality have embraced the dubious criticisms of Wilkinson and Pickett's case,<sup>3</sup> we encounter a familiar pattern of people believing what they want to believe, and believing that there are good grounds for it in the bargain. So the problem does not seem to lie in anything special about the kind of work that most political theorists do.

Another possible response is to distinguish between different audiences. One might concede that arguments play a minor role in the determinants of mass public opinion but insist that they carry more weight in other settings, for example in shaping 'elite' opinion (think *The Guardian* and *New York Review of Books*). What seems to be striking in these cases, however, is the segmentation of the elites in question. Each political tendency has their own channels of communication and commentary, through which their broadly shared outlook is articulated and refined.<sup>4</sup> The arguments internal to the tendency are limited in scope; the arguments they advance against their opponents reinforce shared views rather than winning new adherents. So elite-focused argument may shape the views of one's own 'elite' without doing much to change public opinion generally. And in any case, shouldn't democratic, egalitarian activists be ashamed to confine their arguments to political elites?

#### Argument and confidence

At the centre of the issue, I think, are relationships between argument, belief and action. Whatever we think about the importance of argument, beliefs are absolutely essential to how people understand the world, how they evaluate themselves and others, and how they act. If we want political change, we do need people to believe things that support action for change. That, I take it, is why we place such importance on argument as a way of inducing these beliefs. If argument *doesn't* change people's beliefs – if they are, in fact, determined much more by other influences – why bother?

As Wittgenstein pointed out, many of our beliefs are held without justification, and without any felt need for it (Wittgenstein 1969; 2009, sec. 217). We are so confident about their truth that the question of justification simply does not arise. For most of them, a justification could easily be constructed, but it wouldn't necessarily make the belief any more certain. These are typically, I think, beliefs that are never challenged, at least not by anyone whose opinions matter (to us). But once somebody who does count with you challenges your beliefs, you reach for justifications – a reaction that teachers of political theory, among others, rely upon in the classroom. If the challenge is for real – if it is not just an intellectual exercise – it can undermine your confidence, until you find a good reason for your original belief. Here the function of justification, of argument, is not to induce or change beliefs but to restore confidence. Certainty is re-established, anxiety banished.

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<sup>3</sup> For references and replies, see <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/other/response-to-questions> (accessed 18/4/2011).

<sup>4</sup> See for example the evidence of voting intention by newspaper readership at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2476/Voting-by-Newspaper-Readership-19922010> (accessed 18/4/2011). In any case, the suggestion that 'elites' are more open to argument than others is highly questionable.

I'd like to suggest that political argument often has this character – that it bolsters the confidence of those who already believe something, in a world where those beliefs are constantly under attack. We may already be sure that prisoners shouldn't be tortured, that incomes should be more equal, that men should do more child care, but it reassures us, increases our confidence, gives us strength, to be reminded that there are good arguments for all of these beliefs. Exchanging those arguments among us helps us bond, builds solidarity, strengthens our collective confidence, makes us readier to fight the good fight, to bear the disappointments and to maintain hope. When we switch on the TV to listen to a public debate, when we stay on to hear the speeches at a political rally, when we read the opinion columns of our chosen newspaper, it may well be primarily for the sake of bolstering our confidence in what we already believe, rather than any kind of exercise in reopening the question.

This perspective on political argument casts a different light on the idea of 'preaching to the converted', with its implication of pointlessness. It suggests, on the contrary, that preaching to the converted is in fact an important function of argument. It has similarities to religious ritual, though it is not necessarily so ritualistic: new arguments are to be welcomed among the more familiar ones because they reinforce the case. If the new arguments are designed to defeat novel arguments on the opposing side, they are all the more valuable – not because we were in danger of being won over by those opposing arguments, but because they chip away at the confidence with which we hold our own views.

This aspect of political argument also helps to make sense of the limited impact of our arguments on our political opponents, because it reminds us that all the while that we are putting the case for some egalitarian belief, there are people who are putting the case for the opposite with just as much vigour, reinforcing their allies' confidence in their own beliefs. Nor is it surprising that anti-egalitarian arguments should have so much more purchase with them than our own, since they are more familiar, cohere more with their other views, are put forward by people for whom they have more respect, and are expressed in a style that they find more agreeable.

The confidence-boosting function of political argument seems to generate a recognisable kind of tension between a third-party account of what's going on and the first-person account. The observation that arguments tend to work only with people who are already on-side, and correlatively that their confidence in their own beliefs is complemented by their disposition to ignore and dismiss counterarguments, raises questions about the status of one's own beliefs and of the arguments that one sees as supporting them. And yet, as a human agent, you have no choice but to seek out the best arguments for competing answers to the questions that matter most to you. You cannot treat your own beliefs with the same scepticism with which you treat those of others. You can of course acknowledge the possibility that you are mistaken, but you cannot systematically discount your confidence in your own beliefs on account of a general theory that good reasons are not the only thing that attaches you to them. You can only treat that theory as raising questions that need to be considered in the course of coming to your own best judgement of the truth. So each of us must continue to construct and evaluate arguments for ourselves as though they really do matter. We all have a first-person case for seeking good arguments, regardless of the degree to which they can change the views of others.

And so, to say that arguments are more likely to strengthen the resolve of existing believers than to convert the heathens is not to say that they are merely ideological in character, in the sense of

'ideological' that means they are a cover for something else like class interest. On the contrary, their function depends on taking arguments seriously. It is only by presuming that one's commitment should be to the claim with the best justification that an argument purporting to provide the best justification can function to strengthen one's commitment. So to say that argument is more important for maintaining confidence than for convincing others is not to say that arguing is unimportant or disingenuous or that the truth doesn't matter.

For egalitarian political theorists, the idea that our arguments do more to strengthen resolve than to change opinion is likely to seem deflationary. We would like to think that producing good arguments will help to win adherents to our deeply-held beliefs, and so, at least if we bother to write for a general audience rather than simply for an academic one, we imagine ourselves addressing decent citizens who are capable of being swayed by the power of good reasons. But even if our arguments served no other function than the one I am ascribing to them, it would remain a very important one. Political change in democratic countries only occurs when a large number of people do feel confident that change is both desirable and possible. If we can contribute to change by strengthening that confidence, it is a contribution well worth making.

Nevertheless, this perspective on the role of argument should also make us think about where political theorists fit into wider patterns of social and political change. We should see ourselves as members of broad social movements to which people are drawn by a variety of influences, most of which operate through personal experience rather than through argument. That experiential route is far from irrational, because it always involves a process of making sense of the world as it changes and as those changes affect each person. In times of political and economic upheaval, it can be a route taken by millions of people for whom old ways of thinking cease to make sense. Argument and analysis can contribute to understandings that are already shifting, and can help to give them greater coherence. But these journeys occur in the heart and not just the head. When we offer strong arguments to social movements, we do so neither as leaders nor as under-labourers, but as confederates, as activists who have a specific part to play in the process of social change. And if my reflections here are accurate, then the arguments we advance can operate not just at the level of understanding, but at the level of emotion and willpower as well.

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