

A Code of Conduct for Effective Rational Discussion¹

This code of rational conduct can be construed as an important standard of behavior in two different senses. First, it represents a kind of standard of effectiveness, because it describes the kind of intellectual behavior that is most often successful in resolving the issues that divide us. Moreover, the kind of discussion that actually helps to confirm or revise beliefs is usually conducted in accordance with principles like these. The code, then, is simply a formalizing of those ways of dealing with issues that work.

Rules similar to the ones we suggest have recently been formulated by some researchers in speech communication theory. They have discovered empirically that discussions that follow certain procedural ground rules are more successful in settling issues than those that do not. My own experiences as an unreluctant arguer and my experimentation with these principles in my college classes over the last several years have yielded the same gratifying results.

Second, the code represents an important ethical standard. While it may seem a bit odd to suggest that failure to carry on a discussion in accordance with the principles outlined here is *immoral*, it is surely *not* strange to suggest that one *ought* to argue fairly. Insofar as a spirit of fair-mindedness demands of all participants in rational discussion a commitment to the same minimal standards of intellectual behavior, these rules clearly take on an ethical dimension. Consider how often we find ourselves in situations in which our verbal opponent refuses to abide by what we regard as the rules of the game. This not only shuts down the discussion, but more important, it prevents the issue at stake from being decided or at least further explored. In such situations we frequently become indignant toward our opponent, and our demand for compliance is more than a mild irritation; it has decidedly *moral* overtones. We clearly expect fair play on the part of others, and we obviously should expect no less of ourselves.

The following principles exhibit these two important standards, but they also serve as a review of virtually all the matters covered in the text. Making them a part of your intellectual style should help you to avoid committing the most common errors in reasoning, to construct the strongest possible arguments for your views, to escape any charge of unfairness, and most important, to do your part in resolving those conflicts concerning issues that matter to us².

¹ T. Edward Damer, "A Code of Conduct for Effective Rational Discussion," chapter VIII in *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*. 1995 Wadsworth Publishing Company.

² For a practical application of the principles governing good argumentation, see the detailed critique of several popular points of view, including those of Shirley Maclame and Ronald Reagan, in Lawrence L. Habermehl's *The Counterfeit Wisdom of Shallow Minds: A*

THE FALLIBILITY PRINCIPLE

When alternative positions on any disputed issue are under review, each participant in the discussion should acknowledge that possibly none of the positions presented is deserving of acceptance and that, at best, only one of them is true or the most defensible position. Therefore, it is possible that thorough examination of the issue will reveal that one's own initial position is a false or indefensible one.

The fallibility principle is generally regarded as a standard principle of serious inquiry. To employ it in discussion is consciously to accept the fact that you are fallible, that is, that you may very well be wrong in your view, or at least not in possession of the most defensible view on the matter in dispute.

If you refuse to accept your own fallibility, you are, in effect, saying that you are not willing to change your mind, no matter what—even if you hear a better argument. This is also strong evidence that you do not intend to play fairly. Consequently, there is no real point in pursuing the discussion any further, for there is little likelihood that any significant progress will be made. A confession of fallibility, however, is a positive sign that you are sincerely interested in the kind of honest inquiry that may lead to a fair resolution of the issue.

The assumption of mutual fallibility is the crucial first step for discussants to take. Unfortunately, this move is rarely made in discussions of religion and politics, which is probably the reason that so little progress is made in those important areas of dispute. It is, however, the standard principle of inquiry among scientists, philosophers, and most other academics. Indeed, these truth-seekers would probably argue that it is a necessary condition of intellectual progress.

If there is any doubt about the appropriateness of accepting the fallibility principle, take any issue about which there are a number of alternative and conflicting opinions held. For example, consider the area of religion. Since each of the hundreds of conflicting theological or ecclesiastical positions is different in some respect from all the others, we know before we begin any examination of those positions that only one of them has the possibility of being true—and even that one may be seriously flawed. So it turns out that not only is it *possible* that our own religious position is false or indefensible, it may even be *probable* that it is.

It is quite possible, of course, that our own position is more defensible than *many* of the others—especially if we have spent time developing and

refining it in accordance with the available evidence and the tools of reason. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that out of all of the conflicting religious positions currently held, many of which are vigorously defended by good minds, it will be only our position that will be the correct one. Although we may *believe* that our own view is the most defensible one, we must keep in mind that others believe the same thing about *their* views and only one of us, at best, can be right.

Several years ago at a conference on critical thinking, a panelist defined a critical thinker as "a person who by force of argument had changed his or her mind about an important issue at least once during the last year." He went on to say that it is highly unlikely that any person would just *happen* to be correct on every position held on important matters. On the contrary, given the great number of issues that divide us and the large number of different positions on each of those issues, it is more likely that a person would turn out to be wrong on more issues than he or she would be right.

The most convincing evidence of the fallibility of human opinions comes from the history of science. We are told by some of science's historians that virtually every knowledge claim in the history of science has been shown by subsequent inquiry to be either false or at least seriously flawed. And if this is true of the past, it may be true as well of present and future claims of science, even in spite of the more sophisticated techniques of inquiry used by modern science. Moreover, if such observations can be made about an area of inquiry with fairly standard evidential requirements, it seems reasonable to assume that nonscience claims would suffer an even worse fate. In the face of such findings, we should at least be intellectually humbled enough to be less than certain about our claims to truth.

The important point here is that a confession of fallibility is a clear indication that we are consciously prepared to listen to the arguments of another person. Although it is not easy to admit honestly that a firmly held position may not be true, it is a discussion starter unlike any other. It not only calms the emotional waters surrounding the treatment of issues about which we feel deeply, but it has the potential for opening our ears to different and better arguments. We may even become critical thinkers, that is, persons who change our minds by the force of those arguments. If you are skeptical about how effectively this tactic works, be the first to confess your own fallibility. At least make it clear that you are willing to change your mind. Your opponents will surely enter the confessional right behind you, if only to escape intellectual embarrassment. If they refuse to do so, you will at least know the futility of any further conversation about the matter at issue.

THE TRUTH-SEEKING PRINCIPLE

Each participant should be committed to the task of earnestly searching for the truth or at least the most defensible position on the issue at stake. Therefore, one should be willing to examine alternative positions seriously, look for insights in the positions of others, and allow other participants to present arguments for or raise objections to any position held with regard to any disputed issue.

The truth-seeking principle is also a standard principle of inquiry. It has gone hand in hand with the fallibility principle since the time of Socrates, who taught that we come to true knowledge only by first recognizing our own ignorance or lack of knowledge. The search for truth then becomes a life-long endeavor, which principally takes the form of discussion, wherein we systematically entertain the ideas and arguments of fellow seekers after truth, while at the same time we thoughtfully consider criticisms of our own views.

Since, as we have seen, it is not likely that the truth is now in our custody, all of our intellectual energies expended in discussion should be directed toward finding it or *at least finding the most defensible position possible for the present time*. That position, of course, is the position that is supported by the strongest or best argument encountered.

If the truth were already held, there would obviously be no use in any further discussion. To those who might claim that a discussion could at least be used to convince others of what we already know to be the truth, it should be pointed out that the "others" are probably making the same assumptions about the views that they now hold. Hence, it is unlikely that any truth will be changing hands. If we really are interested in finding the truth, it is imperative not only that we assume that we may not now have the truth, but that we listen to the defenses of alternative positions and encourage criticism of our own arguments.

There are some issues, of course, about which we have already done the hard work of investigation. We have thoroughly examined the issue, have listened to and found seriously wanting the arguments on the other side, and have entertained and found weak and nondamaging the criticisms of our position. In such a situation, we should not give the impression that we have an open mind about the issue and carry on a pseudodiscussion. We have two other alternatives. If we really are tired of the issue and anticipate little or no possible evidence that might change our mind, we should admit that to our opponent and perhaps skip the discussion. But if we genuinely believe that we might have missed something that could cause us to alter our position, then, by all means, we should enter the debate as an honest seeker. The outcome may be that we convince our opponent of our position,

but we should enter the debate only if we ourselves are willing to be turned around by the force of a better argument.

In our better moments we probably all want to hold only those opinions that really are true, but the satisfaction of that interest comes at a price—a willingness to look at all available options and the arguments in support of them. Otherwise, we might miss the truth completely. The problem, of course, is that most of us want the truth to be what we now hold to be the truth. We want to win, even if we have to cheat to do it. For example, we obviously want our newborn child to be the most adorable child in the hospital nursery, but to declare our child the contest winner, before objectively examining the features of every other child, is simply dishonest.

Real truth-seekers do not try to win by ignoring or denying the counterevidence against their positions. Real winning is finding the position that results from playing the game in accordance with the rules. To declare yourself the winner before playing the game or by refusing to play by the rules fails to advance the search for truth and is in the end self-defeating.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF PRINCIPLE

The burden of proof for any position usually rests on the participant who sets forth the position. If and when an opponent asks, the proponent should provide an argument for that position.

A good discussion is not simply a verbal contest in which opinions are traded between opposing parties. A good discussion will include arguments in support of any opinion found by one of the participants to be questionable. Many opinions, of course, are shared by the parties involved and thus require no defense in a particular context. However, the central claims at issue in a dispute will almost always require some support. Therefore, if asked, the one who makes a controversial claim has the burden of proof, that is, the responsibility to provide an appropriate argument in support of it.

To ask others to accept your claim without any support or to shift the burden of proof to them by suggesting that your position is true unless they can prove otherwise is to commit the fallacy of arguing from ignorance. For you are, in this way, making a claim based on no evidence at all. Indeed, you are basing the claim on the absence of evidence, that is, on ignorance. You can see the absurdity of such a move by taking any highly questionable claim and arguing that it is true in the absence of any counterevidence. For example, you could argue that it is true that your great-grandfather died of AIDS unless someone can prove otherwise, or that it is true that pornography causes sex crimes, unless someone can prove that it doesn't. In this way you fail to take responsibility for your own claims and even attempt to get your opponents to do your work for you. Moreover, since

negative claims are notoriously difficult to establish, you are attempting to set yourself up for a "win" by default. But in this game, there are no wins by default; the merit of any position can be only as good as the argument given in support of it.

We do not want to give the impression, of course, that a good discussion must be carried on with the formal style of the courtroom. When the mutual interest of the parties is in finding the truth or the best solution, participants often assume an informal burden of evaluating any claim presented, sometimes without waiting to hear the initial argument in its behalf. This approach is sometimes a good one, because it is more natural and often saves time, but no one should be led into believing that the burden of proof thereby no longer rests on the shoulders of those who make controversial claims, nor that it can be shifted without blame to others. It should perhaps be pointed out that "proof," in the context in which it is being used here, does not mean absolute, knock-down proof. It does not even mean, for example, "beyond a reasonable doubt," as required of the prosecutor in a criminal trial. To provide proof for one's position is to present what appears to be a good, that is, fallacy-free, argument in its behalf. Just recently a tobacco industry representative argued that "they have not yet proved any connection between the smoking of cigarettes and health problems." It is not entirely clear what he meant by proved, but it was obvious that he was going to defend the tobacco interests, even at the risk of appearing foolish. I presume that he was using the term with a meaning that is close to that kind of absolute proof associated with mathematical or geometric theorems. Such proof, however, is not likely to be found for any claim typically encountered in informal discussion; nor would it be reasonable to expect it.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

The argument presented for any position should be one that is capable of being reconstructed into a commonly accepted or standard argument form. If a participant's argument is reformulated by an opponent, it should be expressed in the strongest possible version that is consistent with the original intention of the arguer. If there is any question about that intention or about implicit parts of the argument, the arguer should be given the benefit of doubt in the reformulation.

If we expect our discussions to be effective ones, the arguments we present must actually *look* like arguments. They must be capable of being reconstructed either by us or by our opponents into some commonly accepted or standard argument form, so that the quality of the argument may be properly evaluated. An argument may be either deductive or inductive; it may be, for example, a statistical, analogical, or causal

argument. But if it is an argument, it must exhibit the necessary or standard features of an argument. It must make either an explicit or implicit claim that is accompanied by at least one other explicit or implicit statement or piece of information that is thought to be supportive of the truth of the claim.

It is usually helpful to reconstruct an opponent's argument into a recognizable argument form, so that there will be no misunderstanding or confusion about what is being evaluated. Once formulated, one should also allow the arguer to refine the argument further, so that it will be the best possible version of the argument that is under scrutiny.

If you are the one who is reconstructing your opponent's argument, you should make every effort to be as fair as possible in formulating the argument that you think he or she actually intended to make. While you don't need to turn it into a different or better argument than it is, you should give the arguer the benefit of any doubt that you may have about his or her intention. This means that you should be willing to supply any unstated or implicit parts of the argument and maybe even use words that are more precise or clear than those used in the original argument. The arguer's complementary act of fairness is not to wrongly accuse an opponent of distorting his or her argument, simply because the opponent's reformulation of the argument exposes its weaknesses.

It should be clear by now that good discussion in general and argumentation in particular clearly impose an ethical requirement on us. But there is also a good practical reason for being fair with one another's arguments. If we create a straw man to attack, we not only will waste time and risk losing our intellectual integrity, we also will quite possibly fail to achieve the very goals the discussion was designed to serve. If we are really interested in the truth or the best answer to a problem, then we will want to evaluate the best version of any argument set forth in support of one of the options. Hence, if we don't deal with the best version now, we will eventually have to do so, once an uncharitable version has been corrected or improved on by its author or others. We would do well simply to be fair with it in the first place. Moreover, an honest treatment of our opponents' arguments creates less stress for all the players and is especially disarming to our strongest critics.

THE CLARITY PRINCIPLE

The formulations of all positions, defenses, and attacks should be free of any kind of linguistic confusion and clearly separated from other positions and issues.

Any successful discussion of an issue must be carried on in language that is understood by all the parties involved. Even if what we have to say is

perfectly clear to us or maybe even to those in our linguistic circle, others may not be able to understand us. Consequently, they will not be able to respond to us in any helpful way. A necessary condition of an effective exchange is that all parties understand what is being said. A position or a criticism of it that is expressed in vague, ambiguous, equivocal, or contradictory language will fail to reach and may even mislead those toward whom it is directed. But, most important, if clear language is not used, there will be little progress in resolving the issue at hand.

Moreover, if every participant makes the effort to keep the discussion on target, it will also be a less time-consuming and even less stressful one. Every position or criticism that is expressed in confused language not only delays the potential resolution of the issue but often creates an unhealthy frustration among the participants.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in achieving clarity is that of being able to concentrate clearly on the main issue at stake. In informal discussion it is not easy to keep focused on the central issue. Controversial issues usually have many related features, and all of them may be important to deal with. To be successful, however, we must usually deal with issues one feature at a time. Each party to the dispute must therefore exercise great care in trying to keep other interesting yet distracting issues from clouding the discussion.

Finally, there is a special hell prepared for those who attempt to end a discussion by smugly suggesting that "our disagreement is just a matter of semantics." Such people are more villainous than benign, because they thereby contribute to the failure to resolve what is probably an important matter. Linguistic confusion is not the place to stop a discussion; it is usually the starting place from which we need to escape. We must not let the potential resolution of an issue that matters to us falter on the rock of verbal confusion.

THE RELEVANCE PRINCIPLE

One who presents an argument for or attacks a position should set forth only reasons or questions that are directly related to the merit of the position at issue.

The reasons given in support of a position should always be relevant ones. Relevant reasons are those the acceptance of which provides some reason to believe, counts in favor of, or makes a difference to the truth or falsity of the conclusion. Relevance is the criterion of a good argument that is applied first, because if a reason given is not relevant to the truth of the conclusion, then there is no use in even considering whether it merits our acceptance. It can be safely ignored.

There are a number of typical ways that arguments fail to conform to the relevance principle. Some arguers try to use reasons that are simply emotional appeals, such as the fallacies of appeal to pity and to fear. Other irrelevant appeals are to common opinion and to inappropriate authorities.

Other fallacies that violate the relevance criterion are the so-called *ad hominem* fallacies—those that attack the person presenting the argument, rather than the argument itself. These fallacies are primarily ways of violating the rebuttal criterion, for they are most typically used as a means to avoid addressing the strong points of an opponent's argument. But since personal attacks have no role to play in determining the truth or falsity of any position under review, they are also irrelevant features of any argument.

The very first step in the reconstruction of another's argument is to check it for any obvious irrelevancies. In the context of informal discussion, we usually encounter quite a number of colorful yet irrelevant pieces of material. Most of these features, however, are not viciously irrelevant or even intended as a crucial part of the argument and therefore do not rise to the level of being called fallacies. For that reason they can simply be excluded from the reconstruction.

Many arguments, however, contain irrelevant reasons or premises that the arguer clearly regards as relevant. Indeed, that is why they were included as a part of his or her argument. These premises should therefore be included in the reconstruction of an opponent's argument, even if subsequent evaluation may show them to be irrelevant. It is entirely possible, of course, that what *appears* to be irrelevant may be shown to be quite relevant after further reflection on the matter.

Finally, we should all examine the relevance of our own premises as closely as possible. It is a waste of time for our conversational partners to expend energy evaluating premises that probably shouldn't have been included in the first place.

THE ACCEPTABILITY PRINCIPLE

One who presents an argument for or attacks a position should attempt to use premises or reasons that are mutually acceptable to the participants or that at least meet standard criteria of acceptability.

The principal test by which we determine the quality of an argument is whether the reasons set forth in support of the conclusion are acceptable. A reason is acceptable if it is the kind of claim that would be accepted by a rational person in the face of all the relevant evidence presented or at least available in its defense. This criterion is similar to the instructions that judges give jurors in a criminal trial. They are asked to find the defendant guilty if the key evidence presented by the prosecutor and evaluated by the

defense attorney is evidence that a reasonable person would accept as true or would treat as beyond reasonable doubt. Absolute truth is too difficult a criterion to meet. The most that we can legitimately expect is what a reasonable person would *accept* as true.

What seems rational to some people, of course, does not always seem rational to others. For that reason we have listed a number of specific guidelines in the text that should be helpful in bringing us to more agreement on the question of what is or is not an acceptable claim. For example, it would probably be reasonable to accept the testimony of an uncontroverted expert or an uncontroverted eyewitness. At the same time, it would probably not be rational to accept a claim that contradicts a well-established claim or contradicts testimony from what appears to be a credible source.

In real life, of course, we already use the notion of acceptability in place of the notion of truth. When we swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in a court of law, we are obviously telling what we accept as true, not what is true. The reason we know this is that contradictory claims are the rule rather than the exception in the courtroom, so at least one of the claimants is telling only what is accepted as true. If the criterion of absolute truth were employed, we would hear little or no courtroom testimony, and few disputes would ever be resolved.

Hence the pragmatic criterion of acceptability. But we should always keep in mind that this criterion does not mean that a reason or premise is acceptable simply because someone accepts it or because we can get someone to accept it. We know too well how easy this is, especially if one is preaching to the saved, to the immature, or to the easily tricked. A claim is acceptable only if it would be the kind of claim accepted by a rationally mature person using generally agreed-on standards of acceptability.

There are several types of fallacies that violate the acceptability criterion. A claim that is expressed in language that is confusing is not acceptable simply because of that confusion; we obviously cannot accept a claim that we do not understand. Other violations are the begging-the-question fallacies. These fallacies violate the acceptability criterion because the argument uses a premise that is as questionable as the claim it allegedly supports-mainly because the supporting claim, in effect, is the claim it supports. Finally, a common way of violating the acceptability criterion is found in the so-called unwarranted assumption fallacies, wherein reasons that are based on highly questionable implicit assumptions are used to support other claims.

THE SUFFICIENT GROUNDS PRINCIPLE

One who presents an argument for or attacks a position should attempt to provide reasons that are sufficient in number, kind, and weight to support the acceptance of the conclusion.

Once one has examined an argument for the relevance and the acceptability of the premises, there is still plenty of work to do. Relevant and acceptable premises do not necessarily a good argument make. An argument must also meet the demands of the sufficient grounds criterion. There must be a sufficient number of relevant and acceptable premises of the appropriate *kind* and *weight* in order for an argument to be good enough for us to accept its conclusion.

Some sciences have well-developed sufficiency criteria in place. Statisticians, for example, have determined what constitutes a proper sample from which to draw defensible conclusions. Witness the accuracy of most election predictions. But in informal discussion, it is sometimes very difficult to determine what constitutes sufficient grounds. The application of the criterion in practical areas of discussion, such as morality, politics, and religion, leaves much to be desired. Each area of inquiry seems to have its own standard of sufficiency. Not only the amount of evidence but also the kind and weight of evidence required seem peculiar to each context.

The feature of the sufficiency criterion that is the most difficult to apply has to do with the assignment of weight to each of the pieces of supporting evidence. Indeed, it is probably the disagreement over this issue that causes the most problems in informal discussions. What one participant regards as the most important piece of evidence, another may regard as trivial by comparison with other considerations. It is not likely that we will come to cloture in our disputes until we come to some kind of agreement about what weight to give to critical kinds of relevant and acceptable evidence used in support of our conclusions.

There are two fundamental ways in which arguments fail to satisfy the sufficiency requirement. First, there are what might be called the fallacies of missing evidence. These are cases where the kind of evidence needed to support a conclusion is simply not there. Some examples of these fallacies are too small a sample, unrepresentative data, and special pleading. Other fallacies violating the sufficient grounds criterion are the causal fallacies. Each of these fallacies is a different way of inferring causal explanations from premises that simply do not provide adequate support for such explanations. Some examples of these fallacies are causal oversimplification, the domino fallacy, and the gambler's fallacy.

THE REBUTTAL PRINCIPLE

One who presents an argument for or attacks a position should attempt to provide effective responses to all serious challenges or rebuttals to the argument or position at issue.

Meeting the demands of the criterion of rebuttal is perhaps the most difficult of all argumentative tasks. It is, at least, the weakest part of my own arguments and of the arguments of my students, children, wife, friends, relatives, and colleagues. But an argument is not a good one if it does not or cannot successfully blunt the force of not only the counterarguments to the position being defended but also the arguments mustered in behalf of alternate positions.

Any argument can be made to look good if it does not engage the principal challenges to its strength. For example, virtually every jury in a criminal trial is impressed by the quality of the prosecutor's argument. If that were the only argument heard, nearly all juries would convict the accused. It is the defense attorney's rebuttal and the prosecutor's response to that rebuttal that give the jury the whole picture and the proper basis for decision.

The honest seeker not only will allow the questioning of his or her position, but will encourage such challenges. In most cases, of course, there is the assumption that one will be able to render any challenge impotent, but the underlying reason for the invitation to challenge should be to enlist help in exposing a possibly faulty position.

The rebuttal should be the primary driving force behind the formation of every argument. In this way one will have a constant reminder that an argument is not finished until one has finished off the counterarguments. If you look at most controversial issues and the arguments in their behalf, you will notice in many cases that both of the opposing arguments have relevant, acceptable, and seemingly sufficient support. But at least one of the arguments cannot be a good one, because it is not possible for both of the conflicting positions to be true. The solution to this dilemma of "double truth" is most often to be found in the manner in which one of the arguments can effectively meet the most serious challenges to its own position or can damage the strongest arguments for the other position.

What is a serious challenge? It is one that reasonable persons, following all the guidelines suggested in this code and text, would regard as looking forceful enough on the surface to require some answer. Even if the arguer thinks that there is an effective response to the criticism, he or she should treat it as a serious challenge, if for no other reason than to ultimately convince its holder and others of its weakness. Indeed, the arguer would do well to anticipate the most obvious challenges as part of his or her original argument. It not only shows that one has done one's homework, but

it disarms the critic in advance. The alleged "big guns" are rendered ineffective before they are fired.

What is an effective response? It is one that a reasonable person, following all the guidelines suggested in this code and text, would accept as seriously damaging or destroying the force of the criticism or counterargument. In other words, an effective response to a serious challenge is one that should cause a reasonable person to no longer regard the challenge as a serious one.

There are several ways that arguments can fail to meet this criterion. The fallacies of diversion call attention to several diversionary tactics commonly used by those wishing to avoid the responsibility of rebuttal. For example, arguments that respond to a serious challenge by misrepresenting the criticism, by bringing up trivial objections or a side issue, or by resorting to humor or ridicule are using devices that clearly fail to make effective responses. The same can be said of those arguments that ignore or deny the counterevidence against one's position. Finally, those arguments that try to avoid responding to an argument by attacking the arguer instead of the argument are among the most morally questionable ways of violating the obligation to respond honestly to the arguments of our verbal opponents.

THE RESOLUTION PRINCIPLE

An issue should be considered resolved if the proponent for one of the alternative positions successfully defends that position by presenting an argument that uses relevant and acceptable premises that provide sufficient grounds to support the acceptance of the premises and the acceptance of the conclusion and provides an effective rebuttal to all serious challenges to the argument or position at issue. Unless one can demonstrate that these conditions have not been met, one should accept the conclusion of the successful argument and consider the issue, for all practical purposes, to be settled. In the absence of a successful argument for any of the alternative positions, one is obligated to accept the position that is supported by the best of the good arguments presented.

If the purpose of rational discussion is ultimately to decide what to do or believe, then coming to cloture should happen more often than it does. There are many good arguments out there, and if what we have suggested as appropriate procedures for discussion really have merit, then we should be resolving issues much more frequently than we do.

Issues such as the effect of cigarette smoking on health, the creationism\evolution debate, and questions of gender and race bias should be settled. The arguments have been made, and they are good ones, but the

debates go on. How much more discussion is needed, just because some refuse to recognize the presence of a successful argument?

Unfortunately, very few controversial issues ever come to rational resolution. If you have doubts about this, then ask yourself when was the last time you allowed the force of argument to change your mind about an important issue—even though changing one's mind in the face of a successful argument should not be a difficult thing to do for a genuine truth-seeker.

So why does it not happen? Why are issues not resolved? Probably there are a number of reasons. It could be that one of the parties to the dispute has a blind spot; that is, he or she simply can't be objective about the particular issue at hand. Or maybe he or she has been rationally but not psychologically convinced by the discussion. Another possible explanation is that one or all of the parties have been rationally careless or at least guilty of not thinking as clearly as they may think they have. It is even possible that one of the parties has a hidden agenda—an issue to defend other than the stated one. Or maybe the parties involved are simply not being honest with themselves, for they may want to win the argument more than they want to find a solution to the problem. Finally, perhaps the parties are in what might be called "deep disagreement"; that is, they are divided on the issue because of fundamental underlying assumptions that have yet to be explored.

Unfortunately, none of these explanations is a justification for not resolving our disputes. Indeed, each causal explanation rests on identifiable features of uncritical thinking or violations of the code of intellectual conduct, which we are allegedly committed to try to avoid.

It is possible, of course, that some matters are left unresolved for more respectable reasons. Perhaps the evidence available is regarded as presently too skimpy to lead to a conclusion on the matter, or perhaps one of the parties is still looking for an effective counterargument that he or she thinks is out there to be found. There may even remain serious disagreement over whether an argument presented has indeed been successful—especially with regard to the sufficiency requirement.

These are all reasons that may make one less confident in adopting the conclusion of one of the arguments presented, but since few arguments are ever found to be totally successful, one is obligated to accept the position that is supported by the best of the good or near-successful arguments presented. Otherwise, since one can always claim that there has been no absolute proof presented, one could leave unresolved forever virtually every issue discussed. Besides, we have tried to show that there are objective criteria available to determine the quality of an argument. Judges and juries do it routinely, and there is no reason why the rest of us cannot do it as well. We are not saying that there is one monolithic logic to which all discussion participants must bow down; we are simply saying that

there are more objective ways of evaluating arguments than some are willing to admit.

THE SUSPENSION OF JUDGMENT PRINCIPLE

If no position comes close to being successfully defended, or if two or more positions seem to be defended with equal strength, one should, in most cases, suspend judgment about the issue. If practical considerations seem to require an immediate decision, one should weigh the relative risks of gain or loss connected with the consequences of suspending judgment and decide the issue on those grounds.

If the appropriate evidence is so lacking that one has no good basis for making a decision either way on an issue, it may be quite appropriate to suspend judgment on the matter and wait until there is more of a basis for decision. This alternative should not, however, be seen as a clever way to avoid the psychological fright of making a difficult decision or of moving into unfamiliar territory.

The same might be said of the second condition for suspending judgment—the equal strength of the arguments. This situation is likely to be a very rare phenomenon, for one argument is almost always better than the others if judged by the objective standards available. Equal strength, then, means that one really cannot decide between the two arguments at present. Some issues, of course, do not allow such suspension. If the decision is a forced or momentous one, such as deciding whether to have an abortion, one has to decide on the grounds of the practical consequences of not making the decision.

THE RECONSIDERATION PRINCIPLE

If a successful or at least good argument for a position is subsequently found by any participant to be flawed in a way that raises new doubts about the merit of that position, one is obligated to reopen the issue for further consideration and resolution.

No argument may be regarded as permanently successful. There is always the possibility that new evidence will come to light that will raise new doubts about a position held on what were thought to be good grounds. Under these conditions, further examination is always appropriate. Pride in good or successful arguments past should not become an obstacle to reopening the issue in the present if conditions warrant it. The principles of fallibility and truth-seeking are as important at this point as they were in the original inquiry.

The new doubts, however, should not be the same old doubts in new clothing. Reopening the issue should come only from the impetus of uncovering new or reinterpreted evidence not considered in the earlier treatment of the issue. Otherwise, the re-examination of the issue is the worst form of the violation of the resolution principle—simply a device to continue to haggle over the same ground.