

Chapter 11: Feelings, Facts and Logic

“You Don’t Want to Hear This, But...”

"Man is, and was always, a block-head and dullard; much readier to feel and digest than to think and consider."

— Carlyle

Controversies often involve the confusion of emotion with reason. This chapter suggests specific techniques for keeping emotion out of evaluations of fact and logic. It also suggests ways of detecting and combating appeals to emotion.

We all are quite naturally affected by emotion. Indeed, our feelings vastly enrich our lives. When it comes to deciding what is a fact, however, feelings do not help. In fact, they get in the way. It might be understandable, for instance, for a physician to pity a patient whom he thinks may have some dreaded disease; but it is unwise to let that pity influence his diagnosis. Welcome them or dread them, facts are still facts.

Emotions are similarly irrelevant to logic. Emotionally appealing arguments may turn out to be illogical garbage. Repulsive arguments may prove to be perfectly reasoned. The ancient Greeks, pioneers in the study of reasoning, recognized this truth several thousand years ago. In fact, they categorized the mistaken idea that emotion is relevant to logic as the "fallacy of the argument to feelings." (*Argumentum ad sentimens* is the Latin name logicians use.) Aristotle and other logicians observed that whether something is logical or illogical must be decided on the merit of the reasoning alone.

We see, then, that in appraising controversial issues it is a fundamental mistake to allow emotions to influence our judgment of:

- **the reality of facts**
- **the soundness of an argument**

Emotions and Persuasion

Predictably, people arguing controversial issues appeal to emotions. They know, or at least sense, what Aristotle long ago recognized: that feelings play a crucial persuasive role. The great philosopher even classified emotional appeals (*pathos*) as one of the most basic means of persuasion.

Some emotional appeals are uncalculated, coming from disputants who are emotionally wrapped up in the issue themselves. Others, however, emanate from practiced propagandists who play on emotion as skillfully as a virtuoso plays the piano. Here are some classic appeals to emotion.

Appeal to envy.

Envy is one of the Seven Cardinal Sins so an appeal to it is bound to be attractive. Rather than argue fact or logic, an appeal to envy manipulates us into accepting an argument out of jealousy. A Danish proverb claims, *"If envy were*

a fever, all the world would be ill." Perhaps that is why good judgment is so often overcome by this type of emotional appeal.

As with most appeals to emotion, language is a key indicator that an appeal to envy is afoot. Therefore, be alert for loaded words or phrases that might trigger this feeling. Here is a small sampler. Compare the terms in the left column with those in the right column. The key point here is that a trait or behavior can be referred to in a way that appeals to our feeling of envy or the related feelings of covetousness or jealousy.

LOADED WORDS APPEALING TO ENVY	ALTERNATIVE, MORE NEUTRAL WORDS
fat cat privileged favored indulged	wealthy affluent prosperous
elitist haughty snobbish	discriminating cultured educated
lucky favored	skillful able competent
conceited stuck-up	self confident
pushy aggressive power-mad	assertive in-control masterful

"...we hate that which we fear."

—Shakespeare

Appeal to fear.

Fear can be a self-protective response and perfectly reasonable. But it can also cloud our judgment. As in the case of envy, fear can be played upon by means of loaded words. Some possible indicators that fear is being appealed to are the use of the left column terms instead of the right column terms in the chart below.

LOADED WORDS APPEALING TO FEAR	ALTERNATIVE, MORE NEUTRAL WORDS
bully aggressive threatening	assertive self confident
sneaky underhanded furtive surreptitious	cautious circumspect discreet watchful
out-of-control impulsive rash	spontaneous free-wheeling instinctive

reckless	carefree
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Notice, once again, that the same essential trait or behavior can be referred to in a way that appeals to our feelings—in this case, fear.

Appeal to hatred.

We know from experience that there are all sorts of nasty words that people use to promote and exploit hatred for particular racial, ethnic or religious groups. These are so common we omit a chart of examples for the sake of good taste. However, there are subtler ways of using loaded words to play on hatred. Here are some "code words" that tend to trigger revulsion: welfare queen, bleeding heart, fascist, extremist, fringe element, one-worlder, tree-hugger, union-buster, puritan, bureaucrat, shyster, draft-dodger, politician. Of course, there are many, many more. The point here is not to provide an exhaustive list, but to remind that in "polite" company appeals to hatred are made in this indirect way.

Appeal to pride.

Pride is another of the so-called Seven Deadly Sins — the one, we are told, that most surely separates a sinner from the grace of God. Often we can spot appeals to pride by looking for characteristic phrases like the following:

- any educated (intelligent, upstanding, healthy) person knows that...
- a person with your background (education, breeding) can't help but see that...
- you will be proud to know that...

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

—Proverbs 20.58

Pride unsupported by fact is merely vanity.

Appeal to moderation.

Imagine the following debate: "One plus one equals two." says Jane. "No!" say Harry, "One plus one equals three." Sam, ever the mediator, pushes for the following middle course, "Why don't we agree for practical purposes, that one plus one equals 2 1/2? We each give a little, we each gain a little." This silly story demonstrates that moderation may not help in getting the best answer. Still, in subtler disputes, appeals to moderation are emotionally tempting. After all, they appeal to our desire to be (or, at least, seem to be) tolerant, reasonable and accommodating. But lazy tolerance, that is, tolerance that ignores facts or logic, may be merely error.

Moderation has been created a virtue ... to console undistinguished people for their want of fortune and their lack of merit.

More About Loaded Language

Keep in mind that the emotional charge of some words varies from person to person or group to group. "Conservative," for example, triggers negative feelings in some but positive in others. "Liberal" has the same bi-polar effect. Such words only work well as emotional appeals with audiences of relatively uniform character. This limits their usefulness in a broad-based dispute.

Other words, however, have far more uniform positive or negative connotations. When public officials are "politicians," for instance, it inspires nearly universal distaste. Calling them "public servants" renders the same public officials far more acceptable. Such emotionally broad-based words are the type of terminology most likely encountered in a multi-partisan context.

Also keep in mind that contrastive nouns such as: general vs. warlord, secret agent vs. spy, terrorist vs. freedom fighter, bribe vs. gift) are not the only type of emotionally charged words disputants play with. Contrastive adjectives such as: *generous* vs. *wasteful*, *rude* vs. *forthright* and adverbs, such as: *carefully* vs. *obsessively*, *forcefully* vs. *violently* serve just as well. In fact, a judicious blend of negatively and positively charged nouns, adjectives and adverbs is what you will find in a skillfully constructed emotional appeal.

The Analytic Procedure

We have established that in analyzing disputes, it is a cardinal principle to remain as emotionally uninvolved as possible. Here is how such objectivity can be better accomplished.

Step 1. Be mindful of appeals to your emotions.

Texts in persuasion routinely caution against alerting the audience that their emotions are being played upon. They warn that people who know this are on their guard. Learn from this. Approach the appraisal of any controversy with caution, keeping in mind that appeals to emotion are probably being made. This reduces the likelihood of being drawn in by such moves.

Step 2. Look for specific emotional appeals

Remember our representative sampler of common emotional appeals along with the listing of indicators. We listed: appeal to envy appeal to fear appeal to hatred, appeal to pride and appeal to moderation. All are very common. Remember, though, the range of emotions is great and so is the scope of appeals. Anticipate disputants will appeal to a wide range of emotion — usually by means of loaded words.

Step 3. Try word substitution

This is a countermeasure for arguments that appeal to emotion through loaded words. Simply pick out a key paragraph or two, identify the loaded words or phrases and substitute emotionally neutral language.

Here is this technique applied to a key paragraph from a letter to the editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. It concerns a controversy over controlled deer hunts to reduce the deer population in city parks.

"...everyone has witnessed the failures of this approach. Yet the gun-toting problem solvers are now planning to invade the city's parks. Such a movement is being led by a small but loud minority of hunters, supported by self-serving politicians."

The "everyone," referred to is one of those reifications we detail elsewhere in this book. (See Chapter 3, Reifications.) Right now, however, we are looking for loaded words or phrases. How about "gun-toting problems solvers," the plan to "invade" city parks, the "loud minority of hunters" and "self-serving politicians?" Now, let's try word substitution. Let's see how this excerpt reads if we replace loaded words or phrases with more neutral language? Here is one possibility:

"...Des Moines residents have witnessed the failures of this approach. Yet a controlled number of hunters are now planning to hunt deer in the city's parks. Such a policy is being advocated by some hunters, supported by some city officials."

Substituting more neutral language requires a careful search for loaded language — a critical first step. It also indirectly encourages more thoughtful examination of the issues. For instance, what are the facts about the "proposed" hunt.

Irrespective of the tone of the argument, what were the facts? A call to the Fairmount Park Commission revealed that park officials have not even conducted the required deer census, much less developed an obligatory deer control plan, applied to the state game commission for necessary permission to conduct a hunt, or held mandated public hearings. A key park official summed up the situation by saying, "Even the long-term prospects of such a hunt are very, very remote; and it is certainly not imminent." This controversy exemplifies how emotion can distract us from a very necessary concern with facts.

Chapter Highlights

This chapter cautions against the confusion of emotion with facts and reason. In the final analysis, facts are facts and logic still logic no matter what. The chapter also warns against appeals to emotion, assists in their identification and suggests countermeasures.

Other Related Chapters in This Text

2, Slogans

6, Name-Calling

4, Definitions and Controversy

10, Feelings, Facts & Logic

Keywords for Further Data Base Search

persuasion	stereotyping	subjectivity
propaganda	scapegoating	public relations
appeals to emotion	emotivism	objectivity

Test Yourself

In each of the statements below, underline loaded words that might appeal to emotion. Then put a plus next to those evoking positive emotions and a minus next to those arousing negative emotions. The point of this exercise is to see if you can identify and evaluate loaded words. The first statement is done for you. Remember, what counts as a loaded word varies from person to person depending on values, assumptions and perspective.

"The democracy (+) which embodies and guarantees our freedom (+) is not powerless, (-) passive (-) or blind (-), nor is it in retreat. (-) It has no intention of giving way to the savage fantasies (-) of its adversaries. It is not prepared to give advance blessing to its own destruction." (-)

Pierre Elliott Trudeau

"Everything ponderous, vicious, and solemnly clumsy, all long-winded and boring types of style are developed in profuse variety among Germans."

Friedrich Nietzsche

"For what are the triumphs of war planned by ambition, executed by violence, and consummated by devastation? The means are the sacrifice of many, the end the bloated aggrandizement of the few."

Charles Colton

"With all their faults, trade-unions have done more for humanity than any other organization of men that ever existed. They have done more for decency, for honesty, for education, for the betterment of the race, for the development of character in man, than any other association of men."

Clarence Darrow

"It is the American vice, the democratic disease which expresses its tyranny by reducing everything unique to the level of the herd."

Henry Miller

Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.
