

Gadflies, Midwives, and Argumentation

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on defending the claim that contemporary philosophy deals inadequately with issues of public concern. Beginning with an Aristotelian distinction between dialectical and rhetorical argument, I argue that philosophers have come to view the former as the only acceptable approach while unduly condemning the latter. I contend that this is a mistake, and that stereotypically deceptive rhetoric is not representative of all rhetorical argumentation. I argue further that dialectical argument succumbs to an effectiveness problem concerning audience uptake and shows great disrespect for the lived experience of audience members. I show this through analysis of two paradigm arguments in moral philosophy: Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" and Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Finally, I argue that philosophers dealing with issues of public concern ought to empathize with audiences to construct arguments which better address the reasons that real people take such issues to be important.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Chapter I: Introduction	5
1.1. Argument in Philosophy.....	5
Chapter II: Aristotle and Two Kinds of Argument	11
2.1. Dialectical Argument.....	11
2.2. Rhetorical Argument.....	17
2.3. Rhetorical Argument in Academic Philosophy.....	34
Chapter III: The Importance of Audience	40
3.1. The Audience Factor.....	40
3.2. Two Problems with Dialectical Argument.....	44
3.3. A Defense of Abortion.....	50
3.4. Famine, Affluence, and Morality.....	61
Chapter IV: Empathy and Argumentation	72
4.1. A Suggested Solution.....	72
4.2. Empathetic Argument.....	75
Chapter V: Conclusion	96
Bibliography	105

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1. Argument in Philosophy

Argument is a powerful form of communication found almost everywhere in academic, intellectual, and popular culture. Politicians in favour of increased gun control cite the disturbing frequency and devastating consequences of shooting sprees as good reasons for limiting the access of individuals to firearms. Archaeologists appeal to evidence gathered through processes such as radioactive carbon dating in order to establish that a given fossil discovery can be dated to the Jurassic Period as opposed to the Cretaceous. When a university increases tuition costs, administrators offer the increased ability to provide services and quality educational opportunities for students as justification for having done so. Proponents of all sorts of positions regularly strive to have us believe that theirs is the position we ought to accept and act upon. In each case, advocates for a position make use of argument. They offer reasons and evidence which purport to justify their claims. No matter who one is, they have surely been exposed to argument on a constant basis in their everyday lives.

In philosophy, though, argument is something more. Argument does not just play *a* role in philosophy, it is *the* central component of the discipline and the main method of inquiry employed by the philosopher. As Robert Martin puts it, philosophers rely on argument so significantly because it is the main method by which we test the value of our beliefs.¹ Unlike scientists, philosophers do not work in laboratories or conduct experiments. As such, argument has become the laboratory of the philosopher.² In

¹ Robert M. Martin, *For the Sake of Argument: How to do Philosophy* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2017), 12.

² *Ibid.*

offering arguments to others, philosophers intend that they might think more deeply about their own beliefs and assumptions, and about whether they are beliefs and assumptions worth holding. Though we may use *thought* experiments in order to motivate deeper thinking, philosophers do not develop empirical evidence of our own. Argument allows the philosopher to draw important and meaningful conclusions, make sense of curious facts, implore others to set a high standard for their willingness to believe, and advocate for positions in a manner that they believe any given person ought to accept.

The goal of a philosophy professor is to teach students to think like a philosopher. In order to think like a philosopher, one must come to have an intimate understanding of argument, both good and bad. While other academics and the general public employ argument, they have merely picked up on it over time. Both groups have only a basic acquaintance with argument, focusing almost entirely on the content of arguments and far less so on their structure. Further, when it comes to other academics, a deep understanding of how argument works is not part of their fundamental training. Though historians, for example, make and examine arguments, there is no amount of time taken in history courses to teach students about argument as a method of inquiry.

Philosophers, by comparison, are trained in the proper use of argument, in accordance with a rigorous set of rules, from their very first exposure to the discipline. Would-be philosophy students are immediately taught to appreciate how philosophical argument works so that they may be prepared for the breadth of topics discussed as they become further involved in the discipline. Philosophers are interested in the structure of any given argument at least as much as they are its content. Because of this, students have

instilled in them a strict understanding of, and respect for, logical validity as the chief method by which the value of an argument is judged. They are taught to examine arguments closely for logical errors and to avoid these same errors in constructing arguments of their own.

Properly understood, all argument aims at persuasion. When philosophers offer arguments, they do so with the hope that those exposed to them will accept that the position advocated for is one they ought to hold as well.³ Unlike most arguers, though, philosophers have the advantage of intimately understanding logic and the structure of good arguments. Philosophers attempt to construct arguments using the best reasons they have in favour of the conclusion that they wish their audience to accept. They are guided in this process by their mastery of argument. In contemporary academic philosophy, however, what counts as a good reason is limited to those reasons that the perfectly rational audience would accept. These reasons are those which ought to be accepted by anyone, regardless of the experiences that they have had which make their lives unique and affect the manner in which they analyze and judge arguments. Reasons which do not fit into this category are considered unacceptable. To employ such reasons, according to the philosophical community, is to engage in the wrong kind of persuasion.

The philosophical conception of argument is challenged, however, by a group of scholars known as “argumentation theorists.” Argumentation Theory is a diverse field of study which draws upon such disciplines as philosophy, linguistics, social psychology, rhetoric, communication theory, and discourse analysis.⁴ According to contemporary

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Michael A. Gilbert, *Arguing with People* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2014), 14.

Argumentation Theory, argument is a far broader enterprise than philosophers recognize. Arguments, from this point of view, are not just abstract constructs which offer reasons in support of a conclusion. This is just one of many ways in which argument can be employed. From this perspective, argument can also be used to establish agreement, instill emotion, or cause people to behave in a particular manner. Michael Gilbert, a philosopher and leading scholar in this field, describes argument as a process which is fundamentally social and characterized by a multitude of aspects.⁵ Some of these aspects, he says, are linear and logical (in keeping with the traditional philosophical conception) but others fall outside of these categories.⁶ Argumentation Theory, he says, “focuses on argument as it takes place between *real people in real situations*.”⁷ This sits in stark contrast to the manner in which Philosophy and Critical Thinking courses cover arguments as abstract constructions best understood as almost mathematical in nature.

In this thesis, I intend to argue that there is something valuable to be taken from the broader conception of argument proposed by argumentation theorists and that it really is the case, as Argumentation Theory holds, that the traditional philosophical approach to argument is too narrow. I believe that Argumentation Theory presents a strong challenge to the traditional conception, giving good reason to believe that such an approach is ineffective. The traditional philosophical conception of argument, I contend, is indeed too narrow. This conception privileges an incredibly specific sort of audience and, as such, is ineffective for a significant group of individuals who make up larger public audiences.

⁵ “Argumentation Theory,” Michael A. Gilbert, A World of Many Facets, York University, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://gilbert.info.yorku.ca/argumentation-theory/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gilbert, *Arguing with People*, 14.

Approaching argument from the broader conception offered by argumentation theorists, however, allows us to take a much more diverse range of audiences into account. On this approach, we can offer arguments which will effectively persuade these audiences. Such arguments will offer respect for the fact that audience members are situated individuals, characterized by lived experience, whose judgements may admit of non-rational factors. That is, we can offer arguments that speak to actual people rather than the philosophically-inclined alone. Approaching argument in this manner, I will argue, is consistent with a position initially advocated for by Aristotle, which has either been forgotten, or undervalued by subsequent scholars.

I will further argue that, on this approach, empathy is among the most important tools available to arguers when it comes to the construction of arguments. Coming to a deep understanding of the positions of those who comprise particular audiences is of the utmost importance when constructing arguments that are meant to speak to them. Empathizing with others can provide us with insight concerning not just what their reaction will be to the positions for which philosophers might advocate. We can learn also *why* they feel as they do about such positions and what it is about the issue at hand that they consider to be important. This understanding of others, I contend, can be an incredibly helpful tool in constructing the most effectively persuasive and respectful arguments possible.

Finally, I will offer an alternative interpretation of Plato, within which Socrates appears to engage with his audience in this broader manner to at least some extent. While he is well-known as a gadfly, I contend that it is the side of Socrates that is akin to a midwife on which we should focus. Rather than the man who irritated those around him

to the point of his own death, this Socrates is a more attentive and aware educator. From this perspective, Socrates did not just engage in philosophical discussion with others to show them the faults in their thinking. He did so to help them think more deeply about certain issues, and develop meaningful understanding as a result, while constantly maintaining an awareness of their emotional state. While contemporary philosophers are skilled at embodying the gadfly, I argue, they do not properly balance it against the role of the midwife, as Socrates did.

Chapter II: Aristotle and Two Kinds of Argument

2.1. Dialectical Argument

Aristotle was the first philosopher to analyze the nature of argument and, thus, the earliest argumentation theorist. While Socrates and Plato, among others, certainly made use of argument prior to Aristotle, his is the first thorough analysis into how argument is used and in what circumstances we ought to employ different sorts of argument. As such, Aristotle's analysis underlies a vast portion of the work done in Argumentation Theory. His work forms the basis upon which many subsequent authors have constructed positions concerning the way we ought to understand argument, as well as the manner in which it might be legitimately used.

Among the major contributions made to Argumentation Theory by Aristotle is the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric (or dialectical and rhetorical argument) in *On Rhetoric*. While Plato had previously written about the dangers of rhetorical argument in *Gorgias*, describing it as an immoral and irresponsible strategy concerned only with flattery and not with logic or truth, Aristotle's view here is decidedly more positive.⁸ In *On Rhetoric*, rhetorical argument is presented as a perfectly acceptable counterpart to dialectical argument. Properly understood, rhetorical argument could be used to great effect in attempts to persuade far more diverse audiences than dialectical argument would be capable of persuading.⁹

⁸ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed., trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1355a12-1355b14, 1356a7-1356b8.

For Aristotle, dialectical argument takes as its goal the discovery of truth, and it aims to accomplish this goal by way of logic and reason alone.¹⁰ Dialectical argument involves the presentation of premises intended to provide support for conclusions, and is often but not always, characterized by a back-and-forth discussion involving multiple parties. In such cases, individuals share their own argument in favour of a position with their fellow arguers, who subsequently offer critique in the form of counterarguments, objections, and accusations of logical error. While individual arguers often advocate for different points of view, their goal is that the view which best captures truth, whatever that view may be, will prevail in the end.¹¹

This process is not unlike a trial by ordeal. Rather than determine the guilt or innocence of the accused by their ability (or failure) to survive great dangers, philosophers determine the merit of arguments by whether they stand up to the strongest criticisms. When all is said and done, that argument which best stands up to criticism among alternatives is the one that ought to be provisionally accepted. Arguments that are unable to stand up to this criticism are expected to be revised in such a way as to deal with their faults, and perhaps be discussed later, or if revision of this sort is impossible, abandoned entirely.¹²

In his translation of Aristotle's work, George Kennedy offers a description of the process by which this sort of argument occurs. Dialectical argument, he says, begins with the statement of a thesis (e.g. "Might makes right") by one party, followed by some other

¹⁰ Michael A. Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 4; Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 28.

¹¹ Martin, *For the Sake of Argument*, 11.

¹² Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 3.

party's attempting to refute that thesis by asking "yes" or "no" questions. Successful refutation of a thesis involves the original party being led to accept a contradiction or logical impossibility resulting from their answers to these questions. It remains possible, however, that one could offer a defense through further argument which might allow them to avoid logical errors, thus "winning" the argument.¹³

This description fits the structure of Platonic dialogues. Socrates would find himself in conversation with an individual or group discussing the true meaning of abstract concepts like justice. A suggestion as to the definition of justice might be made by one of Socrates' partners in conversation, at which point Socrates would ask prompting questions that tended to lead to the discovery of a contradiction. Polemarchus, for example, suggested that justice should be understood as defined by Simonides: giving to each person what they are owed.¹⁴

In response to Polemarchus, Socrates asks whether one ought to return a weapon to a man who initially gave it to them for safe-keeping. Is the man *owed* the return of his weapon? Polemarchus agrees without hesitation, but Socrates immediately points out that this leads him to accept a contradiction. If one must return the weapon to its owner, but the owner intends to do wrong with it, then it seems that to give this man what he is owed would be unjust.¹⁵ This process continues, with Polemarchus and others offering amended, or entirely different, definitions of justice to be put to the test by Socrates' questions. They attempt to offer defenses through further argument, but as is usually the case in discussion with Socrates, no conclusion emerges as the clear answer.

¹³ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 28.

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, 331e-332a.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 332a-b.

While Kennedy's characterization is an accurate description of philosophy as it occurred in Ancient Greece, it does not account for the vast array of other circumstances in which dialectical argument can also occur. It is not the case that dialectical argument is possible only in a face-to-face setting or in direct conversation with others. Indeed, dialectical argument can occur entirely in the writing of a single individual. A paper in which one adequately portrays both arguments for their own position, as well as arguments and objections which may be offered by imagined interlocutors, is indeed an instance of dialectical argument.

Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" is an excellent example of exactly this approach. Thomson's is a particularly strong example because she begins by offering the argument of her opponent before offering a counterargument which seems to show that the initial argument ought not to be accepted. Those against abortion, she says, often present the following argument, or some version of it:

1. Fetuses are persons from the moment of conception.
2. Every person has a right to life.
3. While a potential mother may have a right to decide what happens with her body, this is outweighed by a fetus' right to life.
4. Therefore, abortion is impermissible; fetuses cannot be aborted.¹⁶

According to Thomson, however, this argument is flawed. Even if one grants the controversial first premise, she says, the third premise is simply untrue. Thomson claims to show that this is the case by invoking a thought experiment in which an individual finds themselves attached to a famous violinist for a period of at least nine months. This

¹⁶ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 47-48, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265091>.

is supposed to allow the violinist to survive some otherwise terminal illness. The suggestion that one could not refuse to continue being attached to the violinist, Thomson argues, is absurd. Bodily autonomy, she believes, trumps the violinist's right to life.¹⁷

Thus, Thomson offers a counterargument:

1. Fetuses are persons from the moment of conception.
2. Every person has a right to life.
3. But, a fetus' right to life does not outweigh a potential mother's right to bodily autonomy.
4. Therefore, abortion is not impermissible on the basis that fetuses are persons.¹⁸

While I will deal more thoroughly with Thomson's argument in due course, what is important to note at this point is that both her argument, and the argument she attributes to those against abortion are paradigm examples of dialectical argument. Each is purely logical in form; despite discussing an issue in which one could employ graphic and emotive examples and language, neither does. All relevant information is presented in a matter-of-fact way and neither attempts to move beyond that which is firmly rooted in logic and reason.

More than this, Thomson's article is an example of the dialectical process at work in a manner decidedly lacking in immediate, face-to-face discourse. Thomson presents the argument of her *imagined* opponent before offering her own counterargument. As the article continues, she presents, and subsequently addresses, potential objections to her own argument. This all occurs on paper in much the same way that it might occur in direct discussion with a fellow philosopher or academic. Thomson's article is one that

¹⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

precisely follows the process of dialectical argument in the current tradition, as understood by Aristotle and philosophers generally. Further, Thomson has imagined an audience at whom her arguments are directed. This is an audience composed only of perfectly rational actors. Because Thomson captures the dialectical process in a manner lacking in direct interaction beyond the imagined interlocutor, I contend that Kennedy's characterization of dialectical argument should be seen as most applicable to Ancient Greek philosophy but somewhat narrow as it concerns the contemporary practices of philosophy.

Individual arguments, like the example of Thomson's above, are the primary focus of the philosopher. That is, philosophers consider only the written or spoken series of premises offered in support of a conclusion to be important. When analyzing the success or failure of any given argument on this approach, one must only consider the extent to which that argument itself adheres to certain logical rules. Is the argument valid? Do the premises which are intended to support the conclusion actually do so, and if they do, how much support do they offer? Is it the case that the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion, or is this an argument to a probable conclusion? Are the premises, in fact, true or likely true? These are the questions one should be asking herself, according to the dialectician, when attempting to determine the merit of any given dialectical argument. Taking any more than this into account is to go beyond logic and reason. It should not matter, for example, who happens to be offering a particular argument; the argument ought to stand on its own merits. A sound argument just is a proper one whether offered by an esteemed philosopher, a first-year student, or a reviled dictator. Nor should it matter to whom arguments are offered. If one is confronted with a

sound argument which contradicts their beliefs, the dialectician holds that they ought to accept that argument as if by logical compulsion.

2.2. Rhetorical Argument

Rhetorical argument, by contrast, does not take the discovery of truth to be its chief goal, nor does it limit itself to the use of logic and reason alone. Instead, rhetorical arguments are constructed in such a way as to persuade an audience to accept the position for which the arguer advocates. The best rhetorical arguer, for Aristotle, was not one who could successfully persuade any audience but the one who was able to see the available means of persuasion in all instances.¹⁹ Further, while Aristotle certainly intended that rhetorical argument would be grounded in truth (particularly in order to avoid its misuse), he also recognized that, presented in the straightforward manner of dialectical argument, truth would not be persuasive to all audiences.²⁰ For rhetorical argument, then, truth is *a* value but not *the* value in the manner that persuasion is. Indeed, for Aristotle, there is a distinction between that which is persuasive, and that which is only *apparently* persuasive. To be truly persuasive, an argument must be valid; invalid arguments delivered in a rhetorical manner are only apparently persuasive.²¹

While it is surely the case that dialectical argument aims to have individuals adopt particular positions as well, this is not its chief goal. Acceptance of positions, in dialectical argument, is merely a by-product of those positions being true. Dialecticians take for granted that we will, or at least ought to, accept positions grounded in sound

¹⁹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355b14-1355b1.

²⁰ Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 4; Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 14-5, 28.

²¹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355b14, note 28.

arguments. Assuming that there are no major problems with the argument, we *must* accept it. Once it is evident that an argument does, in fact, capture truth, the dialectician expects that those exposed to it will accept the relevant position.

With rhetorical argument, though, Aristotle recognized that the sorts of judgments we make when met with attempts at persuasion are not always entirely rational.²² Just because we might have knowledge of the truth, he says, does not mean that we can effectively persuade others to accept it on that basis alone.²³ Thus, to limit attempts at persuasion to logic and reason alone would be to ignore that strictly logical manoeuvres will not always be successful, and that a broader approach may be much more effective at persuading individuals to adopt positions grounded in truth.

Thus, rhetorical argument, for Aristotle, is to be used to persuade those who will not be persuaded by dialectical argument alone. When faced with an audience of well-educated individuals (particularly in philosophy), one might be perfectly capable of persuading them to accept that a given position is true purely on the basis of the argument put before them and its adherence to formal validity. When attempting to persuade a larger, public audience, however, this approach may not suffice. Not everyone is educated in such a way as to understand why logical validity ought to result in their accepting some position, nor does everyone value logical structure as philosophers do. Indeed, it is important to recognize that many are simply uninterested in becoming so educated, or may find themselves in circumstances where they have never had the opportunity. Rather than hope for one's audience to be, or to become, the sort of people

²² Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 4; Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355b1-1356a7, 39 note 43.

²³ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355a12.

moved to belief by logical validity alone, Aristotle thought it appropriate to employ rhetorical argument in these instances.²⁴

There are, for Aristotle, three modes of persuasion open to the rhetorician. The first, *logos*, has to do with the exact sorts of arguments prized by dialecticians. These are arguments which are concerned exclusively with logic and reason. It is because of the continued inclusion of this mode in rhetorical argument that Aristotle referred to rhetorical argument as an offshoot of dialectical argument.²⁵ Rhetorical argument, in this sense, does not intend to replace dialectical argument with something entirely non-rational. Instead, it is intended to complement logical strength with an approach more likely to engage and persuade public audiences.

Rhetorical argument, then, includes, at the very least, similarly structured arguments as can be found in dialectical argument. Where it differs, however, is that it considers the way in which public audiences are composed of a broad range of people from all walks of life. Many of these people may lack education in, or be otherwise unfamiliar with, philosophy. As such, these audiences are likely to react quite differently than philosophers to the intricacies of logic. Keeping in mind that non-philosophical audiences may not be persuaded by the *exact* same sort of arguments that might be found in dialectical argument, Aristotle introduced the enthymeme as a part of rhetorical argument.²⁶

For Aristotle, the enthymeme was important in grounding rhetorical arguments in truth and in making truth approachable to public audiences. As compared to the

²⁴ Ibid., 1355a12, 1356b11-14, 42 note 55.

²⁵ Ibid., 1356a7.

²⁶ Ibid., 1356a7-1357a14, 42 note 55.

sylogisms characteristic of dialectical arguments, he says, enthymemes are often constructed with fewer premises leading to the same conclusions. According to Aristotle, this is the result of there being no need to explicitly state premises which might be seen as obvious and superfluous by members of the general public.²⁷ Aristotle offers an example of an appropriate time to leave premises implicit when offering arguments to public audiences, saying that “to show that Dorieus has won a contest with a crown it is enough to have said that he has won the Olympic games, and there is no need to add that the Olympic games have a crown as the prize; for everybody knows that.”²⁸ Aristotle intended, Kennedy says, to have rhetorical argument avoid the potentially negative outcomes of presenting dialectical argument to a public audience: their impatience with statements taken to be “given” in ordinary discourse (which they might take as undermining their intelligence) and the “tiresome pedantry” associated with intricate logic.²⁹

The second mode of persuasion, *ethos*, is concerned with the credibility of speakers. As Aristotle says, we are more likely to believe those who we consider to be trustworthy and knowledgeable when they claim that we ought to accept some position or other, and we will take their word concerning a broad range of topics.³⁰ Dialectical argument, it ought to be said, does deal with *ethos* insofar as it tells us to be wary of claims made by authority figures. We should not be moved to accept an argument merely

²⁷ Ibid., 1357a13.

²⁸ Ibid., 1357a13.

²⁹ Ibid., 42 note 55.

³⁰ Ibid., 1356a3-4.

because its proponent happens to be an authority of some sort.³¹ Rather, we must do our due diligence to determine whether the perceived authority figure is one who ought to be trusted on this matter.³² This warning is the extent to which *ethos* is dealt with by dialectical argument. The potential benefits of an arguer gaining the trust of her audience, and proving her knowledge about the matter at hand, are overlooked.

The final mode of persuasion, *pathos*, deals with the fact that all audiences experience emotion, and that such experiences can affect their judgments. This does not just pertain to the emotional reactions that a speaker may awaken in audience members as a result of their argument but to the way in which speakers must be cognizant of the emotional state of those they address.³³ Aristotle recognized that we do not react in the same manner to an argument when we are angry as we do when joyful or depressed.³⁴ Each person is situated within a very specific context of lived experienced and emotional states, and arguers must recognize this in order to give their arguments as strong a persuasive force as they are able. An arguer's ability to recognize the situated nature, and emotional state, of her audience, concerning the issues at hand, and the arguments she constructs in relation to them, is crucial to the process of persuasion.

Aristotle is quite right that it is sometimes the case that *just* the facts of the matter are not enough to persuade individuals to accept the positions that naturally follow from them. Take climate change, for example. Scientists tell us that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that climate change is a real and present danger. In order to avoid the

³¹ William Hughes and Jonathan Lavery, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction to the Basic Skills*, 7th ed. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2015), 131-133

³² *Ibid.*, 144-145.

³³ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, x, 15, 1378a8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1356a5.

most catastrophic dangers associated with climate change, it is imperative that as many people as possible believe it to be a major problem. The more people who accept this position, the more likely that greater efforts will be taken to protect the planet. While it is certainly the case that some individuals (most likely scientists and philosophers) will be persuaded to believe this by dialectical arguments alone, this is not the case for everyone. There are, indeed, many people to whom merely reporting the facts of the matter in dialectical form holds little weight. Even well-educated individuals, in disciplines not having to do with the science involved, may be unmoved by these sorts of arguments.

Polar bears serve as something of a poster child for the negative effects of climate change on both the planet and its inhabitants. Much work has been done to show that climate change has had a significantly negative effect on polar bears, with the threat of extinction becoming all too real.³⁵ Because the Arctic is warming at a rate much faster than other areas, the habitat of the polar bear has been dramatically altered. Sea ice is shrinking drastically and decreasing in thickness on an annual basis, at rates much faster than previously expected, with projections indicating that this will only get worse over time.³⁶ Polar bears depend heavily on sea ice to access their main sources of food, as well as for mating and travel purposes.³⁷ According to one scientific study, polar bears in the Western Hudson Bay area are already showing “declines in body condition, reproductive success, survival, and population abundance.”³⁸ The indication to this point is that these

³⁵ Andrew E. Derocher, "Climate Change: The Prospects for Polar Bears," *Nature* 468, no. 7326 (December 2010): 905-906, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1038/468905a>.

³⁶ Péter K. Molnár et al., "Predicting Survival, Reproduction and Abundance of Polar Bears under Climate Change," *Biological Conservation* 143, no. 7 (July 2010): 1613, accessed June 7, 2017, [10.1016/j.biocon.2010.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2010.04.004).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1613.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

declines are the result of increased difficulties in sourcing food, and prolonged periods of open-water travel while fasting.³⁹ Reports indicate that some polar bears have even resorted to cannibalism in order to make up for decreasing ability to hunt the prey they normally would.⁴⁰

Given this information, it is clear that a major and unfortunate change is occurring in the habitat of polar bears as a direct result of climate change. These facts, presented in a purely dialectical argument may, as I have said, be enough to persuade some individuals. But, for many, mere reports of the facts will not be enough to engage them. For these same people, however, there is a different and more powerful approach to presenting evidence which may be more effective. One can engage with and recognize the power that the emotions of one's audience have both when it comes to the judgments they make about arguments, and their willingness to accept them.

It is one thing to be told that polar bears have decreasing access to food, and that they starve as a result. It is another to be *shown* just how drastic the effects of climate change on these animals have been. It may indeed be more persuasive for this group not just to hear about the effects of climate change but to see actual examples of emaciated polar bears stranded on miniscule ice flow with nowhere to go. It might be more persuasive still to evoke feelings of sympathy for polar bears by connecting the dire situation in which they find themselves to the worries that people have about the well-being of their family and friends. Asking them to imagine what it would be like if people they care about were facing similar difficulties, in terms of finding food and shelter,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Bob Weber, "Starving Polar Bears Turn to Cannibalism," *Toronto Star*, November 28, 2009.

might lead audience members to recognize the significance of the situation. This approach is likely to affect an audience's judgment on the issue of climate change in a positive way and may increase their willingness to accept that this is a major problem worth doing something about.

It must further be made clear that Aristotle does not advocate just any sort of rhetorical argument. That an argument involves strategies which engage with *ethos* and *pathos* is not enough to say that it is an example of proper rhetorical argument. Indeed, just as dialectical argument can be valid or invalid, there are both acceptable and unacceptable rhetorical arguments. I believe, then, that rhetorical argument is best viewed on a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum, we could expect to find those arguments grounded in truth and factual evidence which aim to strengthen their persuasive force by recognizing the importance of (and thus employing) strategies which are, for example, evocative of emotion.

At the opposite end of this spectrum are those arguments which are examples of what might be called "stereotypical rhetoric." This is the sort of rhetorical argument that Aristotle would certainly have condemned. For those who employ this sort of argument, facts are seen as malleable or (if it is in the service of effective persuasion) are completely ignored. Those who partake in this sort of rhetorical argument ignore the importance that Aristotle placed on truth in attempts to persuade.⁴¹ Whereas truth is central to proper rhetorical argument on Aristotle's description, here it is only as valuable as it is useful in persuasion. If an audience would be more receptive to outright

⁴¹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355a12-1355b13.

falsehoods, then, rhetorical argument, on this end of the spectrum, would embrace deception.

Aristotle was certainly aware that this approach to rhetoric could be employed by those acting unjustly, and that it could result in great harm. It was his position, however, that this was no more a problem for rhetoric than for anything else which may be abused by those with ill intentions. For Aristotle, rhetorical argument was a morally neutral tool that could only be judged insofar as particular individuals chose to employ it justly or unjustly.⁴² One would be wrong to cast all rhetorical argument in a negative light on the basis that it might be misused by some arguers.

Perhaps the most obvious examples of stereotypical rhetorical argument come from speeches made by politicians. While it would not be accurate to paint all politicians with this broad brush, public opinion leans heavily toward the perception of politicians as “liars and cheats” who cannot be trusted. The stereotypical politician is a master of deceptive rhetoric. They are concerned only with manipulating audiences to accept their way of looking at things, so that they may subsequently win elections, come to power, and attempt to shape the world as they see fit. This sort of individual has no issue with deception so long as persuasion is more effective when they trade in falsehoods rather than in truth.

President Donald Trump is particularly guilty of employing rhetorical argument in this exact manner. It is not difficult to find a speech given by President Trump in which he offers purported evidence to justify a claim or action which is later found to have been heavily exaggerated, or altogether falsified. At the same time as *appearing* to be

⁴² Ibid., 1355b13.

grounding his claims in evidence, President Trump relies on appeals to *ethos* and *pathos* to seize the attention of those in his audience. This approach has allowed him to capture a fervent and unrelenting audience of supporters, despite his willingness to manipulate and deceive them at every turn.

Take, for example, the speech given by President Trump on June 1, 2017, within which he expressed his reasons for withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Accord. With this speech, President Trump's aim is to provide support for the view that withdrawal from the Paris Accord is the only acceptable solution on the basis that its terms are strongly biased against the welfare of the United States and its citizens. On a surface-level reading of President Trump's speech, he certainly does seem to offer arguments which engage with *logos*. He offers reasons concerning the outrageous expense that the Paris Accord imposes on the United States, and the potential for lost jobs as a result of continued compliance. Upon a closer analysis of the purported facts and figures offered by President Trump, though, deception is rampant.

One of President Trump's major points against compliance has to do with the allegedly unfair nature of The Paris Climate Accord. This agreement, he says, punishes and disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other nations, without imposing any meaningful obligations on those nations who are leaders in pollution.⁴³ As an example of a leading polluter, President Trump points to China, which he claims will be able to increase its emissions over the next 13 years with no repercussion. This is

⁴³ "President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord," FactCheck.org, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://transcripts.factcheck.org/president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>; Robert Farley, Eugene Kiely, Lori Robertson, and Vanessa Schipani, "FactChecking Trump's Climate Speech," FactCheck.org, last modified June 2, 2017, <http://www.factcheck.org/2017/06/factchecking-trumps-climate-speech/>.

simply incorrect. Not only has China pledged to *lower* its emissions over that 13-year period, it is on track to beat that target date and, thus, overachieve goals for reduction of CO₂ emissions.⁴⁴ President Trump would have his audience believe, though, that China wishes to increase its emissions as much as possible while making the United States subsidize the resulting environmental cost, and that many other nations have the same desire.

This is perfectly in line with a consistent claim made by President Trump throughout the speech. According to President Trump, the Paris Accord *imposes* particular obligations on the United States alone, effectively allowing other nations to run amok. The agreement is less about the climate, he argues, than it is about other countries gaining financial advantages over the United States. For example, the United States is not allowed to develop clean coal or build new coal plants, he says, while China and India will be allowed to substantially increase their coal production. President Trump claims that this is just another instance of outsourcing much-needed American jobs to foreign countries. Money that ought to be invested in the United States is being forcibly taken away by this unfair agreement.⁴⁵

Here too, President Trump is deceiving his audience. To claim that the Paris Accord imposes *anything* on the United States or any other country is patently false. There are no explicit bans on coal production in the United States, as President Trump claims.⁴⁶ Even if such regulations were included in the agreement, they would not be

⁴⁴ “President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord”; “FactChecking Trump.”

⁴⁵ “President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord,”; “FactChecking Trump.”

⁴⁶ “FactChecking Trump.”

binding in any way. This is because, as many analysts point out, the Paris Accord is voluntary in nature.⁴⁷ Even the nationally determined emissions cuts are merely suggested goals which are not strictly enforced. It is up to individual countries to set the goals they are comfortable with working toward, and which they consider realistic.⁴⁸ Again, though, President Trump wants his audience to believe that there is an outside force working to hold the United States down so that others may flourish. To withdraw from the Paris Accord is to escape the oppression of this force.

President Trump's purported evidence, and good reasons for withdrawal, are constantly bolstered by engagement with *ethos* and *pathos*. He attempts to situate himself as a trustworthy authority figure who is doing incredible things as president and, as such, ought to be trusted on this decision as well. He cites the rapid growth of the economy (over three trillion dollars in stock market value) that has occurred under his watch as well as the more than one million jobs created since his being elected.⁴⁹ To those unaware of the facts of the matter, this appears to be some indication that President Trump knows what he is doing and that there may be good reason to trust his most recent decision as well. Once again, though, his claims are less than accurate. As for job creation, President Trump's figure is exaggerated and his taking credit is erroneous. Just over 805,000 jobs were created in the United States between January and May 2017, and many of these are more accurately attributed to the Obama Administration.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

As it concerns *pathos*, President Trump expertly includes references to how much he *cares* about the American people as often as he possibly can. He *loves* American workers, he says, and refuses to accept the disadvantages that continued compliance with the *draconian* Paris Accord will force them to absorb.⁵¹ President Trump paints those who supposedly benefit from this unfair agreement as having been overjoyed by the United States' initial decision to join the Paris Accord and inflict upon itself a major economic wound. These countries, he says, “applauded when we signed the Paris Agreement — they went wild; they were so happy — for the simple reason that it put our country, the United States of America, which we all *love* [emphasis added], at a very, very big economic disadvantage.”⁵² President Trump continuously emphasizes just how much this agreement makes the country he loves, and the people within it, suffer while others do nothing but benefit. These countries are laughing at the United States, he says, and he will not allow this to continue.⁵³

This speech is not unique to President Trump. His approach is almost exactly in keeping with the unjust use of rhetorical argument that Aristotle condemned as being capable of doing great societal harm.⁵⁴ The arguments that can be identified in President Trump's speech lack substance. While they engage with *ethos* and *pathos*, they do so as an attempt to hide that almost all the evidence offered ends up being misrepresented, exaggerated, and falsified. This sits in stark contrast to the manner in which Aristotle intended rhetorical argument to be used. *Ethos* and *pathos* were not meant to be tools to

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355b13.

deceive and distract from an arguer's poor engagement with *logos* but to strengthen an argument grounded in good logic, and to make it more accessible to broader, public audiences.

In contrast to the above, Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is an outstanding example of rhetorical argument. No doubt it is one which would gain Aristotle's approval. Having been incarcerated for his involvement in civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, King took the time to respond to a particular group of detractors. This group, composed of eight white Alabama ministers, took issue with the civil rights demonstrations organized by King. The civil rights movement, they believed, was getting out of hand and moving too quickly.⁵⁵ While these ministers were, indeed, in agreement with King, as it concerned the immorality of racism and segregation, their position was that he had not responded to these injustices properly. Demonstrations organized by King, they said, were "ill-timed and ill-advised."⁵⁶ Rather than take such immediate and drastic action, the black community needed to be more patient. This problem ought to be solved with a respect for law in the courts and through local negotiations, not through civil disobedience.⁵⁷

In constructing his argument, then, King is presented with an audience which will be challenging to persuade. King need not convince these ministers of the unjust nature of racism and segregation; they already agree that these are immoral. Nor does he need to convince them that something ought to be done, as it is evident that they have a plan of

⁵⁵ Alton Hornsby Jr., "Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"" *The Journal of Negro History* 71, no. 1/4 (Autumn 1986): 38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

action in mind: everything must be solved in accordance with the law, no matter how long they must wait. What King must do is persuade his audience that waiting is not the proper course of action, and that something must be done immediately. So, while King very well could have presented an entirely dialectical argument, he chose, instead, to harness the persuasive force of rhetorical argument in order to tangle with an audience which would be particularly difficult to persuade by other means.

This is not to say that King's argument does not engage with evidence and facts. Indeed, King does present arguments which deal only with logic and reason. To show why he believes it acceptable to break some laws during a demonstration of civil disobedience, King offers definitions of just and unjust law and subsequently attempts to show that segregation laws fit into the latter category. For King, laws which are not democratically decided, here because the majority of potential voters were black and not allowed to vote, cannot be considered just. Thus, while his fellow ministers condemn him for breaking the law, King believes that these laws in particular ought not to be abided by, so long as one does so openly and with a willingness to accept the consequences of doing so.⁵⁸ Here he attempts to show the ministers that he does indeed agree with them; laws ought to be respected insofar as they are just. The laws in question, however, are not just. This particular argument is certainly aimed to appeal to *logos* alone.

King begins to engage with rhetorical tactics when he attends to the idea that the black community ought to wait patiently for their freedom. King does begin here with another appeal to *logos* exclusively, saying that they *have* waited, and for far too long. For 340 years, King says, his people have been in the United States, and yet, they lack the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

same rights (both natural and constitutional) as other human beings, simply because of the colour of their skin. Even after more than three centuries, it is still an uphill battle to do something as simple as ordering a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.⁵⁹

As he moves deeper into this discussion, though, King begins to employ decidedly rhetorical examples. These examples are predominantly directed at *pathos*. They are evocative of deep and painful emotions on behalf of those treated so poorly, and tend to motivate one to take some sort of action in response. Indeed, this is exactly the right approach to take in attempting to persuade an audience like King's, who lack the motivation to take the fight beyond the scope of the slow-moving law. Waiting any longer, King says, would seem acceptable to someone looking in on the situation from an outside perspective, precisely as these white ministers do.⁶⁰ Of course those who have not had to suffer countless instances of police brutality, witness vicious mobs lynch their parents and drown their siblings, or be consistently referred to by racial slurs would not immediately appreciate the urgency of the cause.

King does not just cite the anger of violence of others, which his people suffer, as a potential motivator. The way that the black community is made to feel inferior to whites is also profoundly concerning. Children, in particular, suffer from racism and segregation but lack the ability to understand why this is the case. King recalls his attempts to explain to his daughter why she could not go to Funtown, an amusement park advertised on television. He found his tongue twisted, he says, trying to explain to the crying child that she could not go to Funtown because only whites were admitted. It was

⁵⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

at this time, he says, that he could see “ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky[.]”⁶¹ King’s son, too, could not understand the reasoning behind the tension between the races. King recalls the difficulty of coming up with an answer when his son asked why “white people treat colored people so mean[.]”⁶²

Living as a black person in the United States, King says, is simply humiliating on a day-to-day basis. Signs constantly tell him where he can and cannot go and motels refuse to accept his patronage, leaving him sleeping uncomfortably in his car on cross-country trips. He claims to be haunted by fear and resentment, never knowing what terrible thing will happen next, simply because of the colour of his skin. All of this leads to his feeling that he is forever fighting what he calls a “degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’[.]”⁶³ That the black community must constantly undergo this treatment, he says, has led their “cup of endurance” to run over.⁶⁴ They are no longer willing to wait because they are no longer willing to put themselves, and their children through such constant torture.

If one is unmoved by the portion of King’s argument which appeals to logic and reason alone, it will be difficult not to react strongly to these examples. There is simply no ignoring how evocative of emotion these examples are. One cannot help but feel anger toward those responsible for harm and death, and pity for the children who cannot understand why they are hated and treated as inferior without any obvious reason. One might be moved, further, to ask themselves why this would be allowed to happen and

⁶¹ Ibid., 40.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

why something significant has not been done to change the situation. Emotional reactions of this sort are incredibly helpful in persuasion and are highly motivational.

It is also important to recognize that these examples are in no way deceptive; King merely offers a factual description, which we know to be accurate, of the way that the black community was treated at the time. He does not offer these examples in order to manipulate his audience with falsehoods. Rather, they serve to draw focus toward the terrible repercussions of legalized prejudice and racism that may be difficult to understand for those who were largely unaffected. They offer insight to those who may have no idea exactly how difficult life may be from a perspective other than their own. For those who might agree that segregation laws are unjust but who advocate for a more patient approach than King's, examples like these may serve to broaden their understanding of the situation and to cement just how important it is that something be done more immediately. King knows that he has this group of white ministers on his side as it concerns the immorality of legalized prejudice, but he must persuade them to accept that taking action sooner than later is the appropriate course of action. These examples are a powerful way of doing just that.

2.3. Rhetorical Argument in Academic Philosophy

Aristotle, it should be said, did not focus on the differences between dialectical and rhetorical argument quite as much as he did their similarities.⁶⁵ Michael Gilbert argues that this is because Aristotle did not see a sharp distinction between them.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 28.

Subsequent thinkers, Gilbert says, deserve credit for having widened the gap between Aristotle's two sorts of argument.⁶⁶ For Aristotle, the major difference between dialectical and rhetorical argument, is the arena in which he believed that each ought to be employed. Dialectical argument is to be used in instances where one intends to persuade those who would understand and appreciate logic for all its intricacies, while rhetorical argument allows us to persuade audiences who will not be moved by appeal to logic and reason alone. Neither, for Aristotle, was the superior sort of argument. This was not to be understood as a dichotomy.

Contemporary philosophers, however, have taken this distinction to heart. In academic philosophy, a dichotomy is presented between the proper kind of argument – dialectical – and the improper kind – rhetorical. That this is the case is evidenced by the manner in which students are trained to become philosophers in Critical Thinking courses. Since these courses are often required, or at the very least strongly encouraged, as preparation for students interested in continuing in the discipline, they serve as an excellent example of the importance that philosophers place on argument as a method of inquiry.

Critical Thinking courses are described as being of the utmost importance to students interested in philosophy. It is claimed that these courses offer students an introduction to the essential principles of reasoning. Critical Thinking courses are devoted to training students in a crucial skillset which they must possess in order to be successful in continued studies in philosophy: the precise analysis and criticism of arguments, in accordance with a strict set of logical rules. Students are taught that

⁶⁶ Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 4.

dialectical argument is the sort of argument that they should strive to master. This is precisely because dialectical argument follows logical rules so well when it is properly employed. They are taught how to identify well-constructed dialectical arguments, as well as those which admit of logical error, and which must be amended or abandoned altogether. While this approach indicates that philosophers are happy to view dialectical argument as neutral, admitting of both good and bad arguments, rhetoric is presented as a predominantly negative argumentative strategy which ought to be avoided as much as possible.

This sentiment is further expressed by the textbooks that are often assigned in these courses. Whether explicitly or implicitly, rhetoric is presented as an improper approach to argumentation. Alternatively, some textbooks deal with rhetorical argument merely in passing and, on occasion, completely ignore it in favour of focusing on dialectical argument exclusively.⁶⁷ Especially in the latter case, it is evident that rhetorical argument is seen as having little or no value in comparison to dialectical argument; so little, in fact, that dealing with it in only the most basic manner (if at all) is considered sufficient.

When these texts do deal with rhetorical argument, it is not presented in anywhere near the neutral terms that Aristotle indicated were appropriate. Rather, students are told that to involve oneself in rhetorical argument is to engage in trickery, flattery, and manipulation but not truth. Rhetorical argument is presented as something that one might use to “seduce” audiences, and which students ought to learn to protect themselves

⁶⁷ Hughes and Lavery, *Critical Thinking*; Anne Thomson, *Critical Reasoning: A Practical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996).

against.⁶⁸ Particularly where it concerns the use of emotion into argument, the characterization is scathing. Sections which include the “appeal to emotion” fallacy are often given such titles as “Irrational Appeals” and “Irrelevant Premises.”⁶⁹ Emotion is described as the focus of “con artists, advertisers, politicians, and others whose stock-in-trade is the manipulation of attitudes, desires, and beliefs.”⁷⁰ To be sure, con artists, advertisers, and some politicians do attempt to manipulate and deceive others in their own ways. That these characters are the most commonly offered examples, however, is indicative of the negative outlook on rhetoric that underlies contemporary philosophy.

Even those willing to admit that rhetorical features might be acceptable in an otherwise strongly dialectical argument cannot help but include implicit references to the idea that rhetorical argument is nothing but manipulative at its core. Lewis Vaughn and Chris MacDonald do precisely this. Rhetorical features, they say, can help to reinforce a strong, logical, factual argument. Indeed, this is exactly the position Aristotle advocates. On the same page that they express this position, however, a cartoon is included with a caption which reads, “Phew! *Fooling* [emphasis added] some of the people all of the time is damn hard work.”⁷¹ While even Aristotle had no problem admitting the possibility for rhetorical argument to be used in a negative and manipulative manner, the inclusion of this cartoon reinforces the stereotypical view that this is what rhetorical argument engages in *most often*. Rather than a neutral tool which may be used for good or bad

⁶⁸ David Hitchcock, *Critical Thinking: A Guide to Evaluating Information* (Agincourt, ON: Methuen Publications, 1983), 3.

⁶⁹ Vincent R. Ruggiero, *Beyond Feelings: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, 4th ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995), 130; Lewis Vaughn and Chris MacDonald, *The Power of Critical Thinking: Second Canadian Edition* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 2010), 178.

⁷⁰ Nancy Cavender and Howard Kahane, *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 2002), 150.

⁷¹ Vaughn and MacDonald, *The Power of Critical Thinking*, 178-179.

ends, this consistent presentation of rhetorical argument as being inextricably tied to manipulation strengthens the notion that a dichotomy exists between dialectical and rhetorical argument. Given Aristotle's approach to these sorts of argument, though, it is perhaps the case that he would label this a false dichotomy.

While Aristotle understood, and embraced, the effect that both *ethos* and *pathos* have on our potential acceptance of argument, the philosophical community since then has largely rejected their use. This, Gilbert says, is not the result of a belief that neither *ethos* nor *pathos* has an effect on our acceptance and rejection of arguments but that they *ought not to*.⁷² This presupposes, however, that we can abstract *ethos* and *pathos* away from all of our judgments about arguments and, as Aristotle has indicated, that is just not the case for everyone. Academic philosophy certainly trains us to do this as best we can, but for those who have no such training, *ethos* and *pathos* are taken into account, and can be powerful tools to make use of when attempting to persuade individuals to accept a position grounded in truth.

I believe that the contemporary understanding of the dialectical-rhetorical distinction is misguided. Dialectical argument, I contend, is not superior and students should not be trained in such a way that leads them to believe this is the only sort of argument worth using. There are, indeed, instances in which dialectical argument is thought to be the preferable or superior approach and, in fact, misses the boat entirely. In these cases, I argue, rhetorical argument ought to be seen not as a manipulative strategy but as a legitimate tool in the persuasion of others. When we intend to persuade others to accept positions based in truth, we do ourselves a disservice to limit the strategies we

⁷² Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 5.

might employ to those acceptable in dialectical argument alone. If we strive to construct arguments using the best reasons available to us, our understanding of what constitutes a good reason must broaden.

Chapter III: The Importance of Audience

3.1. The Audience Factor

According to Christopher Tindale, an argumentation theorist specializing in rhetoric, the most fundamental position from which we experience argument is as an audience. Humans are, he says, argumentative creatures. We recognize arguments for what they are, and offer arguments of our own, but it is as an audience that we first approach argument.⁷³ Indeed, for Tindale, we can act as arguers only because we have an appreciation of what it is to be part of an audience. We know what it is to be addressed and to understand messages from the perspective of an audience, and because of this, we are capable of offering arguments to others that they might also understand.⁷⁴ On Tindale's account, people are constantly receiving and identifying arguments, claims, and instances of discourse for what they are because we are always "in audience" to some degree. We find ourselves "in audience" either as our normal inattentive state, or when something captivates us and demands that we recognize it explicitly. For Tindale, then, audience is at very heart of argument and, as such, is a component that we would do well to better understand.⁷⁵

Despite this, however, Tindale indicates that there has been precious little focus on audience in Argumentation Theory thus far. Argumentation theorists have certainly given attention to arguments themselves, the arguers who construct them, and the manner

⁷³ Christopher W. Tindale, "Rhetorical Argumentation and the Nature of Audience: Toward an Understanding of Audience – Issues in Argumentation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 46, no. 4 (2013): 509-10, <https://www.doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.46.4.0508>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

in which arguments are (or ought to be) evaluated, but the nature of audience has been largely overlooked.⁷⁶ Even in the work of Aristotle and Chaïm Perelman, who offer two of the most systematic and influential accounts that seriously consider the rhetorical features of argumentation, Tindale says, an adequate account of audience is missing.⁷⁷ While both Aristotle and Perelman deal with audience more explicitly than many other argumentation theorists, Tindale is unsatisfied by how their accounts fail to deal with what he takes to be particularly difficult questions concerning the nature of audiences.⁷⁸ Argumentation Theory, he believes, has advanced to the point where developing a better understanding of audience, and giving consideration to the ways in which they react to arguments, is necessary. If argumentation comes naturally to us, and it is true that we approach argument primarily from the audience perspective, then audience is something that focus ought to be shifted toward.⁷⁹

Who is the audience for any given argument? Is it possible to identify one's audience at all? If it is, how is it that arguers can accommodate, and subsequently persuade, their audiences, especially when audiences are characterized by high levels of diversity? How should arguments be evaluated in light of the importance of audience? For Tindale, these are the questions to which satisfactory answers have yet to be given.⁸⁰ At the core of these questions, and for Tindale what almost all problems concerning the audience can be reduced to, is audience identity.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 508.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 508-10, 526-7.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 509.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 511-13.

⁸¹ Ibid., 510-11, 516.

According to Tindale, identity presents such a major problem when it comes to audiences, partly because the audiences who we must construct arguments for can be incredibly diverse.⁸² Larger audiences can be composed of individuals whose identities are grounded in any number of characteristics, and this results in their adopting different beliefs, and the taking of different perspectives on various issues. Indeed, every individual's view of their own identity can be incredibly complex and in a constant state of flux. According to Amartya Sen, Tindale says, we are almost always in deliberation about which aspects of our identity are more important than others, or more relevant to the topic at hand, and all of this affects the manner in which we react and respond to particular arguments.⁸³ One individual's race, class, or culture may sit at the very core of how they identify themselves, while another might identify primarily by their occupation, family ties, or religion, and yet another by their nationality, gender, or educational background. A parent might well have a different response to arguments concerning issues which involve children than someone with no intention of having children would. A parent with a strong religious background might react differently still from one with no religious convictions to speak of.

As I see it, Tindale gives us good reason to think more deeply about the extent to which we should engage with audiences as active participants in argument, just as Aristotle thought we should.⁸⁴ As he later says, Aristotle thought of audiences as being enveloped by the context of their lives but at the same time, accessible to the

⁸² Ibid., 511.

⁸³ Ibid., 512; Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 4, 13.

⁸⁴ Tindale, "Rhetorical Argumentation," 519.

understanding of arguers.⁸⁵ Indeed, if Tindale's initial thoughts on the importance of audience are correct, audiences are the most fundamental part of argument.⁸⁶ The problems with which he concerns himself beyond this, however, seem to have played a part in there being limited focus on audience in Argumentation Theory.

While I cannot hope to give an exhaustive account of audience, or to provide definitive answers to those questions indicated by Tindale as being crucial in constructing such an account, I do believe that audiences can be identified and accommodated. This is possible, I argue, through a common (but often misunderstood) process which most of us engage in, to some extent, nearly every day. While the complexity of audience identity might make it seem that properly engaging with audiences through argument will be a monumental task, I believe that my account will offer clarification as to how we can attempt to do this through far less complicated means than might initially seem necessary.

Before dealing further with this, however, I would like to describe what I take to be two major problems with the traditional philosophical approach to argument. These problems arise when philosophers attempt to construct arguments pertaining to issues of public concern. I argue that this is precisely the result of a failure in those who prize dialectical argument to take seriously the importance of audience in the construction of arguments concerning the issues which involve audiences most.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 524-5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 509-10.

3.2. Two Problems with Dialectical Argument

Because the goal in constructing dialectical arguments is that they be as logical as possible, philosophers believe that *anyone* exposed to a good dialectical argument *ought* to accept it. It is not the case, however, that we generally intend to persuade as many people as possible to accept our conclusions. Rather, the intention of most philosophers is to present a logically sound argument which those exposed to it cannot help but accept, precisely because it is logically sound. It is usually the case, then, that philosophers do not go out of their way to enter the public sphere with explicit intentions to influence as many people as they can.

There does exist, however, a group of philosophers who might claim that they do seek widespread adherence beyond just that of their fellow academics. It is usually the case that these philosophers offer the arguments they do with the aim of “setting things right” as it concerns a particular issue of public concern, which affects actual people in the world. Issues that might qualify as being of public concern, in this sense, might include abortion, gun control (particularly in the United States), climate change, racial inequality, economic inequality (in both domestic and international contexts), and so on. These issues are those which affect almost all of us in some way or another, and which have a moral dimension that tends to be the focus of arguments concerning them. When a philosopher offers an argument regarding the morality of capital punishment, for example, they do so with the intention of reaching as many people as possible, so as to make that audience think more deeply about that issue. They believe that if they can persuade the vast majority of people to accept the conclusion for which they argue

(perhaps that we should not sentence others to death), then this will result in some good in the world.

It is my contention, however, that dialectical argument, the chief tool of the philosopher, is largely inadequate in these instances. When it comes to dealing with issues that have significant implications for *real* people, I argue, dialectical argument drastically misses the mark: it is simply too disconnected from reality and the interests and concerns of the audiences most affected by these issues. This, I contend, is because philosophers do not reflect on (and are not *required* to reflect on) the audiences for whom these issues are most important. Consequently, questions about who these audiences may be, and what their lived experience entails, appear to be completely ignored. Despite what would seem to be an aim toward constructing arguments which engage with issues in the world, philosophers do not consider the people who form their audiences, and who their arguments are intended to affect. The lived experience of audiences is ignored from the perspective of dialectical argument and audiences are assumed to be moved to acceptance by the purely logical arguments normally prized by philosophers. But, when it comes to the general public, these arguments tend to be met not with widespread adherence. Instead, audiences react with confusion, apathy, and offense. If it really is the case that these philosophers intend to have some effect on the world, then dialectical arguments will not do.

To be sure, a charge against philosophy on the basis of its being disconnected from reality is something of a cliché, and it is generally the case that such claims are vacuous and lack good reasons for our accepting them. I believe, however, that mine is a well-grounded critique. If we look closely at the manner in which philosophers use

dialectical argument to offer clarification about issues of public concern, then it becomes quite clear that their unwavering adherence to this method is incredibly problematic.

There are, I believe, two major ways in which dialectical argument fails to speak to the audience when it comes to issues of public concern. First, dialectical arguments, when offered to broader audiences composed not just of philosophers, but of the general public as well, are ineffective to the point of being self-defeating. This problem arises due to the reasons that dialectical argument is legitimately allowed to invoke, according to philosophers. In ideal terms, these reasons should be as disassociated and decontextualized from particular circumstances as possible. When presented as part of a valid argument these reasons, assuming they are true, are supposed to compel audiences to accept the conclusion that they are offered in support of. Certainly, when it comes to audiences composed only of philosophers, these sorts of arguments generally do result in acceptance, assuming they are sound upon close examination.

When dealing with issues of public concern, however, the audience is much broader than this. It is not just philosophers who will be exposed to arguments about capital punishment, euthanasia, abortion, famine, and so on. Rather, because these are issues which affect nearly *everyone* to some degree, everyone will be exposed to, or affected by, them in one way or another. But, not everyone considers the sorts of reasons prized by philosophers to be relevant or persuasive. As such, arguments which philosophers believe *ought* to compel us, will result in very little uptake when the scope of the audience is widened. I call this the “effectiveness problem.” If philosophers intend to have audiences accept the conclusions for which they argue, and act upon them if necessary, I contend that dialectical arguments are not the most appropriate tool. This is

because the audiences most affected by issues of public concern are incredibly broad, both as it concerns both the perspectives they take, and the reasons they consider these issues important.

Second, precisely because of the reasons which dialecticians deem appropriate in constructing them, dialectical arguments fail to afford due respect to the lived experiences of the audience to which they are addressed. Again, because the goal in constructing dialectical arguments is to construct an argument which *any* rational person *ought* to be compelled to accept, the important and situational real-life factors that some individual, or group of individuals, might consider crucial to the issue at hand may be given short shrift or ignored entirely. Despite their offering direction regarding the manner in which we ought to live, those who craft such arguments abstract away as much of what makes individual audience members unique as they possibly can. Arguers are far more concerned with attempting to find the common denominator which will compel any rational person to accept their arguments than with considering potential audiences in any meaningful way.

The implication behind this practice is that these reasons are unimportant. The reasons to which philosophers appeal are the *proper* reasons and all others are wrong, or in some way lesser than those which are purported to have universal appeal. According to this approach, there is a correct way of thinking about these issues and the way that most people think about them is not it. There is, to be sure, an extreme elitism lurking behind this approach. While, in these instances, philosophers are offering arguments to (and concerning) the general public, they remain convinced that the best way to look at these issues is as the philosopher does. That is, in the most logical terms possible. But, these

are profoundly important *human* issues, and the humanity which underlies them ought to be more deeply considered. These issues affect the lives of real people, but the experience that we have as real people is treated as having little or no value when it comes to arguments about them. Since this problem speaks to what I believe is a broad lack of respect for the reasons valued by members of our audiences, I call this the “disrespect problem.”

It may certainly be said, however, that none of this is the goal of philosophers who employ dialectical argument regarding issues of public concern. It may be argued that there is no intention here to speak to the general public, or to have any effect on the world. Rather, these arguments may be constructed for entirely academic purposes and, as such, have only other philosophers as their audience. If this is true, then it is not problematic that there is no broader consideration for audience. With this being an option, it seems that one of two things must be true. Either it is the case that these philosophers are interested in issues of public concern for purely academic reasons, or they genuinely do offer arguments with the intention of having some effect on the world, and the people in it.

If the former is true, it seems irresponsible to be dealing with these issues in particular. Many of the issues dealt with by these philosophers are of the utmost concern to the general public. They involve incredibly important questions, the answers to which may be drastically life-altering. If we are to engage with such issues, we ought to do so with a genuine intent to offer arguments which are crafted with respect to the real-life contexts of individuals to whom such issues are relevant. If the exercise really is purely academic, there are many other branches of philosophy where purely dialectical argument

is perfectly acceptable. There are areas of inquiry where these philosophers might be better suited to expend their efforts, and where the absence of intent to have a real and positive affect on the world at large does not detract from one's efforts in any substantive manner. When it comes to issues of public concern, the stakes are too high to be dealt with by detached, academic arguments alone.

If we are going to make arguments about issues of public concern, however, I believe that we ought to have tangible change as our chief goal, and I find it far more likely that this is a belief shared by most philosophers writing in this sphere. This appears evident when one looks at the manner in which philosophical journals that publish these very arguments are described. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, for example, claims to have been founded on the belief that a philosophical examination of issues of public concern can “contribute to their clarification and to their resolution.”⁸⁷ If this is how the work of philosophers writing about issues of public concern is described, then it would seem that there is good reason to believe that they really do intend to affect tangible change in the world. It is not obvious that their goal is to speak only of how things ought to be, in a manner heavily disconnected from reality. If this is the case, though, and philosophers do intend to help us deal with these issues in the best manner possible, then dialectical argument just will not suffice. When it comes to issues that are of widespread public concern, philosophers ought to take audiences into account, lest they engage in an exercise in futility. This is something that dialectical argument does not appear to allow.

⁸⁷ “Philosophy & Public Affairs,” JSTOR, accessed September 24, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/journal/philpublaffa>.

3.3. A Defense of Abortion

In order to show how dialectical arguments relating to issues of public concern can succumb to these two problems, I return now to Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion." In this article, Thomson offers several arguments in favour of the moral permissibility of abortion. The first of these arguments is specifically constructed to refute what Thomson takes to be (and many other philosophers would agree) the most common and important argument offered by those who stand against abortion. According to these arguers, it would be immoral to abort a fetus on the basis that fetuses are supposedly persons and, as such, have a right to life which we must respect. This argument can be roughly reconstructed as follows:

1. Fetuses are persons from the moment of conception.
2. Every person has a right to life.
3. While a potential mother may have a right to decide what happens with her body, this is outweighed by a fetus' right to life.
4. Therefore, abortion is impermissible; fetuses cannot be aborted.⁸⁸

According to Thomson, the first premise in this argument is generally the main point of contention. Pro-life arguers believe that if it is possible to establish that a fetus is a person, then it will naturally follow that abortion is impermissible. As such, these arguers focus primarily on establishing the truth of this premise. Pro-choice arguers, by comparison, usually aim to refute it. Both parties, she says, tend to focus on the development of the fetus and the point at which it ought (or ought not) to be afforded personhood.⁸⁹ Pro-choice arguers might invoke analogies concerning the development of

⁸⁸ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1971): 47-8, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265091>.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

other forms of life in order to show that fetuses are not persons. They might say, for example, that much like an acorn is not *yet* an oak tree, fetuses are not *yet* persons. They are merely “a bit of tissue that will become a person at birth[.]”⁹⁰ A pro-life arguer, on the other hand, may appeal to the difficulty of drawing a line before which abortion is permissible but after which, abortion is impermissible. If we can only decide that a fetus is a person at some time or other for arbitrary reasons, they say, then we must accept that a fetus is a person immediately at the point of conception.

Whether either of these common examples constitutes a good reason for arguing that a fetus is, or is not, a person (Thomson certainly does not believe that either does) is beside the point. What is important for Thomson is that both parties clearly believe that the issue of personhood is central to determining whether abortion is permissible. But, as Thomson accurately points out, the centrality of this premise in discourse concerning abortion has led to little progress thus far. It is unlikely that prospects will improve going forward, she says, if this premise remains central.⁹¹

Instead, according to Thomson, we ought to focus on the third premise, which indicates that the right to life afforded to a fetus is stronger than a potential mother’s right to bodily autonomy. Despite its initially plausible appearance, Thomson argues that it is precisely because of a flaw in the truth of this premise that the argument does not follow as naturally as those offering it would have us believe. Indeed, even if we accept that fetuses are persons from the moment of conception, Thomson believes that it does not obviously follow that their right to life outweighs a mother’s right to bodily autonomy.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁹¹ Ibid., 47-8.

⁹² Ibid., 48-9.

She claims to show that this is the case by offering a famous thought experiment in which one wakes up to find themselves connected to a particularly important violinist in order to keep him alive for some period of time.⁹³ No matter how long or short that period, Thomson says, if anyone were to find themselves in this scenario, they would think it absurd that they could not request to be detached from the violinist on the grounds that he has a right to life which supposedly outweighs their right to decide what will happen with their body.⁹⁴ Thomson accepts that it may indeed be a *kind* act to remain connected to the violinist, but it is not clear to her that detaching oneself from him would be morally wrong by necessity.⁹⁵

But, this is the exact message sent by the pro-life argument. Potential mothers are told that because they are carrying a fetus which has a right to life, it would be immoral to abort that fetus. This is because, from that perspective, their right to bodily autonomy is not as strong as the fetus' right to life. According to Thomson, though, if we would agree that it is absurd to request that one remain connected to the violinist for any period of time, then we must also accept that it is equally absurd to ask the same of any potential mother. Thus, Thomson contends that there must be something wrong with the seemingly plausible pro-life argument beyond just the controversial nature of fetal personhood. Even if one accepts that fetuses are persons who have a right to life, it does not necessarily follow that such a right outweighs a potential mother's bodily autonomy. Thomson's counterargument then, can be reconstructed as such:

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

1. Fetuses are persons from the moment of conception.
2. Every person has a right to life.
3. But, a fetus' right to life does not necessarily outweigh a potential mother's right to bodily autonomy.
4. Therefore, abortion is not impermissible on the basis that fetuses are persons.⁹⁶

Thomson continues by offering further analogies as well as responses to potential objections. For my purposes, though, a focus on this first argument is enough to show how her approach succumbs to both the effectiveness and disrespect problems. Before showing how this is the case, though, I must first say that Thomson's is an excellent argument by dialectical standards. She identifies a problem with an argument offered by another party, shows how the opponent's argument does not hold, given a condition they already accept, and responds with a counterargument of her own. This counterargument, if one accepts that Thomson's thought experiment is analogous to the situation of potential mothers, seems to show that we ought to accept her conclusion.

Yet, while Thomson's is an impeccable example of an argument in the dialectical tradition, I contend that it fails to speak to the issue of abortion in any significant way for those who are affected by it most. When it comes to actual human beings who may entertain abortion as an option (and those who would be affected by their decision), I contend that arguments like Thomson's have almost nothing to say.

This criticism is one initially addressed by Janice Moulton in "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method."⁹⁷ Here, Moulton uses Thomson's argument as an

⁹⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁷ Janice Moulton, "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 159-61.

example of one which focuses too heavily on showing another view to be necessarily wrong, and not nearly enough on what actual people in such situations must be dealing with.⁹⁸ I concur with Moulton: rather than engage, in any significant way, with the reasons that individuals might have for considering abortion, Thomson's argument is constructed in such a way as to ignore the myriad of complex and unique human perspectives on the issue. It is just not clear that those factors which present themselves as relevant to individual perspectives on abortion (in the context of our real lives) are explicitly considered. But, these are precisely the factors that are important to those who are faced with a need to decide whether abortion is the right thing to do in their situation.

Thomson focuses on personhood and the rights which persons can be said to have on the basis that these features can be dealt with by appeal to logic alone and, thus, can be understood by any rational person exposed to the argument. As Moulton points out, though, all this argument amounts to is a conclusion which holds that abortion is not wrong just because a fetus might be a person.⁹⁹ This argument would certainly be relevant to those who really do see personhood as a stumbling block when it comes to the morality of abortion. While the potential personhood of a fetus may be important to *some* pregnant women, however, it is not clearly the case that this is as central a feature as its prominence in philosophical discourse might lead us to believe.

Indeed, there is good reason to believe that very few women considering abortion ask themselves whether their potential child is a person and, instead, focus on more practical features when making their decisions. In studies of over 3,000 women, surveyed

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

in both 1987 and 2004, researchers at the Guttmacher Institute established that women considering abortion face a decision-making process *far* more complex than can be captured in an argument concerned with personhood alone. In fact, there is no indication that *any* of these women (all of whom chose to pursue abortion) explicitly questioned the personhood of their potential children. Rather, when asked to indicate the most important factors underlying their eventual decision, these women appealed to the way in which having a child would interfere with their education or employment, their inability to afford a child, and poor or non-existent relationships with the fathers of their children.¹⁰⁰ There is a consistent trend here over a period of nearly two decades which makes it clear that, for these women, the personhood of the fetus is *not* a factor in the decision-making process. Rather, these women refer to the real-life interpersonal implications (both positive and negative) of their potentially bringing a life into the world.

This study is not the only one which shows just how broad the scope of the abortion decision is. According to a 2014 study published in the *Journal of Women and Social Work*, women who regularly fall victim to domestic violence are far more concerned about the violent situation that they would be bringing a child into, as well as the permanent connection between themselves and their abuser that would result from having a child with him, than they are with the personhood of the fetus.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the concept of personhood just does not arise as having been explicitly related to the decision made by any of the women in this study either.

¹⁰⁰ Lawrence B. Finer et al., "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 33, no. 3 (September 2005): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1363/3711005>.

¹⁰¹ Isabelle Côté and Simon Lapierre, "Abortion and Domestic Violence: Women's Decision-Making Process," *Journal of Women and Social Work* 29, no. 3 (August 2014): 287, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913519791>.

These studies, to be clear, involve data collected only from women who ultimately did decide that abortion was the right option for them. In my research, I have been able to find no indication that studies have been done which focused primarily on women who considered and ultimately decided against abortion, or who had never considered abortion to begin with. Insofar as these women have been interviewed in connection with abortion, it does not appear that they were asked to share their decision-making process. Rather, in the only study I have been able to find in which such women were surveyed at all, they were merely asked to share demographic information regarding their living situation, income, marital status, and so on.¹⁰²

Yet, while a deeper investigation into these perspectives may provide further insight, we can still draw an important conclusion from the data that is available. These studies tell us that for a significant portion of women, abortion is an issue far too complex to be captured by arguments which focus on one central concept and ignore all other relevant considerations. Real women who must decide whether abortion is the right thing to do, are likely to be concerned with far more than just personhood. They are interested in the real-life implications of bringing a child into the world. This is a perspective which has been largely ignored in philosophical discussion up to this point.

Met with Thomson's argument, a pregnant woman entertaining abortion as a possibility might rightly judge it as being of no relevance to her situation. That the fetus is, or is not, a person does not help her to determine whether she will be able to provide for the child, or if having the child will have a severe and negative impact on her life. The

¹⁰² Elisabeth Ingelhammar et al., "Decision-making about unwanted pregnancy," *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 78, no. 7 (July 1999): 636-41, <https://doi.org/10.1034/j.1600-0412.1999.780713.x>.

personhood of the fetus does not guarantee that her partner will make a good parent, nor does it comfort her that her child will be properly loved if she is the victim of constant abuse, which she might fear that her child will become involved in as well. She may find herself terrified of the way others will judge her, or of the potential complications that she has been told can result from abortion. It is unlikely that any of these feelings will be relieved by Thomson's apparent concretizing of the right for her to decide what happens with her own body.

All of this is more than can be captured in an argument which offers little more than justification for the claim that abortion is not wrong just in case one believes that the fetus is a person. While this may be helpful to an intellectual elite, the general public experience this as a much deeper issue than arguments like Thomson's can account for. Personhood is not an explicit issue to them in the same way that philosophers like Thomson would like to believe. Despite her best intentions, Thomson may have done little more here than solve a problem which does not exist. If women are more concerned with the real-life interpersonal implications for themselves, and their children, than they are with whether a fetus can be considered a person, perhaps philosophers ought to be as well.

Thomson is certainly not alone in her misguided approach to the issue. Indeed, she is accompanied by most philosophers working with issues of public concern. While her argument is, I believe, an excellent one by dialectical standards, it does not lack detractors entirely. There are certainly philosophers who take issue with the quality of Thomson's argument. Their critique, however, is not grounded in the same problems as my own: they do not say that Thomson's argument appeals to the concerns of an

intellectual elite instead of the concerns of persons who must make decisions about abortion in the context of their real lives. Rather, they make the charge that her analogy between the fetus and the violinist is not a good one. They claim that the inconvenience of being attached to the violinist for nine months is not the same as the inconvenience of being pregnant for the same period, or that being kidnapped and attached to the violinist is only *really* analogous to pregnancies which result from rape.¹⁰³ They choose, unsurprisingly, not to address the inadequacies of the very approach they make use of but to charge Thomson with having made use of that approach improperly.

On my view, however, the extent to which Thomson's argument fails to consider the lived experience of real people is exactly where it goes wrong. As I have shown above, there is a clear indication that personhood is not the central feature of the abortion issue for many of those who must consider whether they ought to have an abortion. For them, personhood is not the most relevant consideration pertaining to abortion. In fact, for many of them, it may not be one at all. The decision-making process of these women reveals an extensive assortment of other relevant considerations with which Thomson has not engaged. Rather, she overlooks these perspectives in service of showing that one specific view – that fetuses cannot be aborted because they are persons – is not necessarily logically sound.

This is fine for the philosophically-inclined, or for those who really do take personhood to be the single most relevant consideration. But, for those who do not see the issue of abortion as one in which personhood is a central concept, this argument is of

¹⁰³ Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," 49; Don Marquis, "An Argument That Abortion Is Wrong," in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, 3rd ed., eds. Steven M. Cahn and Peter J. Markie, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 755.

no use. It will not be persuasive for those who have already made up their minds about the relevance of personhood to abortion. Neither will it persuade those who believe that personhood is not the most relevant consideration. Those who believe that abortion is morally wrong on the basis of these other considerations will not be moved to think more deeply about why it might be the case that their perspective is incorrect or incomplete. If Thomson's aim is to persuade those who take abortion to be morally impermissible that they ought to think otherwise, this argument will be unsuccessful for many of those who she attempts to persuade.

Indeed, as I have noted, she recognizes this herself. She does not think that continued focus on personhood is likely to result in much progress being made on the morality of abortion.¹⁰⁴ But, she has not moved far enough from personhood, in my view, to lead the charge toward such progress. Rather, she remains firmly rooted in the dialectical tradition, focusing only on refuting a popular opposing position.

In making this the focus of her argument, though, Thomson does what many philosophers do with issues of public concern. She treats this incredibly complex issue as being dealt with adequately by an argument which ignores the relevance of any consideration other than personhood. Especially given that she has explicitly expressed worries concerning the continued focus on personhood, that Thomson does this anyway is troubling. This treatment of issues of public concern carries with it a particularly negative implication. If an adequate treatment of an issue like abortion is one which fixates on personhood alone, then the message sent to audiences is that other

¹⁰⁴ Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," 47-8.

considerations are not sufficiently relevant, nor important enough, to be examined and engaged with.

But, such considerations are, for members of the audience, the most important factors in determining whether abortion is the right thing to do or not. A woman who finds herself pregnant with the child of a particularly abusive partner has far more to think about than whether the fetus she carries is, or is not, a person. She must worry about the extent to which her abuse will continue (or become worse) following the birth of her child, and whether her partner will abuse the child as well. Depending on the severity of the abuse involved in the relationship, she might fear for her life, and for the way in which her child would be treated were she to die. She may find herself considering adoption but unsure as to how difficult the child's father will make this process for her, given that he, too, has parental rights. This is just a small sample of the deliberation that she would need to do, focusing only on her relationship with the child's father. She might also have financial concerns, or religious convictions, or any number of other considerations that are relevant to the decision she will eventually make.

Despite their significance to those making the abortion decision, considerations such as these are ignored. Real women, as well as their partners, do have to decide whether they should have an abortion or not. When they do this, they have much more than the personhood of the fetus on their mind. These perspectives are incredibly important in properly understanding the morality of abortion, and in persuading audiences to perceive the issue in one way or another. If arguers intend, as Thomson does, to persuade their audiences to accept that abortion is, in fact, morally permissible, then engaging with the reasons that people have for considering abortion is necessary.

Continuing to ignore these reasons, and reinforcing the implication that they are neither relevant nor important to the philosophical discussion, is highly disrespectful of the incredible importance that they have for people who may or may not choose to have abortions. Not only is Thomson's argument one which will find little success in persuading those who have concerns beyond personhood when it comes to the morality of abortion, it is also one which sends a message to audience members. It tells those who take concerns beyond just personhood to be important and relevant considerations, that they are wrong.

3.4. Famine, Affluence, and Morality

Unfortunately, Thomson's argument is not alone in its inadequacies. Indeed, many of the arguments presented in academic philosophy as the best of their kind admit of nearly identical shortcomings. Perhaps an even more shocking example of this sort of argument is offered by Peter Singer in his famous 1972 essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Writing during the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh, Singer presents an argument in favour of drastic changes in the way that those of us living in relatively affluent countries view, and respond to, the overwhelming difficulties regularly faced by those in developing countries.

Singer spends a significant portion of the essay discussing not just that we should be donating to some charity or other to help people in need but the manner in which he believes our moral outlook on charitable giving must change on the whole. Indeed, he says, it is a mistake to refer to our giving money and other sorts of aid to those in need as charitable or generous. Though some might say that charitable donation is a

supererogatory act, he says, this is not the case. Such labels bring with them the implication that the act of donating to charity is a good thing to do but that refusing to donate to charity would not be a bad thing to do.¹⁰⁵

For Singer, such an outlook is incorrect. Providing aid for those in need is not something for which individuals should be praised while others do nothing and are ignored rather than condemned. Indeed, it is our *duty*, he argues, to do much more to improve the lives of these people than we currently do. This, he says, rests on what he calls the “principle of preventing bad occurrences.” This principle, in its strongest formulation, holds that if we can prevent some bad occurrence, while sacrificing nothing of comparable moral importance, then we ought to do so.¹⁰⁶

As a means of clarifying, Singer offers the famous example of the drowning child. Suppose, he says, that you find yourself walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it. To save the child, you must wade into the pond and muddy your clothes. Here, the death of the child would be an incredibly bad thing, while getting one’s clothes dirty is not in any way comparable. As such, it seems almost undeniable that anyone in this situation is bound by moral duty to save the drowning child. If, however, one would have to sacrifice their own life to save the child, it might not be the case that she does have this duty. In such a scenario, to sacrifice one’s own life to save that of another is to sacrifice something morally comparable.¹⁰⁷ As such, this is not an action to which one would necessarily be bound by duty.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 235-6, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

This understanding of the principle, according to Singer, is the one we ought to accept. Though he offers a moderate version of the principle (by which one need only prevent bad occurrences when doing so would result in their not sacrificing something morally *significant*), Singer says that he sees no good reason to accept it instead of the stronger formulation.¹⁰⁸ The argument that Singer really wants to offer, then, can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Suffering and death resulting from starvation, lack of shelter, and lack of medical care are bad.¹⁰⁹
2. If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, then you ought to do so.¹¹⁰
3. It is possible for individuals in richer nations to prevent suffering and death in developing nations without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.¹¹¹
4. Therefore, individuals in affluent countries are obligated to prevent suffering and death in developing nations.¹¹²

It follows from this version of the argument, Singer says, that individuals in affluent countries ought to be giving to the point of marginal utility. That is, we must give until the suffering we experience as a result of further giving would be equal to, or greater than, the relief that our giving would cause in developing countries.¹¹³ This means that individuals who donate in accordance with their duty to prevent bad occurrences would reduce themselves to nearly the same circumstances as those whose lives they hope to improve. This differs from the moderate proposal in that individuals likely would

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 229-230, 233.

¹¹² Ibid., 230.

¹¹³ Ibid., 241.

consider donation resulting in marginal utility to be giving up something morally significant. Indeed, they would likely draw this line far before marginal utility. While this version of the principle certainly allows greater leeway for those who may feel uncomfortable giving nearly as much as Singer would like, he remains adamant that the stronger version is the one that we ought to accept as the correct explanation of our duty to prevent bad occurrences.¹¹⁴ Again, for Singer, there is *no good reason* to accept a version of the principle other than that which would result in marginal utility.

One might think, though, that the principle of preventing bad occurrences, as Singer outlines it, is somewhat deceptive, given the apparent simplicity of the drowning child example. As Singer is quick to point out, the principle does not take proximity into account, nor does it seem to matter whether one is the only person capable of helping those in need, or if many others are equally capable. Singer is aware, however, that either of these factors might well be the basis upon which one could argue that they ought to be excused from obligations to provide aid to the less fortunate, or to particular members of that group.¹¹⁵

In the first case, an argument might be made that one is not obligated to donate to relief funds for refugees in Southeast Asia, for example, on the basis that there are starving people without shelter much closer to home (perhaps in their very community). For Singer, though, this does not affect our obligation whatsoever. Assuming that we “accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, [or] equality,”¹¹⁶ he says, we cannot think that our obligation to help those in need is affected in any way by their

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 231-233.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 232.

proximity. It may certainly be the case that we are more *likely* to provide aid to those nearer to us, but this does not mean we are any less obligated to those living on entirely different continents.

Indeed, the only potential justification for thinking that our obligations would change, Singer says, is not relevant in modern society. One might well be right to say that their donations would do better in closer proximity on the basis that we are better able to determine what the less fortunate *need* when we are nearer to them. Unfortunately for those who would ground arguments in this point, Singer says, the increasingly globalized world in which we live makes it so that we can direct our aid to individuals anywhere else on the planet almost as effectively as those in our own neighbourhood. As such, he says, there seems to be no possible justification for discrimination based merely on geographical location.¹¹⁷

Singer next argues that there is no significant moral difference between being the only person who can provide aid, and being one of millions in the same situation. Certainly, he says, there is a psychological difference in the two cases. One is apt to feel much less guilt in doing nothing when there are many others who could also have taken action than they will when they have no one to blame but themselves.¹¹⁸ But, he says, if we return to the example of the drowning child, the absurdity of the suggestion that our obligation is affected by the number of bystanders becomes clear. If one sees the drowning child before them but sees many others about the same distance from the child as themselves, who could also save him, Singer says, it would be absurd to think that

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 232-3.

their obligation to save him is less than if there were nobody else capable of saving him nearby. The appeal to numbers, according to Singer, is merely a convenient excuse for doing nothing in instances where all of us are involved almost equally.¹¹⁹

Singer further deals with two potential objections to the methods and goals for which he advocates. The first of these holds that providing aid to developing countries is not the responsibility of the individual but of their government. In fact, proponents of this position argue, when individuals choose to donate to privately run charities, they reduce the likelihood that their governments will do the same.¹²⁰ Singer argues that this suggestion just seems implausible. It is more likely, he contends, that a complete lack of individual donation would indicate to governments that their citizens are uninterested in foreign aid. As such, governments would be unlikely to engage in providing aid, and would not force their citizens to do so either.¹²¹ Even if this is not true, Singer says, and individual donation does reduce the likelihood of higher-level aid, we would need good reason to believe that a lack of individual action really would bring about government aid to a significant degree. The onus should be on those who refuse to donate to show how their refusal will be more beneficial to those in need.¹²² This is not to say that Singer absolves governments of any responsibility to those in need. Rather, Singer believes that *both* individuals and their governments ought to provide as much aid as they are able. His immediate worry is that the potential for government aid serves merely as an excuse to avoid personal responsibility.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 239-40.

¹²¹ Ibid., 240.

¹²² Ibid., 239.

¹²³ Ibid., 240.

The second objection addressed by Singer holds that an approach which focuses on donation is one which merely serves to postpone, rather than prevent, tragic outcomes. That is, according to proponents of this view, to donate money to famine relief is merely to postpone starvation, while to work toward effective population control would constitute a proper solution to the problem.¹²⁴ Even if we are able to keep *this* generation of the least-well-off from starving, it may be the case that their children, or grandchildren, will eventually starve anyway. Thus, we must first focus on effective population control, and not on providing immediate aid.

Singer does accept that a consistent rise in population is unsustainable, and that population control is the best way to prevent famine. But, he says, it does not follow from this that individuals in affluent countries have no obligation to provide aid for those in harsher circumstances *now*. Rather, the conclusion that Singer says we ought to come to here is that we would do better to prevent famine by shifting our focus toward population control. For Singer, this objection does not alleviate one's duty to provide aid to those in need. Rather, it makes clear the direction in which this aid ought to be focused.¹²⁵

Here, just as with Thomson, the argument is excellent from the dialectical perspective. It is quite difficult to find logical issue with Singer's argument, and he provides well-thought-out responses to potential objections. Indeed, Singer's argument is often held up in academic philosophy as one of the very best in dealing with the issue of global poverty. Despite its dialectical merit, though, Singer's argument also succumbs to the two problems previously outlined. Singer's argument has an intentionally narrow

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

focus, just as Thomson's does, which is likely to alienate those exposed to it. It is likely to make them feel as though it does not apply to their lives because it does not account for their unique situation.

Further, Singer offers his own perspective, grounded in an academic, logical understanding of the issue as the only proper perspective on the matter; one which ought to be accepted instead of any other. Indeed, his is a much more obvious example than Thomson's argument when it comes to this second problem. Not only does Singer ignore the variety of differing situations in which audience members may find themselves, and thus how they might feel ignored by his argument, he explicitly says that there is no good reason to disagree with the strongest formulation of his principle of preventing bad occurrences. Even though he recognizes that the moderate version is likely to be far more palatable to a broader audience, like the one he hopes to persuade, he stands by the stronger formulation.¹²⁶

What Singer fails to appreciate when constructing his argument is the relative lack of concern that individuals may have for the duties that they are *told* they have by someone who does not appear to know what it is like to be them. Singer spends such a large portion of his essay offering justification for a duty that he believes the vast majority of his audience has in virtue of where they live and their financial situation. He subsequently *orders* them to take action with the threat of moral condemnation should they fail to do so.¹²⁷ Given Singer's closing comments, where he expresses the need for philosophers to take more seriously the conclusions they argue for, to the point of acting

¹²⁶ Ibid., 241.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 235.

on them, this approach seems somewhat strange. If this is indeed his goal, then an argument which succumbs to the effectiveness problem, and thus is self-defeating from the perspective of many, will be of little value. Singer has the increased challenge here of not just persuading his audience to accept a conclusion but moving them to act upon that conclusion so as to create real change in the world. The argument he offers, however, is one which will be acceptable only to an elite few (those persuaded by logic alone) and not by an audience quite so broad as Singer would likely prefer.

Singer's argument does not just lack effectiveness, it is also greatly disrespectful to the perspective of a great many individuals. Singer's argument fails, in almost spectacular fashion, to understand the perspective of those so-called "affluent persons" who would experience this change. Whether he is right, and those of us who can afford to donate much more should do so until such a time that marginal utility is achieved, or not, he does not account for any of the reasons *why* an individual might be hesitant to do so. Unlike Thomson, and perhaps most arguments which admit of the disrespect problem, however, Singer does not simply *ignore* what members of the general public might consider good reasons not to donate significant amounts of their wealth. Rather, he explicitly denies that any of those reasons appealed to by members of the general public *could* be good reasons not to accept the strongest formulation of his argument.¹²⁸

This refusal to entertain alternate perspectives heavily undermines Singer's argument and indicates a failure to appreciate that his detached, logical approach does not account very well for the lived experience of most members of the general public. There is, for example, no shortage of blue-collar workers who do whatever they can to provide

¹²⁸ Ibid., 241.

for their families and, despite this, are barely able to make ends meet. These are the sorts of people who are certainly more affluent than those living in (or nearly in) abject poverty but whose lives very well could be significantly altered by fulfilling the duty that Singer so adamantly believes they have.

Indeed, these individuals may not even feel comfortable acting in accordance with the moderate version of Singer's principle, were he willing to accept their doing so. Though it may seem insignificant to Singer to ask these individuals to donate the equivalent of £5 to charity, even this may be more than would be reasonable for some. To be sure, Singer might well consider those literally incapable of donating this (or any) amount as not sharing in the obligation to those living in poverty. It is not clear, however, that he accounts for those who may well be capable of doing so but who might believe that their obligations to their family, for example, are significantly more important than their obligations to total strangers.

Such a view might be based in the perfectly reasonable concern that a person has for their partner, or that they have as a parent for their children. One might be more likely to do whatever they can to ensure that their family lives reasonably comfortably on the basis that these are the people they care about most. Even if they are just barely able to donate the sort of money Singer suggests, they may refuse to do so because they believe it would have a negative impact on those most important to them. Perhaps they are worried about contingent expenses that may arise in the future and wish to be prepared for such occurrences. They might consider charitable donation to be less important than being financially prepared if their family should find themselves in need of something like expensive medical attention or private tutoring.

What is important here is not whether this is a good reason to refuse to donate. Singer would certainly say that it is not, given that he advocates for the acceptance of a principle of impartiality which would not allow one to privilege their loved ones in making such a decision.¹²⁹ What is important is that the individual who offers this as a reason sees it as a *good* reason. A responsible arguer ought to engage with this in a more respectful manner than Singer does. We ought to do our best to understand the unique situation that members of our audiences find themselves in given their individual lived experience. In so doing, we may be able to understand more deeply what approaches and tactics will be best suited to persuade individuals that providing such aid is the right thing to do, and that they really are able to donate significantly more than they might think, without their lives being negatively affected to a drastic extent as a result.

Singer chooses not to do this. Instead, he explicitly discounts that any reason which does not fit into his argument could ever be important enough to reasonably excuse anyone from their obligation to prevent bad occurrences in the lives of their fellow persons. To take either the more common dialectical approach of ignoring such reasons, or pre-emptively undermining them, as Singer has done, however, is remarkably short-sighted, both practically and morally-speaking.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 232.

Chapter IV: Empathy and Argumentation

4.1. A Suggested Solution

What I hope to have made clear in the above is that the effectiveness and disrespect problems really do exist in philosophical argumentation. It is important to realize that these problems are not uniquely related to Thomson or Singer's arguments, nor are they related just to arguments concerning abortion and global poverty. Rather, they are part of the traditional philosophical approach in general, due to the attachment of philosophers to dialectical argument. These arguments, because they are often cited as the best of their kind in philosophical circles, merely serve as excellent examples of what philosophers generally take to be an adequate treatment of issues of public concern.

From the perspective of the audience, however, this is the wrong approach. There is more to the lived experience of audience members than purely logical accounts can hope to speak to. When it comes to problems such as global poverty and abortion, there are a multitude of differing perspectives which are grounded in reasons that, for those who hold these perspectives, are *good* reasons. These positions are held not because individuals fail to grasp the logic surrounding the issue but because factors beyond those captured by a detached, universal account are also relevant and important to real people.

If my charge against philosophy is valid, as I believe it is, and if the intention of philosophers, when dealing with issues of public concern is to affect the world in a positive manner, as I believe it should be, then we must make changes in the way that we deal with such issues. We must find a way to accurately capture the facts surrounding these issues, yes, but we must also remain cognizant of their deeply personal characteristics. While the dialectical approach is well-suited to many areas of

philosophical inquiry, when it comes to dealing with issues of public concern, the argumentative strategies we employ need to be far broader.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this change is the need to understand *why* individuals adopt the perspectives they do. When it comes to some of the most controversial and divisive issues, the gaps between differing perspectives often appear insurmountable and this tends to result in philosophers dismissing some perspectives, and the beliefs in which they are grounded, as unworthy of any discussion. The steadfast commitment of philosophers to the dialectical approach has directly led to their giving such positions short shrift, either because they lack the desire, or the ability, to deal more explicitly with them within the dialectical tradition. As I have shown above, philosophers like Thomson and Singer deal with important and personal issues such as abortion and global poverty by ignoring many of the reasons that such issues are important to people. The actual reasons that women may struggle with when deciding whether to have an abortion and the reasons that people do not donate to charity nearly to the degree that they may be duty-bound to, are ignored or labelled as being not good enough to consider whatsoever. Because of this, audiences are bound to wonder what arguments like these have to do with them and the situations in which they find themselves.

If we hope to address issues of public concern as the human issues they truly are, however, engaging with those real, human reasons in a direct manner is of the utmost importance. When philosophers refuse to make attempts at understanding members of our audiences, we greatly decrease the likelihood that an argument asking them to see things from the philosophical perspective will ever gain traction. But, this is exactly what we should consider our goal when discussing issues of public concern. Whether it is the

treatment and prevention of global poverty, the increased accessibility of abortion for those who wish to seek it, or any number of other major changes that we would like to bring about, if philosophers hope to make a positive difference in the world by offering arguments, then we ought to aim to persuade as many people as possible to accept the positions for which we advocate. If this is to be the goal of philosophers, however, we cannot entirely disregard individuals on the basis that they adopt a perspective of which we do not approve. We need to understand what has led them to adopt the positions they do, and engage with them in a more comprehensive manner.

I contend that, in dealing with such issues, philosophers would be best served by the adoption of an approach in which explicit recognition of the audience is a central element: one not unlike Aristotelian rhetorical argument. Offering arguments which will be both effective for, and respectful of, our audiences requires that we recognize and react to them as individuals with lived experiences which inform the perspectives they adopt. Further, we must engage with the reasons which underlie these perspectives rather than ignoring them, or dismissing them from the outset, as has been the dominant approach thus far.

By what means, then, can we accomplish this? How is it that philosophers ought to go about recognizing their audiences in the construction of arguments? How do we become the ideal Aristotelian rhetorical arguer who can see all possible means of persuasion available to them? I believe that the answer is empathy. Empathizing with members of our audiences can provide us with incredibly deep insight into the way that they approach issues of public concern. Rather than present arguments meant to appeal to a perfectly rational audience in an attempt to persuade people, we can use empathy to

determine what it is that they take to sit at the heart of these issues. We can gain a deeper understanding of how people view issues of public concern, and why they take the positions they do, by attempting to see these issues as *they* do, from a point of view informed by their own lived experience.

Pinpointing the beliefs that underlie perspectives on crucial issues such as these and engaging with those beliefs, precisely because they are what the audience takes to be important, is an approach which is certainly more respectful of audience members as actual individuals with lived experience. More than this, the arguments that we can construct when we gain such insights, because they engage with the components of issues of public concern that our audiences take to be at the very core of these issues, will have a greater likelihood of being effective. If we accurately determine what it is that truly grounds the positions which individuals adopt concerning abortion, global poverty, and any number of other major issues, then we will be better capable of presenting arguments which speak to them as people.

4.2. Empathetic Argument

In his *Coalescent Argumentation*, Michael Gilbert offers an alternative to the traditional dialectical (or, as he refers to it, the “Critical-Logical”) approach to argument. While argument is a crucial part of the lives of nearly everyone, he says, the traditional approach has a habit of going wrong due to the emphasis it places on opposition, as well as a lack of recognition that argument is a situated endeavour engaged in by individuals who do not always argue in a strictly logical manner.¹³⁰ As an alternative to this

¹³⁰ Michael A. Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, xv, 3-4.

approach, Gilbert offers what he takes to be a sort of argument which is both more creative and cooperative. He calls this “coalescent argument.”¹³¹ The traditional philosophical approach, he says, pits arguers against one another. Each arguer must attempt to identify, and focus on, what is *wrong* about the other’s argument.¹³² One arguer “wins” the argument when she persuades the other to accept the position for which she advocates.¹³³ Instead of this, coalescent argument aims at having arguers identify points of agreement and disagreement between their apparently conflicting positions.¹³⁴ Ideally, Gilbert says, successful coalescent argumentation would result in two positions which appear to be at odds coming together (coalescing) in such a way that agreement can be achieved between advocates for both positions.¹³⁵

The approach that Gilbert advances here bears some similarity to my own. We both are highly concerned with the state of contemporary philosophical argument to the point that we argue in favour of alternative and broader methods. We both advocate for deeper engagement with audiences as individuals whose positions are grounded in who they are as real people. My project differs from his, however, both as it concerns the extent to which empathy is explicitly invoked, as well as what I take to be the process, and the goal, of successful empathetic argument.

First, while Gilbert indicates that empathy is very likely the most crucial element in a coalescent approach to argument, he deals only briefly with the concept.¹³⁶ While I do believe that he provides an account which can form the basis of a very rich

¹³¹ Ibid., xv.

¹³² Ibid., 49.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 111.

understanding of the concept, my intention is to provide a much more explicit description of exactly what I take empathy to be, as well as the way that it can be used in, and subsequently benefit, philosophical argument.

Secondly, Gilbert and I have different processes and goals in mind when it comes to the alternative sorts of argument we suggest. Again, the goal of coalescent argument is to minimize disagreement between competing positions. The hope is that these positions might coalesce and lead their advocates to find a non-conflicting option on which they can mutually agree, and which might not previously have been considered.¹³⁷

This is not the goal of empathetic argument. Rather than being interested in the lived experience of others in order to identify points of agreement and disagreement, the empathetic arguer attempts to understand the positions of those who comprise her audience, as they (audience members) understand them, so that she can construct arguments with their perspective explicitly in mind. She does this not so that she and her audience can come to an agreement on the issue at hand but so that she may be better capable of persuading them to accept the position for which she argues.

It should also be said that empathetic argument can be applied in a variety of different circumstances, whereas Gilbert seems to indicate that coalescent argument is primarily dialogical in nature. In his examples of how coalescent argument might be applied, Gilbert presents situations in which only two individuals present their positions to one another in a conversational manner. This comes after he consistently refers to those who enter into this sort of argument as dispute *partners*, and indeed, he does

¹³⁷ Ibid., 49, 102-3.

indicate that he places a strong emphasis on dialogical argument involving only two persons from the outset.¹³⁸ Empathetic argument, as I envision it, can be applied in more circumstances than this. To be sure, an empathetic arguer might enter into argument with only one other person. In these instances, she empathizes with this individual, and using the information gathered through empathy, attempts to persuade them to accept her position. She might also address much larger audiences than this, though. These audiences might be composed of many quite diverse individuals. In such cases, the empathetic arguer attempts to empathize with her audience as a whole. She tries to understand, for example, why those who believe passionately in a right to own and bear arms share in this belief. Subsequently, she constructs her argument with this understanding in mind. The process by which she empathizes with a large audience may not be as intimate as with an individual, and testing whether her arguments have been successful may be different as well, but I believe that empathetic argument is equally applicable in either case.

Before describing empathetic argument further, however, it is important to be clear about what I mean by empathy. Over the past 150 years or so, many different and conflicting positions have been offered as to what we should understand empathy to be, and so to avoid any potential confusion, it is crucial to be clear about what I take empathy to be. As I see it, empathy is a process by which we project ourselves into the situation of others and attempt to understand the way in which they see the world. For the purposes of my project, what we attempt to understand is how they view particular issues of public concern and what it is that they take to be important about such issues. In order to clarify

¹³⁸ Ibid., 4, 119, 124-34.

further, I believe that Gilbert's description of empathy can be quite helpful. Though his treatment of the concept is rather brief, I believe that Gilbert's terminology serves as an excellent stepping-off point upon which to build a rich account of empathy. Properly understood, this account of empathy is one which is not particularly difficult to apply to philosophical argumentation.

Empathy, Gilbert says, is both an attitude and an act of will which "requires paying attention to the entire range of communicative and epistemic modes available in order to project oneself into another's position."¹³⁹ This can be a difficult task, Gilbert says, especially as the disagreement between two positions grows, but this gap is precisely what makes empathy so crucial.¹⁴⁰ Despite its potential importance to his project, though, Gilbert does not say any more than this about what he takes empathy to mean.¹⁴¹ I believe, however, that a closer look at the two components of empathy to which Gilbert refers, will be very beneficial in coming to an understanding of what empathy is. If we understand the empathetic attitude and the empathetic act of will more fully, I argue, it will become quite clear how empathy can be reconciled with philosophical argumentation.

Looking first at the empathetic attitude, it is perhaps unsurprising that I contend that there are two crucial features of this attitude that are worth a closer look: respect and humility. While these two features do not account for an exhaustive picture of all that the empathetic attitude might include, I argue that they are the two features which most clearly identify the disposition we must embody when attempting to empathize with

¹³⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

others. If we can have the sort of respect for audience members that I suggest, and can be humble concerning the instances in which dialectical argument alone falls short, then I believe that we will be well-positioned to practice empathetic argument.

As I have said several times, the sort of respect that is most important for philosophers to have is a respect for the real people that our audiences are composed of. We must respect them as individuals with lived experience which informs what it is that they believe and the good reasons (from their perspective) that they have for adopting particular positions on issues of public concern. While philosophers may not evaluate these reasons and beliefs in nearly as positive a light ourselves, this does not mean that we can assume their irrelevance as we are often wont to do. Rather, we must identify and engage more deeply with them. These reasons and beliefs may indeed be erroneous in nature; they may be grounded in logical error or factual inaccuracy, or may be rooted in emotion. But the proper response to this is not to dismiss them outright or to address our audiences with a blunt and careless accusation of their being wrong in hopes that they might see the light that is our own “correct” position and adopt that instead.

I previously gave the example of an individual who felt that Singer does not account for the circumstances of their life in his argument. This might be the sort of person who believes that providing for their family, and being prepared for contingent expenses is more important than making charitable donations. Perhaps they worry that their children will require private tutoring, or that their family members will someday need expensive medical treatment, and this keeps them from donating generous amounts to charity.

As I have said, this may not be a good reason from the philosopher's point of view. It may be factually true that such individuals could comfortably provide for their families while, at the same time, donating a significant amount to charity. I do not agree, however, that it follows from this that we may simply dismiss reasons such as these as being irrelevant or lacking merit. But, this is exactly what Singer does. Before such reasons are even offered to him, Singer pre-emptively denies that there could be any point in offering them, saying that there is no good reason to accept the moderate version of his principle of preventing bad occurrences as opposed to the strongest formulation.¹⁴² This is the sort of assumption that we cannot continue to make in these scenarios; it is an assumption which is just not indicative of an empathetic approach to argument.

The respect that we need to have is such that we would be inclined to think more deeply about the audience before us, and about those positions which are commonly attached to particular issues of public concern. This is so that we may try to understand the fundamental beliefs which underlie competing perspectives regarding these issues. We must be willing to put in the effort required to discern what it is that makes individuals adopt, and stand fervently by, perspectives which do not seem reasonable to us. The manner in which we deal with such issues, and engage with those who adopt these perspectives, must indicate a respect for the reasoning they have done, no matter how we evaluate it, if we have any intention of affecting, rather than annoying them.

A further part of this respect will have to include what I take to be a very important distinction, one which I believe philosophers fail to appreciate far too often with each other, and certainly outside of philosophical circles. This is a distinction,

¹⁴² Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 241.

initially made by Andrea Nye, between analyzing and reading, or as I prefer to say, *listening for* and *listening to*.¹⁴³ As philosophers, when we *listen for*, we are attempting to pinpoint claims within an argument which we can undermine in order to show that the argument is somehow faulty. This practice is certainly acceptable, to some degree, and it would be wrong to deny its importance to the dialectical process. Indeed, this is a fundamental aspect of that process; listening critically so that we might identify inaccuracies and make them known to the arguer so that they may amend their argument accordingly. This process, then, is a primarily judgmental one aimed at determining whether specific arguments are worthy of consideration.¹⁴⁴ It is often the case, however, that being critical becomes the philosopher's only goal when we engage in this practice, and unfortunately, this can lead to major misunderstandings about the content of arguments being presented. Some philosophers will take specific terms or phrases as triggers, and immediately begin to think through the various ways in which they can incorporate them into the construction of an objection. Again, because this is a fundamental part of dialectical argument, and because dialectical argument is something in which we are so well-trained, this happens in many cases as nothing but a habit.

This tendency is one that I believe we ought to move away from, to some extent, both in philosophical circles and when it comes to attempts to empathize with audiences comprised of the general public. Rather than *listening for* by default, I argue that we must *listen to*. Instead of listening with the intention to be as critical as possible, we must become equally skilled at listening to understand the position presented to us as a

¹⁴³ Michael A. Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation*, 60.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

considered whole. While it can be incredibly easy to identify what we think to be an error in an argument that needs attention, and to dwell on it, I believe that we need to minimize the extent to which we do this.

This is especially true when it comes to interactions with those who are not trained in philosophy to the degree that some of us are. Rather than trying to pinpoint the errors in logic made by members of the general public and focusing primarily on them, we must think more deeply about why those claims, which we take to be erroneous, are considered to be sufficient from the perspective of this audience. It is not necessarily the case that they do not understand what they are saying, or that they are easily convinced by falsehood. There is often more to it than that, and it is a good arguer's responsibility to determine what this is. As Gilbert references the distinction made by Nye, which bears striking similarity to the distinction I make here, I believe it would be fair to say that this serves as a good example of at least part what he means when he says that paying attention to the full range of communicative and epistemic modes is a necessity.¹⁴⁵

Further, we must move away from the unfortunately elitist mindset with which we tend to approach argument. As I have said previously, there is a belief among philosophers that people ought to be compelled, by the power of logic, to accept the best examples of dialectical argument. Regardless of who might make up an audience, or who might be presenting the argument in question, so long as an argument is properly dialectical, philosophers assume that it will be accepted.

In those instances where negative reactions occur, however, it is often the case that blame is placed on the audience; this is especially the case when audience members

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 111.

are not as well-trained in philosophy as the arguer. The assumption is usually that people reacting poorly would be compelled to accept the argument in question if only they were better trained to understand why they ought to do so. If the argument itself is indicated as being to blame, though, the immediate assumption is that it must be in some way faulty in terms of its logic. It simply does not live up to the dialectical standard in the way that it initially appeared to. Surely, an argument which does not admit of these flaws would be accepted by those who understand why they ought to accept a proper dialectical argument.

Rarely, if ever, is it suggested that this sort of argument just does not resonate with this sort of audience, and that a different approach may be necessary. Because philosophers use dialectical argument as our main method of inquiry in the search for truths, we have come to see this sort of argument as the best and only way of arguing properly. We do not consider that an alternative approach may be more effective, because we do not see any other approach as being good enough to employ. But, an alternative approach does exist, and we already understand that it has great potential to persuade. We simply need to broaden our approach to include rhetorical argument with empathy at its core just so long as it sits at the proper end of the rhetorical spectrum.

This is not to say that I deny the importance of logic. Indeed, I concur with the Aristotelian belief that even in employing rhetoric, we must continue to see *logos* as being at the heart of our arguments. Rather, I contend that philosophers must practice humility both in the way that we approach perspectives with which we do not agree, as well as in the construction and presentation of arguments. Philosophers must be open to the possibility that there may be value in perspectives (and the beliefs in which they are

grounded) that we would not normally accept or engage with beyond identifying their logical errors and supposed falsehoods. We must recognize that we may not have all the answers, and that views which would normally be dismissed may be worth engaging with more deeply so that issues with which almost all of us are concerned can be better addressed.

In addressing such issues, philosophers must also appreciate that there are many individuals for whom a purely logical argument will not be sufficient. Such arguments will often fail to be persuasive, and may even offend those to whom they are offered. Rather than take the elitist view that there is only one way to present and receive arguments, and that others must come to prize the purely logical approach as we do, we need to recognize, as Aristotle did, that there is nothing inherently wrong with broadening our approach so that we may better speak to the concerns of the masses. The general public is not in any way lesser than philosophers because they are not trained to value logic as we do, and we cannot insult their intelligence by continuing to act as if this is the case. They are simply different when it comes to the sorts of arguments, and the kind of reasoning that they recognize as persuasive.

So, this is what I take the empathetic attitude to be in a philosophical sense. It consists in a respect for those whom we present philosophical arguments to, and for the lived experience afforded to them as real human beings. A respect for the intelligence of our audiences, and for their ability to select good reasons upon which to ground the positions they take on various issues of public concern. A desire to do the work necessary to understand the perspectives held by our audiences, to determine what these purportedly good reasons are. A willingness to address these reasons through an approach

to argument that is more broad than dialectical argument; a sort of argument which has the capacity to be more immediately persuasive in contexts where our audience just is the general public.

What, then, do we do with this attitude? If the above is the mindset that we must bring to the table, what actions must philosophers take so that we may engage with audiences through empathy? This is the empathetic act of will, and it is the process by which we may come to determine what competing positions on issues of public concern consist in. My explanation of what this act of will looks like is one that, admittedly, appears simple, and which should not strike anyone as being something new and unheard of. The empathetic act of will, as I see it, is a thought experiment. It is a conscious projection of oneself into the position of the individual or group with whom we are attempting to empathize. We must imagine what it is like to be in the position that they find themselves in, as well as the way in which they feel about, and would react to certain facts relating to, the issue at hand. Through this process, we can come to propose, and subsequently test through argument, hypotheses concerning the content of the perspectives held by audience members.

This should not appear in any way foreign because it is something that many of us already do almost naturally. We often come across people in our daily lives who stand out for whatever reason, and make attempts to understand what it must be like to be them in the situation that they are currently in. During a morning commute, you might see a young mother catch the bus while pushing a two-seat stroller and holding the hand of a third, older child. She may struggle to find a place to fit the stroller, her older child, and herself amongst an already crowded bus. Her children may begin to sob audibly, and she

may become visibly agitated. At this point, many people will think to themselves (or aloud) that this woman should get a car to avoid the trouble of taking all these children on the bus at such a busy time of day. Others, though, will recognize that this is an excellent everyday opportunity to empathize with another individual.

One might attempt to put themselves in this mother's shoes. They might try to understand what it must be like to find oneself in the position of needing to take public transport, and having to bring these children along so early in the morning. While many can find the appearance of a mother pushing a stroller full of children on an already crowded bus to be an annoyance, empathizing with her situation may push them to re-evaluate the way in which they may previously have passed negative judgment. It is certainly possible that one would come away from an empathetic thought experiment such as this with a feeling of compassion toward the mother. This feeling of compassion might affect their current and future actions concerning people in similar situations. This is the sort of experience that happens to us quite often, and I believe that we can apply the information that can be discovered through this process to the construction of arguments.

It must be said that there may be slight differences in terms of the way we attempt to empathize in our daily lives compared to when we do so to construct persuasive arguments. For example, when we engage in the empathetic thought experiment with the mother on the bus, we do not tend to test our conclusions. If we speculate that the mother is in this situation because she is a single mother who must care for, and support her children with no other assistance, or because she is physically or mentally incapable of driving, we do not usually ask her whether any of this is the case. It is certainly possible that this is not the case. She may be very well-off and capable of driving but chooses to

avoid doing so because she worries about the safety of her children in a smaller vehicle, or as a kindness to the environment. Perhaps the reason that we do not test these hypotheses is because we do not see the absolute success of attempts at empathy in these instances as being the most important factor. Rather, we might think that what is important in these instances is how our attempting to empathize can affect us and our interactions with others.

This is somewhat different when applying empathy to argument. What I take to be the most important factor in these cases is the way in which attempts at empathizing can improve the quality of the arguments we construct. As I have said, empathizing with others can allow us to learn more about them, and the way they approach important issues, so that we can construct arguments that speak to them. We may be wrong about those things that we think we learn about them, just as we may be wrong about the circumstances of young mother's life, but we will be capable of testing whether this is the case through the very arguments we hope to improve.

At this point, I would like to provide what I believe to be a helpful example. It is one thing to explain what the empathetic attitude and act of will are, and another to show how embracing these will look different from the manner in which philosophers normally approach issues of public concern. Despite what may have appeared above to be a demanding account, it is my hope that, through this example, it will become clearer that the differences between the traditional approach and empathetic argument are not nearly so monumental.

Take, then, an audience composed of those who have a fervent belief in the right to own and bear arms. Gun ownership is an incredibly controversial topic, and one of

great public concern. Whether individuals should be free to purchase any sort of gun they choose, and to what extent, if any, the purchasing process ought to be regulated are hotly contested in public debate in America. Unfortunately, little progress has been made on this issue. It simply appears that those who wish to enact policies of stricter gun control are incapable of persuading those who passionately support the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution to alter their positions in any way whatsoever.

Now, how might a philosopher deal with such an audience, assuming that she wished to persuade them to support some semblance of gun control? To use a commonplace example, I imagine that she might present facts and figures indicating the danger that can result from widespread gun ownership. Like Singer, she might suggest that if we can prevent unnecessary deaths from occurring, then we ought to do so. She might then point to statistics indicating that, in the United States, where it is easy to procure a gun compared to many other countries, 64% of all homicides in 2016 were gun-related. She may contrast this with figures concerning England and Wales where procuring a gun is much more difficult, and where only 4.5% of homicides were gun-related in approximately the same time period.¹⁴⁶

Given all of this, she might suggest that making it more difficult for some individuals to acquire a gun is at least one way in which many unnecessary deaths might be prevented and, so, she might argue, restricting the ability of some individuals to buy guns (or to purchase particular types of guns) is a route that ought to be explored.

¹⁴⁶ “America’s gun culture in 10 charts,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>.

While this is an extremely quick overview of what has become an exceptionally routine argument on the topic of gun control, from as neutral a perspective as I can imagine, and assuming that one would be persuaded by logic alone, it is not a bad argument by any means. But, it is an argument constructed in the dialectical tradition, and it aims at appealing to any given person regardless of the way in which their unique lived experience may affect their point of view when it comes to this issue. From an objective point of view, we are supposed to see that a smaller population of firearms in one country appears to result in fewer gun-related killings, and from this, assume that a reduction in firearms in another country would have similar results. Given the degree to which the situation in England and Wales is similar to the situation in many other countries with comparatively fewer guns than can be found in the United States, there is at least something to this argument.

For those individuals who are strong believers in the right to bear arms, however, an argument such as this simply presents them with facts, of which they may already be aware but which do not change anything about what they may have experienced themselves that led them to take the position they have. So, it is not surprising that this sort of argument is historically ineffective and often met with negative response. As with the typical reaction among non-philosophers to arguments like those given by Thomson and Singer, people are bound to wonder what this argument has to do with them. What account does it take of their lives and the circumstances that lead them to believe that owning a gun is necessary?

Compare this with the course of action that I believe an empathetic arguer might take. First, the empathetic arguer takes account of who her audience is. In this case, it is

Americans with a strong attachment to the Second Amendment right to bear arms. She recognizes that these are individuals who claim that it is their inalienable right to own guns of all sorts, and who believe that nobody can infringe upon that right. She realizes that they consider this to be a fundamental part of who they are as people. To be fair, this much is likely also known to the philosopher taking the traditional dialectical approach. Indeed, I would suggest that it is common knowledge among almost everyone. The difference, however, is that the traditional philosopher seems to do nothing more with this information than merely recognize it as a fact about a certain subset of individuals. Again, the argument that the philosopher intends to present is one with universal appeal, and which does not prioritize any specific group. It is because of this attempt at universal appeal that philosophers do not feel the need to engage more deeply information like this, which pertains to a one specific group.

The empathetic arguer, on the other hand, must delve deeper into the position held by her audience. She must ask herself what it is that attaches her audience so fervently to this belief and *why* that is the case. She may recall having heard passionate believers in gun ownership ground what they perceive as a need to own guns in a desire to protect themselves and their families. She might wonder what it is that they are protecting themselves from, or why they feel responsible for taking this protection into her own hands. It is at this point that the empathetic arguer begins to move toward the act of will that is projecting oneself into the perspective of another, attempting to see and understand their position as they do. She must attempt to discover their underlying beliefs, as if they were her own, while ensuring that her own judgments and biases are not allowed to enter the picture.

She might begin to suspect, for example, that what lies at the heart of this belief is a deep-seated fear. This might be a fear that attack is always imminent. That home invasion is extremely prevalent and that one must be prepared to act quickly in these cases to protect themselves, and their families, so that they do not have to rely on the police to do so. The police, they might think, do not care about people like them, or will be unable to come to their assistance in a timely enough manner to prevent incredible harm. This fear may be, to some extent, irrational. It could be, for example, that her audience succumbs to what psychologists call the availability heuristic, a mental shortcut which results in our believing that the probability of some events is higher than it is because we are more easily able to recall particularly powerful examples of such events.¹⁴⁷ So, reports of a particularly gruesome home invasion, resulting in multiple deaths, might lead people to believe that such events are incredibly common, and that they need to prepare for when it inevitably happens to them. Statistics show, however, that home invasion resulting in any sort of violence, let alone death, accounted for only 7% of the nearly four million average instances of home invasion which occurred in the United States from 2003-2007.¹⁴⁸ This something that the empathetic arguer must engage with. She cannot choose to ignore this fear because it may be irrational. She must tailor her arguments in such a way that she does not just take that fear into account, and engage with it explicitly, but so that it is made evident to her audience that she recognizes its importance to them.

¹⁴⁷ Anthony Esgate and David Groome, *An Introduction to Applied Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 201.

¹⁴⁸ Shannan Catalano, "Victimization During Household Burglary," Bureau of Justice Statistics, accessed September 21, 2018, <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2172>.

The empathetic arguer still presents facts to her audience, but she presents facts that she has good reason to believe will resonate with them. Rather than more general figures, she may instead appeal to statistics concerning instances in which her audience would suggest that having a gun benefits them. She might reference studies indicating that the rate of homicides related to home invasion is incredibly low, despite what her audience may have come to believe.¹⁴⁹ She may appeal to the greater potential for children to harm themselves, and others, in a household where they can access guns (despite common parental misconceptions about whether their children know where guns are stored in the household).¹⁵⁰ She might point to the instances in which individuals have killed members of their own families, mistakenly believing that someone had broken into their home.¹⁵¹ She may attempt to persuade her audience that they would be doing a better job of protecting their families if they were to choose some non-lethal means of defense, rather than exposing them to the immediate, and almost guaranteed, lethality of firearms.

This, of course, may not be what this specific audience needs to hear either; it may not resonate with them for many reasons. Perhaps they do recognize the rarity of homicides occurring during home invasion, or it may be that this group of gun owners, in particular, does not feel fear as the empathetic arguer has hypothesized. As I see it,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer Mascia, "Loaded Guns, Little Hands," *The Trace*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/10/when-kids-pull-the-trigger-interactive/>; Frances Baxley and Matthew Miller, "Parental Misperceptions About Children and Firearms," *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 160, no. 5 (May 2006): 543-547, accessed September 26, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.160.5.542>.

¹⁵¹ Albert Samaha and Sean Campbell, "She Thought She'd Shot a Burglar. Then She Realized It Was Her Roommate.," *The Trace*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.thetrace.org/2018/03/mistaken-identity-shooting-self-defense/>.

however, errors such as this do not constitute a problem for the empathetic arguer so much as they present an opportunity. Just because one group of faithful believers in the right to bear arms might not be persuaded by this argument does not mean that none will.

It may indeed be true that the empathetic arguer needs to concoct another hypothesis for this group and present to them another argument. Because she embraces the empathetic attitude, this is something that she will be open to doing. She will not see this error as a failure but as an opportunity to better understand, and construct further arguments aimed at, this kind of audience. The more that she learns about her audience, the better her arguments will be *for them*. Persuading all, or most, passionate gun owners may require that she construct a whole host of arguments pertaining to the dangers of widespread gun ownership. We must remember that these are incredibly complex issues, and be open to the idea that they will not be solved by a single argument, no matter how remarkable it may be.

Ultimately, what the empathetic arguer must do is embrace rhetorical argument. She must recognize the importance of the emotional situation and reactions of her audience by engaging with *pathos*. She may attempt to arouse feelings of sympathy in her audience, for those whom they wish to protect, in order to help them see facts which might otherwise be of little importance to them. In recognizing and engaging with their emotions, she appeals to *ethos* by showing her audience that she understands the way in which they approach this issue, that she recognizes that they are not violent, illogical, or evil people. They are afraid. She needs to show them that they can trust her to deal with this issue in a way that recognizes what is important to them, rather than in a manner

which seems to pass judgment on them, and which tells them what they ought to consider important because what they now consider important is not important at all.

But, the empathetic arguer cannot engage with either *ethos* or *pathos* in an exploitative manner; she may not abuse their trust or cause them greater fear to accomplish her goal. She must keep *logos* at the heart of her argument. She must not succumb to the pressure of trading in falsehood just because doing so may persuade a greater number of people more quickly, and with far less resistance, than truth. She must not engage in the deceit and manipulation that philosophers have come to connect inextricably to rhetorical argument and which now, perhaps more than ever, is painfully evident in the world. She must take the neutral tool for which Aristotle advocated and use it virtuously. The empathetic arguer must persuade her audience through truth but in such a way that these truths resonate with them, engage with their lived experience, and speak to them as real human beings.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Having shown how I believe that empathy can be compatible with, and improve, philosophical argumentation, I would like to take this opportunity to address the reason that this thesis is titled as it is. It is almost unquestionably the case that modern philosophy in the West owes a great deal of credit to Socrates for its very existence. It is difficult to imagine where philosophy would be today if not for Socrates' having urged those around him to question their assumptions on all subjects and take nothing for granted. Indeed, were it not for Socrates having taught Plato, and Plato subsequently teaching Aristotle, much of the groundwork for Argumentation Theory might not exist at all.

Despite the incredible influence he would have on philosophy, however, Socrates' methods were not without their controversy during his lifetime. If there is one thing that nearly everyone knows about Socrates, it is that he was a notoriously irritating figure. Throughout the dialogues of Plato, Socrates finds himself in conversation with people who have deep-seated, and previously unquestioned beliefs, about justice, knowledge, piety, virtue, and so on. As I have said previously, Socrates' companions in philosophical discussion would offer what they took to be the proper understanding of one of these concepts, only for Socrates to ask them a question which, when answered, would show how their understanding was deeply flawed. A second definition might be offered, and subsequently subjected to the same scrutiny, with similarly disappointing results. This back-and-forth would continue through multiple attempts at defining a concept, often with different members of a group giving their own definition in the expectation that theirs would be the one with which Socrates found no problems. Unfortunately, though,

definitive answers were not often found through discussion with Socrates. While he would certainly help his audience understand why particular definitions of a concept were faulty, he was not in the business of telling them what it was they should believe instead.

Socrates' methods were certainly frustrating for many of those he encountered and, to be sure, he was aware of the reputation he had garnered. He knew that people were easily irritated by him, and that he had made enemies both of those who he had shown to lack the wisdom that they claimed to have, and of those who believed that he was corrupting the youth of Athens by teaching them to do the same.¹⁵² When offering a defense against his potential execution, Socrates describes himself as a gadfly attached to the great and noble but sluggish horse that was Athens.¹⁵³ He was sent as a gift by the gods, he says, to criticize the beliefs of Athenians and awaken them from a slumber in which they valued material wealth more deeply than wisdom, truth, and the state of their souls.¹⁵⁴ That he annoyed Athenians was merely his way of motivating them to engage with, and question, these beliefs, and this was something that he believed he had been divinely chosen to do.¹⁵⁵ In somewhat poetic fashion, though, the Athenians chose to swat away the gadfly that had caused them such frustration, sentencing Socrates to death.

This picture of Socrates, in which he annoyed those around him to such an extent that he was executed, is one we know all too well. What is often overlooked, however, is his tendency to act in, and compare himself to, a quite different role. Like his mother had

¹⁵² Plato, "Apology," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 21b-24b; Plato, "Theaetetus," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 148e-149a.

¹⁵³ Plato, "Apology," 30e.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29d-30b, 30e-31a, 36c-d.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30d-31c.

been, Socrates thought of himself as something of a midwife.¹⁵⁶ As he tells Theaetetus, though, this is something about which he is particularly secretive, and perhaps this is why few Athenians thought of him as anything but a gadfly.¹⁵⁷ Like a midwife attends to a woman's body and aids her giving birth to a child, Socrates says, he attends to the souls of men and assists them in discovering wisdom and truth within themselves.¹⁵⁸ It is his most important duty, he says, to put the ideas of his students through every test available in order to determine whether their beliefs are erroneous, or grounded in truth.¹⁵⁹ This is why he engages in the questioning and criticizing of the beliefs of others. He is attempting to discover whether what they are "pregnant" with is an idea that captures truth and wisdom, or if it is a "false phantom" which must be aborted.¹⁶⁰ But, while the gods have sent him to provide this assistance to others, Socrates himself is barren of wisdom or truth of his own, in much the same way that a practicing midwife can no longer bear children.¹⁶¹ Those who wonder why Socrates did not provide definitive answers about some concept or other, and why the conclusions to his discussions were not always satisfying, need only look here to understand. Socrates cannot provide either of these, for he believes that he does not have them within him.

What I believe we see here is an important insight into Socrates' teaching philosophy. While many may think of him as an annoyance, and as someone who only makes himself known so that he can show them how they are wrong about all that they believe, he certainly took his philosophical project to be something more. The methods

¹⁵⁶ Plato, "Theaetetus," 149a-151b.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 149a-151b.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 150c-e.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 150c.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 150c-e, 151c-d.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 149b, 150c-d.

which resulted in him garnering such a negative reputation among Athenians were not only a test of the veracity of the beliefs of those he spoke with. They were also a test of these individuals as thinkers. In taking on the role of a midwife, Socrates appears to have been all too happy to assist others in developing knowledge grounded in truth, but this was something that he would only do for those who he recognized as being capable of learning through his methods.¹⁶² Those who did not pass such tests, he says, he would refer on to others, like the sophist Prodicus, whose teachings they might be more receptive to.¹⁶³

An important part of the way that Socrates' puts the role of midwife into action involves an acute ability to recognize who his audience is. Whether they will be the sort of person who he can persuade, and who is open to discovering the wisdom and truth within themselves through the methods that Socrates employs. Further, Socrates is quite skilled at recognizing the emotional state of his audience, and at reacting appropriately to whatever it is his methods have made them feel. As he says, it is he who brings upon them the "pains of labour" and he who alleviates them.¹⁶⁴

An excellent example of this process is found in *Meno*. Here, Socrates engages in discussion with Meno concerning virtue. They attempt to determine what virtue is, and whether one comes to be virtuous by being taught, through practice, naturally, or by some altogether different means.¹⁶⁵ In keeping with the way in which most discussions with

¹⁶² Ibid., 151b-c.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Plato, "Theaetetus," 151a-b.

¹⁶⁵ Plato, "Meno," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 70a.

Socrates tend to proceed, Meno offers definition after definition of virtue, all of which are subsequently shown to be faulty by Socrates.¹⁶⁶

At this point, Meno finds himself utterly lost and pessimistic as to the potential outcome of this conversation. He tells Socrates:

... I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed. ... [Y]ou seem ... to be like the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you now seem to have had that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. Yet I have made many speeches about virtue ... very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is.¹⁶⁷

Two things are evident here. First, as I have said already, Meno is utterly confused at this point. What he previously thought he knew about virtue has been so thoroughly questioned and debunked that he cannot begin to think any further about what it might be. He is frustrated with Socrates for having put him in this position and put this pain upon him, and Socrates recognizes this. But, there is something beyond what Meno has explicitly shared that Socrates recognizes as well. That is, the previous notions of virtue which Meno had been given by Gorgias, and accepted on the grounds of Gorgias' authority alone, have now been abandoned.¹⁶⁸ While Meno is pessimistic about the extent to which they will be able to determine anything valuable about virtue, he is also now something of a blank slate where virtue is concerned, and can be more easily led by Socrates toward discovering wisdom and knowledge of his own.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 71e-79e.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 80a-b.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 71c-72a.

But, Socrates now needs to draw Meno back into discussion, and alleviate the pain he has caused, so that Meno does not end the conversation here. While Meno is now aware of his ignorance, Socrates must give him good reason to continue thinking about virtue rather than giving up. Meno does not think that any progress can come in this conversation and, indeed, wonders whether there is any point in trying to define something which one does not already understand fully.¹⁶⁹ Socrates combats this skepticism by famously showing that one of Meno's slaves can be taught to recall geometrical knowledge held within his soul merely through a series of questions posed to him.¹⁷⁰ The result of this is a much more optimistic Meno, a Meno who is immediately ready to resume discussion concerning virtue, and who, by the end of the dialogue, has a clearer vision of what virtue is and a desire to think more deeply about the concept.¹⁷¹

We see here the midwife truly in action. While the gadfly is the side of Socrates who causes frustration aimed at readying individuals for deeper thinking, the midwife recognizes and eases such pains in order that they might also be *willing* to do so. But, what do the two sides of Socrates have to do with this thesis? I believe that there is an important analogy to be made here between Socrates' two sides and the two approaches to philosophy that I have previously discussed.

The contemporary philosopher that I have described is the gadfly. She presents logically sound but decontextualized, arguments regardless of the specific audience before her. She expects that such arguments will successfully persuade audiences precisely because good logic is supposed to be compelling. While she is respected for this

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 80d-81a.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 82a-86c.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 86c-d, 98b-100b.

approach among her peers, just as Socrates was respected by Plato and others who genuinely appreciated his teachings, it is an approach which has little traction with audiences composed of non-philosophers.

Where Socrates balances the gadfly with the midwife, the contemporary philosopher does not seem to do so nearly as much. While Socrates did not think himself capable of giving those he conversed with explicit answers, the contemporary philosopher does exactly this. As I have said, it is implicit in her approach that if her audience does not agree with her methods it is a failing in them, and not in her approach to argument. Because she is trained in philosophy, she knows the proper way to deal philosophically with questions about abortion, global poverty, racial inequality, the death penalty, gun ownership, and any number of other incredibly important public issues. She speaks past what her audience takes to be important because decontextualizing these issues is what she thinks is the proper way of dealing with them. She causes the same pains that Socrates said he could. She annoys and offends those whose perspectives she ignores. But, she does not follow this with the audience recognition of the midwife. She does not draw her audience back into the conversation, from which she has already alienated them, in order to persuade them to think differently about the subject at hand, as Socrates would have.

To be clear, I do not contend that Socrates was the empathetic arguer which I believe is necessary in dealing with issues of public concern. Indeed, many of the issues that fall into this category today would have been meaningless to Socrates and, as such, it is difficult to speculate, and impossible to pass any judgment, about how he might have

dealt with them through argument. Nonetheless, I believe we can take something important away from his midwifery.

Though his methods were quite different from the empathetic arguer described above, Socrates did accommodate audiences. He recognized that it is important to dispel falsehoods and misinformation, to be sure, but he was cognizant also of the need to go beyond mere identification of such inaccuracies. Socrates' goal was to give people good reason to think more deeply about their unquestioned beliefs. While he did push them to recognize when their beliefs were inadequate, the midwife in Socrates was always at work to recognize when he had pushed someone too far. When this occurred, he did not allow frustrated individuals like Meno to walk away, defeated and confused, without attempting to draw them back into discussion. Rather, he recognized the emotional state they were in and attempted to show them that all was not lost simply because their previous beliefs had been so thoroughly undermined. He wanted them to think more deeply, yes, but he knew that his efforts would be futile if they served only to anger or upset those with whom he discussed philosophy.

This is something that contemporary philosophers do not do nearly often enough. Philosophers point out falsehoods and offer purported truths through argument, but as I have said, they do not give individuals any reason to accept these arguments other than those which only the philosophically-inclined would be willing to accept. They do not engage with their audiences as being composed of people who have unique lived experience. Philosophers irritate and offend, just as Socrates did, but too often, the upshot provided by the midwife is missing.

Again, the climate in which philosophers find themselves today is markedly different from the one in which Socrates was positioned. The issues of public concern with which we must grapple are far greater in number, and seem much more personal, than those that Socrates attempted to assist others in dealing with. Indeed, it is difficult not to view the divide between differing perspectives as being hopelessly large. But, I am optimistic about the potential for empathetic argument to make positive change as it concerns argument pertaining to these issues. Our methods will not be the same as Socrates' were, but the underlying appreciation for the emotional state of one's audiences and the recognition of a need to draw them toward the subject matter being discussed are no less applicable today than they were for Socrates. I believe that we can channel this approach into argument if we attempt to empathize with our audiences, and see issues of public concern from their perspectives. If we meet them on their own terms, and engage with what they take to be important about these crucial issues, I believe there is a greater opportunity to be persuasive, and to identify misinformation, and outright falsehoods, in an effective manner. This approach, I believe, will have far more positive results than the methods philosophers currently employ.

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