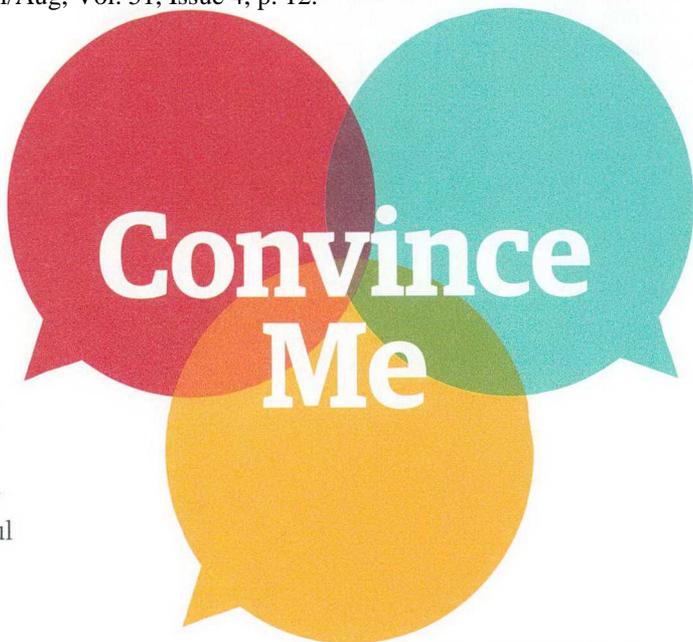


# INsights

## ARGUMENTS

**WALTER SINNOTT-ARMSTRONG** likes arguing, and he wants everyone else to like it, too. But there is a difference between thoughtful debate and self-interested point scoring, and which one we choose in the moment may have ripple effects on our personal lives and the culture at large. In his new book, *Think Again*, the Duke University professor of practical ethics explains why (and how) we should strive to present careful justifications for the views that matter to us—not to “win” but to learn. —**MATT HUSTON**



**WHAT'S WRONG WITH HOW WE THINK ABOUT ARGUMENTS?** Many view them as fights or competitions. You might win a fight, but you're still bloodied. Some arguments are like that: People yell and call each other names, and both end up worse off. If we instead listen carefully and charitably to the other side's arguments, we can better understand the reasons for their position, which can lead to more fruitful compromise.

**HOW MIGHT SUCH AN APPROACH PLAY OUT?** Some want to raise the minimum wage to \$15.

You might think people who oppose that are just selfish. But if they say they're worried it would reduce work for people in minimum-wage jobs, and you take them seriously, you'll want to find out whether that's true. If it is, then maybe you'll still support an increase, but over time, or with simultaneous increases in unemployment benefits.

**WHAT CONDITIONS SUPPORT A FRIENDLY ARGUMENT?** Harvard legal scholar Cass Sunstein found that if extremists on climate change are

given data supporting the opposing side, it only makes their views more extreme—but that people in the middle respond to evidence. So you have to pick whom you're going to talk to, or at least the issues you're going to talk about with them. If you want to get to know somebody whose politics are different from yours, talking about an issue on which that person is a moderate can get you into a constructive discussion. Simply asking others for their reasons and giving your own is a signal that you consider them rational and worth listening to.

**WHY DO PEOPLE OFTEN HESITATE TO ADMIT THAT AN OPPONENT HAS A POINT?** It may simply be due to concern that those who are listening might think they're unintelligent or uninformed. But there are other motivations as well. Having to admit that your position is too extreme can require you to make it more complicated, and then you might worry about whether you'll be able to state it properly or even remember all of the qualifications. Complexity and subtlety come with an added cost.

## A RECIPE FOR BS

**HABITUAL PURVEYORS OF** bull have little or no regard for evidence: They just repeat what sounds convincing. Yet many of us, at some point or another, will speak up about a subject with little regard for our actual knowledge of it. Research by psychologist John Petrocelli at Wake Forest University illuminates the factors that could make us more likely to do so.

In two studies, participants were asked to type out their thoughts about either the behavior of a fictional political candidate or policies

such as capital punishment and affirmative action. Afterward, they rated how much they had been concerned with evidence for their opinions when they offered them—which, along with the number of thoughts they had given, was used to gauge the degree to which they had engaged in BS.

The respondents tended to show less concern for the evidence when they were required to provide an opinion than when they were told they did not have to do so. And BS-ing was less likely when they were advised that a knowledgeable reader—someone who knew the candidate well or who was an expert on the policy topics—would be assessing their opinions. “People often think that if they can come up with an argument, that’s evidence,” Petrocelli says. But his findings suggest that when we’re in the room (or exchanging comments online) with someone who’s equipped to call us out, we may think more critically about what we really know.

—ALEXANDER BLUM

