

Pessimism about Arguments

You have probably had the experience where people are arguing about (say) abortion—and the debate doesn't seem to go anywhere. Sure, folks give arguments for their view, but usually no one on the other side gets convinced. So the debate just ends with a standoff. If anything, folks become *more* entrenched in their opinions.

This can cause people to be pessimistic about debate and giving arguments in general. But I'm here to tell you that *arguments can accomplish things*.

For one, consider that pessimism about argument is *self-incriminating*. After all, you are giving an *argument* for pessimism, namely that in your experience, arguments are ineffective. Yet this assumes that your argument *justifies* your pessimism, at least to your own satisfaction. But then—contra your pessimism—your argument indeed achieves something: Justifying a claim to your own satisfaction is not insignificant.

Second, although it may come as a surprise, an argument occasionally justifies a claim to most everyone's satisfaction, thus halting the debate. In academic philosophy, one example is Putnam's objection to the view that the mind = the brain. Putnam argued that if this were true, then basically, artificial intelligence would be impossible. After all, if a mind is literally the same thing as a biological organ, then there couldn't be a mind without an organic brain. So it would be impossible to build a mind from inorganic materials. And we should not rule out the *very possibility* of artificial intelligence! Philosophers generally came to agree. Of course, in the future someone might find a problem with Putnam's view, thus ending the consensus. But that sort of thing happens in science as well: New data can sometimes discredit a previously accepted hypothesis. Even so, both science and philosophy are able to reveal truths about the world.

Third, even if the arguments do not settle the main question, they can still teach us other important truths. Consider, for instance, the Design Argument (which is roughly “the universe exhibits an order or design; hence, there must be a designer, God”). One well-known objection is that *evolution* shows how complex designs might come into existence without a designer. Still, a theist may be able to counter this objection; perhaps she can say that evolution is part of God's grand design. But naturally, her opponent may be able to criticize that too, and so on. Hence the debate can continue, and we may not learn what we primarily wanted to know, viz., whether the Design Argument works. Yet *already* the debate has taught us two important lessons.

One is that *the Design Argument definitely does NOT work unless it addresses evolution*. That is a noteworthy lesson, since some folks advocate the Design Argument without considering evolutionary theory. Another is we have learned of *a more sophisticated theism*, which tries to integrate evolution into God's design. That too is an important lesson; after all, many people think that evolutionary theory leads straight to atheism. Yet it now seems that theism and evolution can be reconciled.

So arguments DO accomplish things! We can learn lessons from the debates (even if the main question goes unanswered). And arguments can justify things to your own satisfaction—and sometimes even to everyone's satisfaction. Three cheers for arguments!