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David Godden  
*Old Dominion University*

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# Teaching Rational Entitlement and Responsibility: A Socratic Exercise

DAVID GODDEN

*Department of Philosophy  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia  
USA 23529  
dgodden@odu.edu*

**Abstract:** The paper reports on a Socratic exercise that introduces participants to the norm of rational entitlement, as distinct from political entitlement, and the attendant norm of rational responsibility. The exercise demonstrates that, because participants are not willing to exchange their own opinion at random for another differing opinion to which the owner is, by the participants' own admission, entitled, they treat their entitlement to their own opinion differently, giving it a special status. This gives rise to rational obligations such as the obligation to provide reasons, and a willingness to risk those opinions to the force of the better reason.

**Résumé:** On décrit un exercice socratique qui initie des participants à la norme de droit rationnel, distingué du droit politique, et à la norme d'accompagnement, la responsabilité rationnelle. Les exercices démontrent aux participants que, puisqu'ils ne sont pas prêts à échanger leur propre opinion au hasard pour une autre opinion à laquelle ils ont droit, ils traitent différemment leur droit à leur propre opinion, ce qui donne à leur opinion un statut particulier. Cela donne lieu à des obligations rationnelles telles que l'obligation d'avancer des raisons ainsi que l'obligation d'être disposé à remplacer leurs raisons par des meilleures raisons.

**Keywords:** evidence proportionalism, rational entitlement, rational obligations, rational responsibility

For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing amongst all the nations of the world the beliefs he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose those of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best...There is abundant evidence that this is the universal feeling about the ancient customs of one's country. One might recall...an account told of Darius. When he was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be at his court and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks...he asked some Indi-

ans...who do in fact eat their parents' dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing. One can see by this what custom can do and Pindar, in my opinion, was right when he called it 'king of all.' Herodotus, *The Histories* (3.38)<sup>1</sup>

[T]here is ... one unerring mark of ... [the love of truth, namely:] not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant. Locke, *Essay* (IV.xix.1)<sup>2</sup>

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. Hume, *Enquiries* (X.i.87)<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This article takes its inspiration from Patrick Stokes's recent contribution "No, you're not entitled to your opinion" to the online academic journal *The Conversation* (October 5, 2012). Stokes, a lecturer in philosophy at Deakin University, in Melbourne, Australia, describes the following conversation he has with his students at the beginning of term:

I say something like this: "I'm sure you've heard the expression 'everyone is entitled to their opinion.' Perhaps you've even said it yourself, maybe to head off an argument or bring one to a close. Well, as soon as you walk into this room, it's no longer true. You are not entitled to your opinion. You are only entitled to what you can argue for." (Stokes, 2012)

Reading this reminded me of an exercise I've been doing in my introductory classrooms for a couple of years now—an exercise which I thought worth sharing. While it's not so dramatic as to claim that people are not entitled to their opinions, it does endeavor to show that the kinds of entitlements people claim for their own opinions not only differ in kind from those entitlements which everyone with an opinion has, but also come with some rather special obligations.

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus. (1996). *The histories*. A. de Selincourt, (trans.). New York: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> Locke, J. ([1690] 1975). *Essay concerning human understanding*. P.H. Nidditch (ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 697.

<sup>3</sup> Hume, D. ([1777] 1975). *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 110.

At the beginning of each of my introductory philosophy classes, I conduct an exercise which endeavors to show, in a Socratic way, that there is a difference in kind between the entitlement we grant that everyone else has to their opinion, and the entitlement we claim to have for our own opinions. These kinds of entitlement are distinguished as political, in the first instance, and rational, in the second. The exercise works by demonstrating to participants that they take their entitlement to their own opinions to be something more than a mere political entitlement, because they do not treat the two entitlements equivalently. That is, since they are not willing to exchange their own opinion at random for another differing opinion to which the owner is, by the participants' own admission, entitled, they treat their entitlement to their own opinion differently, giving it a special status. At that point, we begin a conversation about the differences between these kinds of entitlement. I then endeavor to show participants that the claim of a rational entitlement to a view gives rise to certain rational obligations—obligations which do not attach to mere political entitlement—such as the obligation to provide reasons for the opinions to which a rational entitlement is claimed, as well as a willingness to risk those opinions to the force of the better reason.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I treat the terms “opinion” and “belief” equivalently, while recognizing that they are not synonymous. As one reviewer rightly observed, “the notion of being entitled to your opinion is far more entrenched than a notion of being entitled to your beliefs.” Generally, students come to my classroom having been taught that there is a fact-opinion divide, such that the two are categorically different from one another. Facts are unarguable truths occurring in a realm where answers are definitely right or wrong, while opinions occur in some other realm where truth is not possible or is unavailable. As such, not only are opinions contestable, they are not objectively right or wrong. This simplistic mischaracterization of the difference between fact and opinion is one of the first anti-rational biases I attempt to rid my students of. Thinking of opinions as beliefs is one way to begin “unlearning” this bias. Beliefs aim at the truth: to believe a claim is to take it to be true. And, beliefs have a mind-to-world fit: the conditions for the truth of a belief are the same as the conditions for the truth of its contents. These characteristics give beliefs a specifically epistemic dimension which is frequently, erroneously, and irresponsibly ignored when talking of opinions, particularly as contextualized by the “fact-opinion divide.” I suspect that this is the reason behind the difference observed by the reviewer. Yet, beliefs are things that we take to be true, and in this respect they are not different from opinions. Opinions are views that we hold, and views that we take ourselves to be right in holding – that is, we take our opinions to be true. We have the opinions we do because we believe them to be true, i.e., we take them to be factual. It is opinion's claim to correctness, truth, and factuality that closes the fact-opinion divide and compels one to undertake the rational responsibilities advocated herein.

This pedagogical note offers a lesson plan for an exercise which is designed to teach, through a kind of experiential, discursive, and Socratic learning, the difference between political and rational entitlement to one's opinion, and some of the responsibilities which come with claims to rational entitlement. I report on some of the discussion which tends to arise from the exercise, as well as some of the "teaching points" which I try to include in the lesson. In addition to the lesson plan, a take-home assignment is supplied in an Appendix. The assignment is designed to prompt students to begin to think critically about their own views by having them articulate the reasons they have for an opinion while considering not only why someone might think differently but what it would take to get them to change their mind. The idea here is that there should be a connection between their reasons and what would change their mind, and that their reasons should address rather than ignore the reasons of their objectors.

## **2. Rational entitlement and responsibility: Lesson plan for a group exercise**

In brief, the lesson plan for the exercise can be given in the following steps, which are discussed further below. I conduct this exercise in classrooms of about 35 students, in a class period of 1 hour and 15 minutes. It would perhaps be feasible with a much larger group of participants, although this would likely require a technological way of collecting, randomizing, and distributing the opinions polled.

Steps:

1. Formulate opinion poll question.
2. Conduct opinion poll.
3. Randomize and redistribute opinions (discussion of Socrates the gadfly).
4. Survey for voluntary exchange of opinions.
5. Discussion: Entitled to your opinion.
6. Discussion: Valuing opinions.
7. Rational entitlement & Rational responsibility:

### *Step 1. Formulate opinion poll question*

The objective here is to articulate a suitable question. Depending on the time available, sometimes I begin with a discussion ques-

tion such as: What are some of the most pressing and challenging problems facing society today? This usually yields several problems suitable for use as a topical basis for the opinion poll question. A brief discussion of these problems can also be used to highlight some of the philosophical (social, value-based) dimensions of these problems, as against their non-philosophical (empirical, technical) aspects. Alternately, one may simply come to the exercise having prepared a question for the opinion poll. Indeed, having one of these as a back up is generally a good idea, just in case discussion does not yield anything suitable.

The opinion-poll question itself should be formulated in such a way that it is open-ended, allowing for a spectrum of different answers, rather than answers of either “yes” or a “no.” Ideally, it should be on a topic that the participants have some interest or stake in, and yet one which they have not, perhaps, devoted much prior thought to. (The pedagogical benefit of this will become apparent later.) Here are some examples of ones I designed:

Under what circumstances should...

- ...an individual have to give up their private property for the public benefit (including things like taxation)?
- ...an individual have to surrender some of their liberties (e.g., privacy or mobility) for the sake of public (or national) security?

To what degree do you think that...

- ...developed countries should have to subsidize developing ones in order to offset the causes of global climate change due to industrialization?
- ...corporate executives and directors should be held morally, legally, or financially responsible for the activities of the companies under their direction?
- ...countries and companies that provide arms to warring factions should be held legally or morally accountable for the actions of the parties they arm?

The opinion-poll question should be written on the board or projected on the screen at the front of the room, preferably by itself without incidental text.

*Step 2. Conduct opinion poll*

This step requires some blank strips of lined paper (e.g., index cards) and something to collect them in. Alternately, it requires the technology to have students electronically compose and submit their answers to the poll question. Answers must then be randomized and redistributed to participants in the exercise.

Provide each student with a strip of paper. Instruct them to write, in a several complete sentences, their opinion to the poll question. They should not include their name. In general, it suits the purposes of the exercise to keep this instruction as brief and vague as possible. What you are aiming for is to have a detailed or nuanced opinion, but one which does not include any reasons. Once each student has had a chance to write their opinion on the paper, collect them.

*Step 3. Randomize and redistribute opinions  
(discussion of Socrates the gadfly)*

The activity of this stage involves randomizing and redistributing the opinions to the participants. This may be done by having each participant blindly select an opinion, or by randomly redistributing them (perhaps by some electronic means). I use the time involved in this activity to begin a brief discussion about Socratic wisdom.

During this stage of the exercise, as I circulate the room randomly redistributing the opinions, I will typically ask the students how many of them felt themselves to be particularly well-informed about the issue, or had given the question much thought prior to the exercise. Ideally, and typically, very few students will answer affirmatively here. At this point, I ask the students how many of them actually wrote down that they didn't feel well-informed enough about the topic to have a considered opinion. Normally, no one will have done this, though some might respond that they would have had they considered it to be an option.

Time allowing, I take the following digression. I observe that, on the face of it, it is curious that, generally speaking, we feel both willing, and perhaps even obliged, to form and articulate an opinion on matters about which we have little knowledge. When asked why we tend to behave this way, students frequently report that ignorance—not knowing something—is looked upon negatively in our classrooms and workplaces. Ignorance and error seem to have the same standing in

these settings, so it is better to risk some answer, which carries with it the chance of being right, than to admit ignorance, which guarantees that one will be wrong. Yet, through the story of Socrates the gadfly, I try to show students: (i) there are many things worse than ignorance—especially, mistakenly believing that one knows when, in fact, one does not, and indeed (ii) that a meta-cognitive awareness of one’s ignorance about some topic has cognitive virtues—particularly, that knowing that one does not know is conducive to learning in a way that mistakenly believing that one already knows is not.

No doubt, my readers will be well familiar with the story of Socrates in *The Apology*, though my students typically are not—indeed this is typically their first introduction to the character of Socrates. Yet, since the point of this story is tangential to the main point of the exercise, I tend to be brief in its retelling. I focus on Socrates’ response to the paradoxical prophesy of the Oracle of Delphi. The Oracle, you will remember, divined that Socrates was the wisest man in all of Athens, even though Socrates himself believed that he possessed no wisdom whatsoever. In testing this prophesy, Socrates became the character of the “gadfly” challenging his fellow Athenians to articulate their claims to wisdom, and then submitting claimants to his Socratic questioning, eventually leading them to a stunned state of *aporia* at the “torpedo-fish” moment when they realize that they do not actually possess the wisdom they thought they did. The moral of the story, I take it, is not merely that Socrates might well have actually been the wisest of Athenians (despite his tragic fate), but that knowledge of one’s ignorance is a kind of wisdom preferable to mistakenly believing that one knows when one does not.

#### *Step 4. Survey for voluntary exchange of opinions*

Returning to the main exercise, at this point I ask students two survey questions, the results of which I record for all to see. First, students are asked whether they are willing to simply exchange their own opinion, the one they contributed, for the one they randomly selected—that is, whether they are willing to give up their former view and adopt the opinion of a random peer in its stead. Results are recorded, both affirmative and negative, as a raw number and as a percentage of responses. Following this, I ask each group whether they counted the opinion they randomly drew as roughly equivalent to their own (the one they contributed).



## Survey Questions:

1. Are you willing to exchange your own opinion for the one you selected at random?
2. (Of each group) Do you count the opinion you selected as roughly the same as your own?

Willing to exchange opinion?	Count opinion as roughly the same?
YES	No
	Yes
NO	No
	Yes

Typically the vast majority of participants are unwilling to simply exchange their own opinion for the one that they randomly selected or were assigned. While it doesn't really matter how many of each group count the random opinion as roughly the same as their own, the point here is to demonstrate that we are more willing to exchange our opinions when we view them as much like our own, and are increasingly unwilling to exchange our opinions the more we see them as unlike our own. (Rarely, a person will select their own opinion back, and this simply gives a limiting case of the first kind.) Normally, I challenge participants to say why they would not be willing to exchange their opinion for one they count as roughly equivalent to their own. Usually I'm told that the details constituting the difference are the reason. Similarly, I challenge participants who are willing to exchange their opinion for one that they count as not basically similar to their own. Here participants have a variety of answers. Sometimes students will remark at this juncture that they were unwilling to exchange their opinion for the other because they were merely given an alternative point of view without any reasons for preferring the other to their own. Since this comment anticipates future discussion, it is best to acknowledge it and move on quickly, perhaps saying something like "Well that seems important somehow, doesn't it? We should get back to that." (This is one of the reasons why it is preferable to phrase the survey question in such a way as that it just invites opinions, rather than arguments.)

At this point, while remarking that these results are interesting, I introduce—almost as an aside—a final survey question which, hopefully, will create some cognitive dissonance in the participants, and which will serve as a focal point for further discussion.

Final survey question:

3. Out of curiosity, how many of you think that the other person is entitled to their opinion?

The results here are often unanimous. Participants consistently agree that people are entitled to their opinions—regardless of whether they themselves agree with that opinion or are willing to adopt it as, or in exchange for, their own.

*Step 5. Discussion: Entitled to your opinion*

At this juncture, I make a point of observing to participants the apparent tension in their responses. How is it that they can say that a person is entitled to their opinion—indeed, just as entitled as they are to their own—and yet they are unwilling to exchange their own opinion for one selected at random to which the author is, by their own admission, entitled? In a good group, I will even challenge the participants to identify this tension for themselves. Either way, identifying this tension opens a collective discussion of the following question:

Discussion question: What do we mean when we say that a person is entitled to their opinion, even if we disagree with it or are unwilling to adopt it as our own?

Responses to this question have included points like the following, which I record on the board:

- It means that I will respect them as individuals, and not bear them any ill-will, even though they do not share my views.
- It means that I respect their opinion, even though I don't agree with it.
- It means that I will not try to take their opinion away from them by, e.g., forcing my opinion on them, and I expect that they will not try to force their opinion on me.
- It means that a person's opinions are a product of their own experience of the world which, while different from mine, is just as valid.
- It means that everyone is allowed to have their own view of things, and that no one is really right or wrong.
- It means that everyone's opinion counts the same.
- It means that this is America where people have the freedom to think what they want and to say what they think.

- It means they're entitled to be wrong.

There tends to be a wide variety of responses to this question, and it can lead to a rather open-ended discussion among students. One of the points that frequently emerges at this point (and if it doesn't it is worth drawing out) is that people identify themselves with their opinions. They take their opinions to be a reflection of who they are, and a product of their experience of the world. Thus, to invalidate a person's opinion is, in some important sense, to invalidate, negate, or reject that person's experience of the world, and thereby the person themselves. It seems to me that this is one of the attitudes informing the rhetoric of "entitlement" and "respectful difference" characteristic of the arena of public debate today. As the exercise progresses, it is designed to expose the problematic aspects of these attitudes.

At this point in the discussion it should be pointed out that, although we say these nice things about respecting other people and their opinions, the fact is we do not value all opinions the same.

#### *Step 6. Discussion: Valuing opinions*

The proof here is simple: if you assigned the same value to the opinions of others as you do to your own, you would be willing to exchange them for yours. But you aren't willing to make such exchanges, so you don't value them the same.

This point can be illustrated with the following example. Suppose instead of each of you contributing your opinion to the box, you each put a dollar (specify, bill or coin here) from your pocket into the box, and you then selected one at random. By a show of hands, how many of you would be willing to exchange? By and large here, participants express a willingness to make this exchange. (When they don't it is often because of a concern over the condition of the currency, which would prevent them from spending it on certain occasions, e.g., in a vending machine.) The point here is that they value each dollar the same. As participants often tell me: a dollar, is a dollar, is a dollar—they all spend the same.

This leads to the next discussion question: how do we value opinions? There are a variety of ways to begin discussion of this question, but one way I have used (for reasons which will soon become apparent) is this:

Discussion Question: Since you are willing to exchange your dollar for another's, but unwilling to exchange your opinion for another's, what is the difference that makes your opinion so preferable that you are unwilling to make the exchange?

Responses to this question have included points like the following, which I again record on the board:

- Opinions are *more like pairs of jeans* than dollar bills. Dollars all spend the same. And while all pairs of jeans are basically the same, I'm *more comfortable* with mine. My pair of jeans *fits me* better than yours do, and that's why I prefer mine to yours.
- Opinions aren't like dollar bills, they're *more like a farmer's crops*. My opinions are things that I've *made*—they are a product of my efforts and experience. I cultivated my opinions, and what I value about them is the *work* that I have put into them.
- Opinions aren't like dollar bills because *our opinions are a product of our upbringing*. We have the opinions we do because they are what we have been taught and what we have been brought up to think.
- Opinions aren't like dollar bills because *our opinions are a reflection of ourselves*. We invest of ourselves in our opinions. We identify with our opinions, so to change your opinion is to change something of yourself.

As is hopefully clear, the purpose of inviting students to consider how they value opinions in this way is to prompt them to articulate a number of answers to which they are inclined but which don't work, in the hopes of getting them to see for themselves why answers such as these don't work. (On this point, students will also often say things like: (i) that they think their opinion is right, and have no reason for thinking the other opinion is right, or (ii) that they were not given any reasons for the other opinion, so they were given no reason to make the exchange. Again here, it is worthwhile to acknowledge these points, but return to them only later in the discussion.)

Moving through the recorded list, it is often possible to note a (partial) trend. In general, the reasons people tend to cite have to do with the relationship of the opinion to its owner—specifically between their own opinions and themselves. My opinions fit me better than yours do; they are a reflection of me, my upbringing, and my experience of the world. The motivating

attitude here seems to be something like this: just as invalidating a person's opinion is to invalidate that person's experience—or even the person themselves—people's inclination to prefer their own opinions is a way of *being true to themselves*, and affirming their own experience of the world. Problematically, this approach leads to a pre-critical method of valuing opinions based on their similarity to one's own. Generally, we are more willing to exchange opinions the more that they are like our own, and increasingly less willing to exchange opinions as they become increasingly unlike our own. That is to say, we tend to evaluate opinions based on whether we like them or agree with them. If an opinion is like mine then it is okay, and if it is not like mine then it is bad.

Yet, showing participants that this is not the way they actually value opinions is relatively straightforward. To illustrate this, I modify the currency example just used. If, instead of a single dollar, everyone put into the box the sum of money they have in their pockets, wallets and purses right now, there are some circumstances under which you would be willing to exchange your contribution for theirs, and some in which you would not. That is to say, you will make the exchange when you value the amount of money they contributed more than you value the amount of money you contributed. So, to learn how you value opinions, perhaps you should consider and articulate under what circumstances you actually would be willing to exchange your present opinion for another. This leads to the final discussion question, the results of which are again recorded:

Final Discussion Question: Under what circumstances would you be willing to exchange your opinion for another's—i.e., to adopt their view as your own?

If not unanimous, responses to this question tend to cluster around a few key points, or conditions for exchange:

- If someone could convince me that my opinion was wrong and that theirs was correct.
- If their opinion took into account considerations which I had not previously considered. (If someone were looking at the issue in a way that I hadn't before, and in a way that my view did not take account of.)
- If someone had reasons for their view which I thought were better than my reasons.

Of course, sometimes the change in view here is not a wholesale replacement. Students often prefer to qualify their answers in terms of when they would be willing to modify their own view, but the moral of the story remains the same.

At this juncture, what participants should recognize—indeed, what should be emphasized to them—is that none of the features pertaining to the relationship of opinions to their owners factor into their conditions for exchange. You value your own opinion not because it is yours, and not because of any relationship it has to you. Rather, you value it because you think that it is worth having—that is, that it is worth more than the other opinions out there. And, you'd gladly exchange it for one that you thought was worth more.

And, the worth of opinions comes from their relationship to the world, not from their relationship to their owners. You value an opinion not because of how well it fits you, but because of how well you think it fits the world. You do not believe things that you think are wrong—even if you really want them to be true. You would, or at least you should, exchange a convenient falsehood for an inconvenient truth.<sup>5</sup> Next, as you grow up, you do not retain *all* the views of those who brought you up. (People typically use the “this is what I was brought up to believe” reason highly selectively, conveniently ignoring all those beliefs that they were brought up to have but subsequently rejected.) Rather, you only retain those that you accept as your own—those that you judge are true or that your community was *right* to believe. Further, you identify yourself with your present beliefs *because* you take them to be true, and you take yourself to have a view of the world that is generally right. When you become convinced that another view is actually right (i.e., better than the one you presently hold), you no longer identify yourself with the old view; rather, you identify with the new view. And, you do not perceive changing your mind in those circumstances as an affront to your identity; rather, it seems like the natural and sensible thing to do. (Indeed, we acquire new beliefs and change our mind about existing beliefs continuously in our conscious lives.) Finally, even if you invested a great deal of resources and effort into arriving at a view which you (subse-

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<sup>5</sup> I leave aside here questions of the will to believe, and of pragmatic reasons for believing unknowns or falsehoods, e.g., the benefits of the placebo effect. As worthwhile as this discussion is, it is premature for the audience envisaged, and beside the point of the exercise anyway. In the end it represents a set of outlying cases only. Generally the practical benefits of avoiding errors outweigh those of embracing them.

quently) came to think was mistaken, you would, or should, exchange the hard-earned mistake for the easily-acquired truth. Although you might still value the work you invested in your mistakes, because you can learn from them, this value should only be instrumental. You should value the learning, and what you learned from your mistakes (the acquisition of truth), not the error that precipitated the learning. In the end, people who focus, as pre-critical thinkers do, merely on relations between opinions and themselves, take ownership of their views but no accountability for them.

*Step 7. Discussion: Rational entitlement and rational responsibility*<sup>6</sup>

We have now reached the point in the exercise where it is time to reveal the moral of the story. To begin, it is best to remind participants of some of the attitudes and responses they expressed throughout the exercise, and then to note some of the consequences deriving therefrom.

First, participants should be reminded that their unwillingness to exchange their own opinion for another's shows that they value their own opinion differently than the other opinion. Yet, participants can also be reminded, despite their unwillingness to adopt the other opinion, they counted the holder of that opinion as entitled to it. As such, and despite the rhetoric of respect and toleration that accompanies such attributions of entitlement, participants do not treat the entitlement they grant to anyone with an opinion the same as the entitlement they claim to have for their own opinions. Rather, the kind of entitlement they claim for themselves affords their own opinions a special status such that they are *correct* in their unwillingness to exchange their opinion for another. This point should be stressed. It's not just that participants *won't* change their minds; participants implicitly claim that they are *right* not to do so—that they *shouldn't* have to, that they are under no *obligation* to.

At this point, the distinction between political and rational entitlement can be introduced. Political entitlement is the sort of

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<sup>6</sup> Although I make no attempt to show this here, I take the account of rational responsibilities, entitlements, and standards given in this section to be both broadly consistent with, and within the same theoretical and methodological spirit as, the design stance to argumentative norms (Goodwin 2002, 2007).

Goodwin, J. (2002). One question, two answers. In H.V. Hansen et al. (Eds.), *Argument and its applications: Proceedings of OSSA 2001*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-17). Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Goodwin, J. (2007). Argument has no function. *Informal Logic*, 27, 69-90.

entitlement we grant to anyone with an opinion, regardless of how we value that opinion. People can be politically entitled to their opinions even in cases where we judge the opinion itself to be not merely false, but completely wrong-headed, or even offensive or bigoted. Political entitlement, as we will see, comes with very little obligation on the part of the person who holds it. Nevertheless, granting someone political entitlement to their opinions creates corresponding duties in us. Firstly, we take on the responsibility of allowing them to make up their own minds about things and not forcing (e.g., through coercion or brainwashing) them to accept some set of beliefs. Equally, we take on the obligation of not silencing or imprisoning them because of their views.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, there are duties which are not created when political entitlement is granted. For example we do not take on the responsibility of placing any credence in the view, or of paying it any heed when forming our own view. As such, in the marketplace of ideas, political entitlement is little more than the right to be wrong and ignored.

Rational entitlement, by contrast, is the kind of entitlement we claim for ourselves when we assert that we are *justified* in our unwillingness to exchange our opinions for others. Unlike claims to political entitlement, claims to rational entitlement do come with obligations on the part of the claimant. By claiming that we are right in not trading our opinion for another, we create obligations for ourselves. First is the obligation to say why we are unwilling to exchange our own opinion for any other—i.e., to say what it is that makes our opinion better, or more valuable, than its alternatives (or at least the alternative on offer). That is, we create for ourselves the obligation to give reasons for our view.

Second is the obligation to switch, alter, modify, or qualify our view in the event that we are wrong—that is, if it turns out that we are *not justified* in our unwillingness to exchange our view for another. By claiming we are right not to switch our view, we are under the obligation to modify our view if our reasons don't pan out—to modify or surrender our view in the face of the better reason. By itself, this obligation does not presuppose or prescribe what counts as a good, or better, reason. But

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that a person who is politically entitled to a view cannot suffer censure or even punishment for expressing that view in certain circumstances. For example, expressing certain views under the right circumstances could constitute an illocutionary (or performative) act (e.g., libel, slander, hate speak, bribery, extortion, threat, conspiracy, sedition, or treason), the *act* of which is punishable.



our ordinary behavior offers some guidance here. Despite some of the things we might be inclined to say (see previous section), our behavior reveals that we are willing to change our opinion for another (or modify it on the basis of another) when we are convinced that the other opinion is right in some way that ours is not. Generally, we have the opinions we do because we think they are correct; it is not the case that we think an opinion correct just because we have it.

Taken together, this pair of obligations sits at the very foundation of our normative practices of giving and asking for reasons. The claim that we are right not to switch our view—i.e., the claim that we are rationally entitled to our position—commits us to both give satisfactory reasons when called upon to do so, and to respond appropriately to the reasons we are presented with. That is, it commits us to be rational. Understood in this way, rationality is a matter of fulfilling this pair of obligations.

Indeed, understanding the nature of rationality as satisfying the obligations to give and be appropriately moved by reasons provides a standard of rationality. As Siegel (1997, p. 2) writes, “to say that one is appropriately moved by reasons is to say that one believes, judges, and acts in accordance with the probative force with which one’s reasons support one’s beliefs, judgments and actions.” Similarly, Pinto (2006, p. 287) writes: “rationality is a matter of making our attitudes towards propositions or propositional contents appropriate to the evidence which shapes them.” The central idea here is that being rational involves proportioning our commitment such that it accords with the evidence we have. This standard of rationality, perhaps first articulated by empiricists like Locke (1690, IV.xix.1; 1975, p. 697) and Hume (1777, X.i.87; 1975, p. 110), is called *evidence proportionism*, and has been defined by Engel (2000, p. 3) as follows: “In general a belief is rational if it is proportioned to the degree of evidence that one has for its truth.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Siegel, H. (1997). *Rationality redeemed: Further dialogues on an educational ideal*. New York: Routledge.

Pinto, R. (2006). Evaluating inferences: The nature and role of warrants. *Informal Logic*, 26, 287-318.

Locke, J. (1975). *Essay concerning human understanding*. P.H. Nidditch (ed.). Oxford: Oxford UP.

Hume, D. (1975). *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Engel, P. (2000). Introduction: The varieties of belief and acceptance. In P. Engel (Ed.), *Believing and accepting* (pp. 1-30). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Although the claim to rational entitlement creates certain unique obligations for the claimant, it also seeks to impose an additional set of duties upon others—duties which do not arise from mere political entitlement. Specifically, when we claim to be rationally entitled to our view, we claim that it is valuable—it is worth having—and as such that others should take heed of it and place some credence in it. That is to say, we assert that others have a duty to take our view into account when forming their own—at least, if they are to be rationally responsible. By the same token, by accepting the responsibility of surrendering our view to the force of the better reason, we undertake the obligation of paying heed to their view, at least insofar as they meet the obligations that accompany their own claim to rational entitlement. As such, individual claims to rational entitlement create an obligation to engage with others in reasoned discourse, and to comport our views according to the rational standard of evidence proportionality.

Claims of rational entitlement come with a complex set of rational responsibilities. People who claim only political entitlement to their views accept no responsibility for them. Specifically, they refuse to accept the responsibility of giving a reason why they decline to exchange their view for any other, and they refuse to surrender their view to the force of the better reason. In effect, they are refusing to be rational, and are opting out of the entire social practice of rationality—the giving and asking for reasons. While such people cannot be silenced, they should be ignored.

### **3. Follow-up assignment**

Following this in-class exercise, I assign a take-home writing exercise (Appendix, below) whose primary aim is to introduce students to the basic attitudes conducive to critical thinking and rational responsibility. To successfully complete the assignment, students must not only be able to demonstrate a degree of self-knowledge, by articulating an opinion of their own and the reasons they have for that opinion. They must also have a comparative understanding of their own position (by imagining what reasons an intelligent, rational person could have for disagreeing with them), and a critical, reflective self-understanding (by identifying a circumstances under which they would be willing to change their mind and give up or modify their present view).

The assignment has four basic components: (i) the first requires simply that the student articulate one of their beliefs, (ii) the second, that the student articulate the reasons they have for their view, (iii) the third, that the student articulate what they would require in order to change their mind about that belief, and (iv) the fourth requires them to imagine what kinds of reasons an intelligent, rational individual might have for holding a different view.

Some students find the third component challenging, as it involves counter-factual thinking. Clearly, if one believed that any of the conditions identified in (iii) were actually satisfied, they would not have the belief they articulated initially. Also, there is a positivistic flavor to this component. Answers which simply state that they would require “good reasons,” “facts,” “evidence,” or “being convinced” in order to change their mind are to be discouraged (as they miss the point). Instead, what is required is that students be able to state specific evidential conditions which they would not only count against their belief, but which would, indeed, prompt them to modify or surrender their belief if satisfied. While students needn’t adopt an entirely contrary view here, what is important is that they are able to articulate specific conditions under which they would modify their view.

A comparison of the answers given at stages (ii) and (iii) of the assignment frequently yields the following important result. Not only is there seldom any discernible connection between a person’s stated reasons for their view and what they require to change their mind, but what people demand in order to change their mind is typically out of all proportion with the reasons or evidence they have given for holding the view in the first place. That is, rather than naively adopting a standard of evidence proportionalism for their own views, people untrained in critical thinking normally favor their own opinions in a way that is disproportionate to the evidence they have for them. For example, as I emphasize in the class discussion following the assignment, people ought to revise, or at least revisit, their commitment to a belief if the reasons that they profess to have for the belief are shown to be mistaken. Generally and *ceteris paribus*, one of the things that should occasion changing one’s mind about something is the discovery that one’s reasons are defective. Yet, typically, students almost never articulate this as a condition in part (iii) of the assignment.

Another result which sometimes occurs during stage (iii) of the assignment is that the student will claim, or perhaps even

discover, that there is absolutely nothing that would get them to change their mind about one of their views. One way of looking at responses of this type is to understand them as limiting cases of the disconnection between a person's stated reasons for a view and what they require to revisit or revise the view. If nothing really would get them to change their minds, then clearly they do not hold the view *on the basis of* the stated reasons. After all, if the view were held on the basis of reasons, then the defeat of those reasons should occasion the abandoning, or at least revisiting, of commitment to the view. This brings us to a second way of looking at responses of this sort. Saying that there is nothing at all that would get you to change your mind about something is to hold that belief beyond the reach of reason, and thereby to place a limit on reason itself. Such a discovery tells you something of singular importance about yourself, since it reveals that you do not hold the view in question rationally—i.e., on the basis of reasons. Rather you hold it in some way that is prior to, or independent of, all reason and reasoning. Now, while I grant that this may be fair enough on occasions that are both limited and extreme, I encourage students to recognize how they react when others make such claims. When other people are entirely unwilling to reconsider their own views, especially in cases where we disagree with them, we find such obstinance condemnable rather than commendable. Instead of viewing it as a character strength that one will stand on the strength of their convictions, we see it as a character flaw—a stubbornness and irrationality that makes it impossible to get anywhere with them. And, when such an attitude is taken up in a blanket way, it amounts to little more than a refusal to accept rational responsibility for one's views.

One of the goals of this exercise and accompanying assignment is to train participants to take rational responsibility for their own views by forging a strong connection between their commitment to a view, the strength of their reasons, and what would change their mind. In my efforts to cultivate the attitude of evidence proportionalism in students, I tell them that they should be as critical of their own, favored views as they are of those that they think are entirely mistaken and misguided. It is only by thinking critically about the reasons we have for our own views that we can rightly gauge our rational entitlement to them, and hence the level of commitment we should place in them.

#### **4. Addressing shirkers of rational responsibility**

Before concluding, I suggest some strategies that might be employed in responding to the student who doesn't recognize, or is disinclined to accept, rational obligations. These considerations observe some of the social and pedagogical harms that arise from the ambiguity of entitlement, and bear not only on the function of criticism but also on how to approach and manage diversity in the classroom.

*It's all just opinion*

As teachers, especially in the humanities, I expect we have all experienced the following reaction from some student: it [insert course subject or area topic here] is all just opinion, and everyone is entitled to their own opinion, so how can *my* opinion possibly be (objectively) assessed—or, more specifically, how can it not have received the desired grade?

While this reaction may well reflect the student's sincere perplexity, it is also a sign that the student has failed to recognize, or refuses to accept, their rational responsibilities. What are some effective strategies in responding to such a student?

In a sense, the entire exercise and subsequent assignment described herein is designed to induce in students the realization that rational obligations apply to them. Here are some points that can be emphasized in this kind of situation.

- In response to the specific concern that *opinions cannot (or should not) be graded*, I tell my students that I don't grade their opinions—I grade their reasons. It usually takes some time for students to fully believe me when I say that I really don't care what their opinions are, but am only interested in their reasons—in their ability to articulate, reflect upon, and think critically about why they believe what they do. It can help to incorporate this directly into the grading schemes of course work. For example, in the assignment given in the Appendix, section 1 is not qualitatively assessed. Section 2 is qualitatively assessed, particularly in terms of whether it ignores or takes account of objections articulated in section 4. Similarly, section 3 is qualitatively assessed according to whether the defeat of one's reasons is among the things that would get them to change their view, and the extent to which there is a connection between their stated reasons and what they would require to change their mind.

To move beyond the specifically grade-related aspect of this concern, the following points can also be raised.

- In response to the claim that *it's all just opinion so there are no right answers*, it can be observed that it does not follow from this that there are no wrong answers, nor that some views are not objectively better than others. Indeed, the student's own unwillingness to exchange their view for another, and their taking themselves to be *right* in not doing so, shows that they themselves feel that some beliefs (their own) are better than others (the ones for which they are not willing to trade).
- Similarly, in response to the claim that *it's all just opinion so all opinions count the same*, it can be emphasized that the student does not consistently hold this view since, as the exercise shows, they are not indifferent to the opinion they have.
- In response to the claim that *since it's all opinion rather than fact, there are no wrong answers*, the ambiguities and inaccuracies of the fact-opinion divide (discussed in note 4) can be raised. Basically the point here is that we hold the opinions we do because we take them to be factual.

Besides these problems with the view itself, the following problematic consequence can also be observed.

- *It's all just opinion is a discussion ender*. If all there is to say about opinions is that you have yours and I have mine and nothing more can be said, then there is no prospect for us to reasonably settle our differences.

As Stokes writes:

The problem with “I’m entitled to my opinion” is that, all too often, it’s used to shelter beliefs that should have been abandoned. It becomes shorthand for “I can say or think whatever I like”—and by extension, continuing to argue is somehow disrespectful. And this attitude feeds, I suggest, into the false equivalence between experts and non-experts that is an increasingly pernicious feature of our public discourse. (Stokes, 2012)

*Intransigence and having the strength of one’s convictions*

A second set of strategies for addressing the student who is disinclined to accept their rational responsibilities is to invite them to look at their response from a different perspective—specifically from the perspective of one whose opponent refuses to accept *their* rational responsibilities.

When presented with this circumstance, students almost universally recognize that such a person is being unreasonable. At least they will admit that they would not engage with such a person as it would be largely pointless.

This realization offers a perspicuous view of a perplexing general feature of the attitudinal landscape—namely, the differential way in which we characterize steadfastness of conviction depending on whether or not we agree with the position in question.

These days in public and political arenas, one of the worst accusations one can be labeled with is that of the “flip-flopper.” While the negative connotation here perhaps originates in the idea that the flip-flopper is one who changes their position to suit their audience, one who will say anything to get what they want (usually elected), the accusation has come to be used to deride people who merely change their views on things over time.

The implicit idea here is having an unvarying, constant view on an issue is a good quality. It is a sign of strength of conviction: imperviousness to the fickle winds of changing public opinion, and resilience to our detractors who would get the better of us. In general having the strength of our convictions is a necessary quality of strong leadership. Indecision is a weakness and changing one’s decision is even worse, since both are somehow signs of not knowing what you want or what is right.

Problematically, these very same behaviors receive an entirely different characterization when they are found in someone whose views disagree with our own. In this case, the person’s unwillingness to reconsider or change their view is a sign that they are unable or unwilling to see the error of their ways—that they are unwilling to listen to reason, or to see the facts. Here people do not demonstrate the strength of their convictions so much as an irrational intransigence which makes them obstacles to resolution or progress. After all, the only thing worse than indecision is being wrong and unwilling to change. Such people are not to be praised but avoided entirely, since you can’t get anywhere with them.

Bringing students to recognize the hypocrisy of this attitude can also help them to recognize the strength of character

involved in admitting that you were wrong and learning from mistakes.

*Agreement and the function of criticism*

Another danger of this duplicitous view of commitment is that it prompts people to forego efforts to change one another's minds about things they disagree upon, and likewise to be disinclined to justify their own views to objectors. The prevailing sentiment in the public sphere seems to be that no matter what you do you will always have detractors, many of whom will never be won over to your views no matter what you say or do. "Haters gonna hate." And, seemingly since you can't convince everyone, you shouldn't worry about convincing anyone. Further, not only should you not waste your efforts trying to persuade your objectors (who aren't likely to change their minds anyway), but you shouldn't bother with responding to criticism or justifying yourself, your views, or your decisions at all—unless compelled to by some authority. No matter how justified you really are, your objectors will never admit it anyway. Combined, these attitudes amount to abandoning reason itself as a means to resolve differences of opinion, or justify judgement, decision, or action.

A final strategy for addressing the student who is disinclined to accept their rational responsibilities is to offer them a different perspective on the function and value of criticism. As already mentioned, as pre-critical thinkers we tend to evaluate opinions based on whether we like them or agree with them. If an opinion is like mine then it is okay, and if it is not then it is bad.

Criticism, on this view, has a purely negative function. It is not employed against things we like. If we already agree with something, we don't challenge or criticize it—in fact we tend to let it by without giving it much of a second thought, without examining it or scrutinizing it too closely. On the other hand, we tend to be very critical, indeed dismissive, of things that we don't like. When we cannot ignore a view we disagree with, then we unleash criticism upon it. The function of criticism here is not usually to change an opponent's view (since their intransigence is presumed). Rather the function of criticism is to demolish their view in the eyes of some audience—to persuade some third-party that our opponent's view is wrong and, thereby, that ours is right.

Against this picture, I offer my students a view of criticism as an opportunity to improve their own view, since our



views are strengthened to the extent that they can withstand rational criticism. Indeed, that we receive criticism from our opponents is at least a sign that our view is important enough that it cannot be ignored. Criticism, on this view, is not negative but an opportunity to succeed. It is an opportunity to test your opinion to see whether it really is worth having. I encourage my students to hold their own, preferred views to the same critical standard as those views with which they vehemently disagree—that they should feel not only a sense of *ownership* of their views, but a sense of *accountability* for them.

### *Diversity in the classroom*

As educators we are challenged with negotiating a diversity of perspectives and identities, ancestries and aspirations, attitudes and aptitudes in our classrooms. And, we must accommodate this diversity as best as we are able so as to provide an optimal environment for learning. Yet, while this means that we must structure an environment that is both stimulating and stress-free, it does not mean that we should acquiesce to the status-quo. Granted, we must create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable to be who they are and to express this in the classroom. Without this, our students will never engage and the learning process can never begin. Yet, this is merely the beginning of the learning process. (No learning has yet occurred!) To stop here is merely to allow our students to stagnate and atrophy. Learning involves a modification of behavior—a change in the learner. Our students must feel comfortable enough to try on new ideas and perspectives, and confident enough to admit when they are wrong so they can learn from their mistakes. As effective educators, we must structure a learning environment that allows students not merely to *be* who they are but to *change* who they are.

## **5. Concluding remarks: The ambiguity of entitlement and enlightened discourse**

The teaching exercise reported on herein is motivated by an “ambiguity of entitlement” that is pervasive in our culture today and which has given rise to set of relativistic, anti-rationalistic inclinations in a climate of otherwise healthy, rational engagement and dissent. Students, it has seemed to me, enter the uni-

iversity classroom with an awareness of alternative viewpoints, but without the critical disposition or skills enabling them to meaningfully engage with these differing opinions or to take a critical attitude towards their own views. Instead, they are mollycoddled into the disingenuous and relativistic view that everyone is entitled to their opinion—that challenging or denouncing someone’s view is somehow an affront to their person, and that all opinions count equally (seemingly because all people do).

Such an attitude, together with the moralistic rhetoric of tolerance and respect informing it, is not only insincere—since, favoring our own opinions over all others, no one treats all opinions as equal—it is irrational and detrimental to the public good. That everyone is entitled to their own view excuses anyone from having to hold their own opinions up to rational scrutiny, to modify them in the face of the better reason, and to engage with others in reasoned dialogue. And these pernicious attitudes leave the people (whether in the polis, the marketplace, or the academy) with neither the inclination nor the wherewithal to settle differences of opinion in a rational, discursive, and civilized way.

People who claim political entitlement to their views accept no responsibility for them. Yet by trading on the ambiguity of entitlement, they seek to impose obligations on the rest of us—obligations that they are not willing to take on themselves. Specifically, they expect that their political entitlement to their view requires that we should take heed of their opinion and place the same stock in it as we do all others when, for example, setting public policy. Yet, by shirking the rational responsibilities of giving satisfactory reasons when called upon to do so, and of surrendering their view to the force of the better reason, they refuse to take heed of, and give credence to, the views of others when reaching their own view. In effect, such people are refusing to be rational and, in opting out of the process of giving and asking for reasons, they are opting out of public discourse. Yet, at the same time they expect to be allowed to contribute to it. As I said previously, while such people cannot be silenced, they should be ignored. The simple truth is that while all people are equal, all opinions are not and no one treats them as such. The sincere and accountable among us accept the rational responsibility that comes with discriminating among opinions as we all do by favoring our own over others. Those who do not accept these obligations are not only irresponsible—both epistemically and morally—but disingenuous as well.

Nor is this irresponsibility and disingenuousness a merely individual epistemic and moral failing. Clifford, who held that believing on insufficient evidence is always a moral failing, warned in his 1877 essay *The Ethics of Belief* that the resulting credulity is also the cause of a greater social harm.<sup>9</sup>

Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judiciously and fairly weighing evidence. ... But a greater and wider evil arises when the credulous character is maintained and supported, when a habit of believing for unworthy reasons is fostered and made permanent. If I steal money from any person, there may be no harm done from the mere transfer of possession; he may not feel the loss, or it may prevent him from using the money badly. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself dishonest. What hurts society is not that it should lose its property, but that it should become a den of thieves, for then it must cease to be society. This is why we ought not to do evil that good may come; for at any rate the great evil has come, that we have done evil and are made wicked thereby. In like manner, if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though this is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery.

Clifford's warning serves to remind us that the proper functioning of a deliberative democracy presupposes not only an active and informed citizenry, but also a rational one. Despite our entitlement to make up our own minds in whatever way we see best, in public fora we bear an obligation to offer not only opinions but also, when challenged, reasons for our opinions, and we have a right to expect the same of others. Our inclination to accept these obligations and claim these rights in public discourse derives from our inclination to treat ourselves and each other as rational. Deliberative democracy is built not around the princi-

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<sup>9</sup> Clifford, W. (1877). The ethics of belief. *Contemporary Review*, 29, 289-309. Reprinted in: Stephen, L. and Pollock, F. (Eds.). (1886). *William K. Clifford, lectures and essays*. London: Macmillan and Co.

ples of consensus or compromise, but around the ideal that the citizenry will be able to rightly apprehend the relative merits of alternative goals and policies and thereby be able to collectively judge the best course for society. The social harm, then, in allowing ourselves and our neighbors to relinquish our rational responsibilities is that it undermines the very values, skills, and dispositions presupposed by democratic society.

Indeed, the very political entitlement that we claim when making up our own minds as we best see fit is ultimately grounded in the enlightenment idea that we are all equally rational—that none are in a privileged position to know the true and the good. This is why the person who claims merely a political entitlement for their views while disavowing their rational obligations is doubly disingenuous. Not only do they misrepresent the kind of entitlement they are actually claiming (by refusing to exchange their view), they misrepresent the very foundation of their political entitlement.

The overarching goal of this teaching exercise is to begin to cultivate a sense of rational responsibility in participants, a responsibility which I take to be at the center of all critical thinking and the public use of reason (which Kant held to be the defining feature of an enlightened culture). One of the many freedoms of living in a Western, democratic civilization is that we live in the wake of liberal rationalism where individuals have claimed the right to use their own reason in determining for themselves what is true and just—where neither church, nor state, nor private interest has the authority to tell us what to think. Yet with that right comes an obligation—the obligation to take responsibility for our own beliefs and decisions. Perhaps acceptance of this responsibility should be a prerequisite of being permitted to contribute to public discourse.

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## Appendix: Assignment / Exercise

### ASSIGNMENT I: WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO CHANGE YOUR MIND?

#### 1. What you believe:

Write a single statement, beginning “I believe that . . .,” expressing something that you firmly believe, or a value that you deeply hold. (Choose this carefully! Try to pick something that is significant or important to you, something that others might disagree with you about, and something that you are willing to share with the class.)

#### 2. What are your reasons?

Consider the opinion you expressed in (1). Write a short paragraph giving your reasons for holding your opinion. If you are having trouble formulating your reasons, maybe thinking about these two questions will help. (i) If you wanted to explain to someone else why you have the opinion you do, what would you say? (ii) What would you tell another person in order to try to persuade them to think the same way as you do about this topic?

#### 3. What would it take to change your mind?

Write a brief paragraph explaining what it would take to get you to change your mind about the belief or value you expressed in (1). What could someone say, do, or show you to get you to change your opinion?\*

\* Two comments: (a) Don't worry about whether you think anyone could actually do this, just write down what they would have to do however unlikely or implausible you think it is. (b) If the answer is nothing—there is nothing, however unlikely, that anyone could say, do, or show you to get you to change your mind—then write that down. (Knowing that nothing will get you to change your mind about something is just as important as knowing what would change your mind.) If, after thinking about it, your answer is that nothing would change your mind, go back to (1); pick a different belief or value; complete parts (2) and (3) for the new belief or value.

#### 4. What might someone else think, and why?

Consider someone who disagrees with you about what the opinion you expressed (1). Write a short paragraph giving the reasons—the best reasons you can think of—some intelligent, rational person might have for holding an opinion different from your own.