# Argument as combat.

## Abstract

Argument is seen as central to philosophy, especially epistemology. It is often said that philosophy teaches you to argue for any position. Arguments are used to justify beliefs and many people suppose that for a belief to be counted for knowledge it must be justified. In science, scientific theories must be backed by the evidence and it has been proposed that the relationship of evidence to theory is that of argument to conclusion. But is argument really so important? Arguments in practice are hardly ever persuasive, and a deductive argument adds no new information. Knowledge and wisdom of the philosophical kind can be garnered and created through observation, exploration, experiment, collaboration, narrative and sharing. None of these ways of knowing necessarily involve argument, and can actually in some cases be harmed by argument.

It is fairly uncontroversial to say that argument has a central role in contemporary English speaking philosophy. But if argument is a form of combat then this emphasis on argument could be a source of gender bias in philosophy and in certain sciences. Men are physiologically attracted to combat through the mechanism of testosterone fluctuations in response to competitive situations. But apart from being attractive to some men, arguments do not create good philosophy. Good philosophy aims at the love of wisdom and knowledge. Two principle goods in philosophy are the creation of knowledge and the spreading of knowledge. Arguments neither create knowledge nor are persuasive. On the contrary, arguments create divisions and cognitive biases. As such philosophy may be better with less of an emphasis on argument, and more emphasis on non-violence, sharing and love.

## Combat

Let us define combat as any activity that has no product other than to create winners and losers and to generate hierarchies. This is quite a broad definition of combat and includes non-physical combat sports like chess and computer gaming. It doesn’t include competitions that have a stand-alone product, like literary competitions, dance competitions or vegetable growing competitions. A product for the purposes of this definition is an intrinsically intended outcome. Any positive outcome is only a product if it was the explicit aim of the activity in a way that is essential to that activity. Both combat sports and deadly combat can have positive outcomes, such as increased fitness, that do not count as products because they are extrinsic to the combat. These may be intended or unintended. For example, World War II had the positive outcome of helping accelerate the development of the digital computer and the radar. But these happy results were not intrinsic to the combat. World War Two, as a war, was not aimed at developing technology. Neither were the technological advances intended, in that when the various heads of state decided on having a war, the development of the computer and radar would not have been one of the reasons that led them to the decision to go to war. A combat sport like boxing may have intended benefits such as keeping fit and improving one’s self defence capability and confidence in public. But these are not *intrinsic* products, because the structure of boxing would not change if someone did not have these intentions, or if these outcomes did not happen. So, if someone did not improve their fitness through boxing, it would not mean they had failed at boxing, although they may have failed in their intention to improve their fitness. Boxing and international war share this lack of intrinsic product while retaining the purpose of creating winners and losers and generating hierarchies, so they both come under the concept of combat I have in mind.

Likewise with argument, there may well be benefits to be had from arguing, such as improved capability at arguing, improved cognitive abilities, and improved motivation to research relevant information. But if argument is *merely* combat, then none of these benefits will be intrinsic to the argument; in other words, failing to improve your arguing capability, or failing to be motivated to research relevant information does not constitute an argumentative failure. You can still win an argument without generating these benefits. That said, it could be that at least some arguments do have intrinsic products. For example argument may result in error correction and conflict resolution. If some arguments have these products, then those arguments are not combat. So the “argument as combat” slogan may not apply to all arguments.

In nearly every field of combat and combative sport men dominate, including non-physical combat like chess. Chess is a good example because it is often used as an analogy for philosophy. Chess is a combat sport because it has no intrinsic intended product. In chess two people make moves within a very large deterministic set of possible moves. At the end of the game there is one winner and one loser (unless it is a draw). But nothing has been achieved. The only thing that the winner takes away with him is the fact that he has beaten the other player. Enthusiasts might say that specific chess games may advance the field of chess because they displayed some innovation which was then recorded in the chess canon. But this kind of product is not intrinsic to the sport. There is no doubt that playing chess exercises certain transferable cognitive abilities, but these benefits are not intrinsic to the sport either. The vast majority of world class chess players are men and it goes without saying that chess masters are very intelligent. It is likely that the large numbers of men in the top tier of chess competitions is explained by a male preference for combative sport rather than any innate superior ability at chess in men as a gender. If argument is combat and analytic philosophy has become the analysis of arguments, then perhaps there is little to be gained from contemporary philosophy over and beyond a chance to test one’s mettle in an arena full of intelligent combatants.

## Argument as Combat

Are arguments a form of combat? Arguments do have winners and losers and arguments do generate hierarchies. There is a slogan in academic philosophy which says: “Argue with propositions, not with people.” This is meant as an admonishment against ad hominem arguments. One might think that this means that arguments exist in some abstract intellectual realm and therefore are not dominance contests between men. But the values of impartiality, fairness and strict rules of engagement are common place in combative sport and ad hominem attacks are no more appropriate in a boxing ring as they are in a philosophy department. In fact, this lack of personal involvement is a sign that philosophical argument is a combat sport. If the arguer is not personally connected with the point they are arguing for, the argument itself can be framed as play. The forbidding of ad hominem attacks ensures that the arguer is safe from being held personally responsible for the propositions they are arguing for. This is analogous with a soldier who is not held morally responsible for the death he causes. The normal moral prohibition on murder is relaxed when it comes to men murdering other men in the context of war. In these cases it is not even called murder. For war and combat to succeed in creating hierarchies, the combatants cannot be held morally responsible for the harm they have caused to their opponents. But perhaps philosophers should be morally responsible for the beliefs they espouse. Socrates was prepared to die for what he believed in. It is a sign that someone is only in it for the pleasure of argument if they wish to avoid responsibility for holding the beliefs that they argue for.

Arguments are supposed to justify beliefs. Knowledge is often considered to be justified true belief. If this is the case then the product of an argument is knowledge, which is a philosophically important product. But it is often the case that philosophers do not believe in the position they are arguing for. Believing in what you argue for is not seen as a requirement. This ability to argue for a proposition you do not believe, which can be called “philosophical detachment”, ensures that there is no product in philosophical argument. If one does not believe in a claim that one has justified through argument, then one has not produced knowledge, because knowledge requires belief. Rather than arguments justifying knowledge, they don’t even seem to ground belief. If one can win an argument without coming to believe the conclusion, then it must be that the argument had no purpose other than the creation of winners and losers and the generation of hierarchies.

## Philosophy

Let us agree that philosophy is the love of wisdom. Love is nurturing and aims at flourishing. So the goal of philosophy is to nurture wisdom so that it can flourish. Creating and disseminating knowledge are two principles goals in philosophy. The philosophical community should be a safe and conducive place for the practice of wisdom and the creation and sharing of knowledge. Philosophers should be like mid wives, and bring forth the creation of knowledge. This idea of philosophy comes from the etymology of the word. The analogy with midwifery comes from Socrates, an iconic ancient Greek philosopher who often symbolises the spirit of philosophy. Socrates had a reputation for being argumentative and for questioning everything and everybody in a way that many found abrasive. Given this, it may be thought that argument is essential to philosophy viewed as a tradition in which Socrates is the paradigm philosopher. But Socrates claimed to know only that he did not know anything. This is incompatible with the idea of Socrates as someone who argued for a position, because he had no position. His practice was to ask questions and listen carefully to the answers. Socrates explicit aims were to become wise, to understand the nature of the good and of justice and to live the good life. Also, Socrates willingly accepted state execution which demonstrates that he took responsibility for his beliefs to the highest level.

## Argument does not generate knowledge

Argument does not obviously further the aims of generating and spreading knowledge and wisdom. Argument does not obviously generate or disseminate wisdom. A modus ponens deductive argument is one where the premises entail the conclusion. In this case there is no more information in the conclusion than in the premises.

Inductive arguments do not have decisive conclusions and it may be said that inductive arguments are ampliative, in that the conclusion contains more information that the premises. Statistics generates useful information but is of no use in settling disputes on a case by case basis. For this reason, I do not think that collecting data and analysing it statistically is necessarily an argumentative process. That said, philosophers such as Popper have fretted that statistical statements are not strictly falsifiable. There is a great deal of philosophical work spanning centuries aimed at taming chance and making probability amenable to argument. The amount of work conjoined with the lack of consensus perhaps itself is an argument that the project of framing statistical information as argumentative has failed.

Arguments are used to justify claims based on evidence or proof. This frames epistemology as a process similar to a legal trial. In a legal trial an innocent defendant presumably knows that she is innocent before the trial begins. But in order to establish her innocence before the court, her case must be argued by a professional. The professional will make use of evidence and put arguments before the impartial judge and jury. This provides the justification for the claim that she is innocent. But the justification for the claim to innocence in this case is not the same as her grounds for knowledge that she is innocent. It is her knowledge that she is innocent that contributes to her wisdom, not the justification in court.[[1]](#footnote-1) The blurring of the distinction between the justification of claims and the grounds for knowledge may contribute to and sustain the centrality of argument in epistemology and science.

An example of this phenomena can be seen in the recent debates as to the existence of God. Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Law have an unshakeable conviction that God does not exist. Their philosophical work in this area consists of coming up with new arguments for the nonexistence of God. It is clear that these new arguments are redundant as grounds for their own knowledge of the nonexistence of God, because they already had this belief with the highest levels of conviction. The purposes of these new arguments therefore seem to be to justify claims and defeat opponents rather than ground knowledge. Descartes’ Meditations moves from confession of complete doubt, to a deductive proof for the existence of God. Although it is possible that these meditations persuaded Descartes to believe that God existed, it is highly unlikely given that he believed in God before he began the Meditations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another recent example is what has been labelled “neurosexism” in a book by Cordelia Fine (2010). A neuroscientist may already hold beliefs about sex differences and then seek to find neuroscientific arguments to support these beliefs. This use of scientific method is contrary to the ideal that the scientific method generates knowledge, since the scientific evidence merely provides argumentative grounds for beliefs that are already held with high levels of conviction. I should not be understood as criticizing neuroscience here; this is only meant as another example of when arguments do not create belief.

## Arguments not persuasive

As well as not creating knowledge, arguments are not very good at persuading people. Regardless of who wins and who loses an argument, the arguers are likely to go away with their beliefs either unchanged, or more polarised. One mechanism that causes this is confirmation bias. Arguers, once they have established which side of an argument they are taking, will interpret evidence so as to confirm their viewpoint. They will also seek confirmatory evidence and ignore disconfirming evidence. This is even the case when people are arbitrarily assigned positions to debate. The result is that arguments serve to increase dichotomies and divisions rather than to persuade, spread wisdom or teach.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Arguments do not create clarity

Neither do arguments create clarity. It has often been suggested that the study of argumentative form will help clarify discourse. This is certainly true to a degree, but journals of analytic philosophy, especially in epistemology, are increasingly unintelligible to the general reader. It is a common complaint among those trained in the analytic school that “non-philosophers” don’t understand their work.[[4]](#footnote-4)

## Combat is attractive to men

Men are physiologically attracted to combat situations. Most combat arenas tend to be either exclusively male or male dominated in terms of numbers of participants.[[5]](#footnote-5) The physiological explanation for this is that men get a testosterone boost when they prepare for a combat, and they get another top up if they win. If they lose, they get a drop in testosterone levels. (Goldstein, 2001) [[6]](#footnote-6) This also happens vicariously, so testosterone boosts happen in combative sports fans when their team wins. It hardly needs be said that the feeling associated with winning is rewarding and motivating, whereas losing is unpleasant and demotivating.

## Testosterone in women

It is important to note that women also have testosterone boosts associated with winning and losing, but the effect is not so strong. Men who care for young children tend to have lower levels of testosterone. There are women who have unusually high levels of testosterone and these women tend to have a competitive advantage in sport.

## Testosterone advantages

It has been known since the 1930s that testosterone confers an advantage in competitive sport. The advantages are not only physical. Testosterone also confers psychological advantages, which may explain the predominance of men in sports such as chess. The effects of testosterone that have been studied are: increased awareness of social threat; decreased perception of negative emotions; reduced empathy and a lowering of response to startling stimuli (Wood & Stanton 2015). This will confer an advantage in arguing by reducing the possibility of seeing your opponent’s point of view and also by not getting intimidated or manipulated by your opponent’s emotions. The reduced startle effect will enable better focus.

The increased levels of testosterone following victory lead to behaviour that seeks further competitive situations and increases the likelihood of further victory. This creates a feedback system where argument winners seek and promote further argument.

It is also interesting that the testosterone boost related to winning is relative to the status of the opponent. If the opponent is easy to beat, or considered low status, then the victor may experience a drop in testosterone levels equivalent to losing. Men gripped in this combat cycle will only seek contests with those on their level or higher.

I am presenting these statements about testosterone as fact but I would like to qualify this a little. The thesis that argument is combat and this explains the male dominance through the mechanism of testosterone came to me as a synthesis of my experiences in analytic philosophy in many conferences and undertaking a PhD, and through reading about testosterone. The studies I have quoted in this article were found as a result of directly searching for studies that would support my thesis. But I do not think this qualifies as neurosexism, as most of the research was motivated by issues around doping in sport. The mechanism by which testosterone confers competitive advantages is the object under study; the proposition that testosterone confers competitive advantage is already established. However, this said, it maybe that none of these effects are causally linked to testosterone, as the science is not infallible.

## Winning arguments

The feedback system can be mapped out like this: it is possible in philosophy and in science to win arguments fairly, according to impartial, objective standards. Winning arguments leads to promotion, prestige and power. Winning arguments leads to heightened testosterone levels in men. Heightened testosterone levels lead to increased engagement in social competition coupled with a lowering of empathy. This leads to a top tier of professional philosophers who place high value on arguments, have low levels of empathy and are much more likely than chance to be men.

When I gave this paper in a conference, a delegate asked me why I had chosen the testosterone route, rather than a psychoanalytic route to explaining the phenomena. She suggested an article by Vinca Bigo (2008) which I went on to read with great interest. Vinca Bigo gives an account based on attachment theory. The coming to awareness in infancy of the fact that one’s mother is a separate agent on whom one is utterly dependent and who could potentially be threatening is a source of separation anxiety which in men can create delusions of superiority and the need for control. Vinca Bigo uses this to explain certain features of contemporary economics: that it relied heavily on mathematical models that made the world seem predictable and controllable; whilst at the same time creating an in-group of economists who are superior to non-economists. The problem is that these mathematical models don’t work and Economics as a discipline seems unable or unwilling to change its methodological assumptions in the face of continued empirical failure. This insensitivity to correction in the face of empirical failure points to a collective pathology. The collective pathology stems from a need to maintain delusions of control and superiority. Bigo suggests that heterodox economic theories that do not necessarily involve reductive mathematical models could serve the purposes of economics much better were they not excluded from consideration by the current male dominated hierarchy.

Katrine Marçal’s book “Who cooked Adam Smith’s dinner?” (2015) explains how the economists’ view human nature as typified by the “economic man”. The economic man is entirely rational and entirely self-interested with seemingly no emotional relationships or family history. This has been a seductive image of the reality of human nature that has had an increasing and damaging effect on global culture. The “economic man” acts always to maximise his personal utility governed by his preference ranking. Using this idealised atom of social exchange, the entire global economy can be reduced to economic men playing competitive games. The models assume that each person will act to maximise their utility and that not to do so would be irrational.

Economics as an academy has two features in common with philosophy, they are both male dominated and they are both populated by highly intelligent people. A third similarity, which is perhaps more difficult to establish, is that both have become divorced from reality. Countless psychological and economic experiments have shown that economic man does not exist. It has been proven again and again that people simply aren’t motivated in the way that economics predicts. Furthermore, the global economy regularly behaves in ways which economists have utterly failed to predict. The most impressive failure being the 2008 crash, which was predicted by many, many people, but by no celebrated economists. The problem to be addressed is: why is economics so resistant to empirical correction?

Vinca Bigo answers this problem by proffering a particularly male psychological pathology. This masculine pathology causes men to enjoy the feeling of conditional predictability and control as a way of overcoming the trauma of separation in infancy. This feeling is so desirable that these men will prefer a delusional model of reality that makes it seem predictable and controllable, to a more realistic model of reality in which the world seems unpredictable and mysterious. The desirability of the feeling of control stems from separation anxiety as it manifests specifically in boys. The masculine gender is defined in opposition to the feminine care giver and for this reason places high value on autonomy, control, independence and strength and a negative value on dependence, empathy, emotion and attachment. These latter qualities become associated with femininity whereas the former become associated with masculinity. Because the kind of conditional prediction that leads to control is achievable through rationality, then rationality becomes associated with masculinity and contrasted with emotionality or temperament which thus become feminine traits.

I was asked why I chose the testosterone based explanation rather than this psychoanalytic explanation. In answering this question after the event has been over for several months I am supressing the very impulses that this essay is attempting to uncover. My impulse is to find arguments for why my testosterone based theory is superior to the separation anxiety based theory. But this is entirely unnecessary. The two explanations explain and categorise broadly speaking the same phenomena and they are not mutually exclusive.

## Combat language

The language of philosophical argument has many parallels with ancient jousting, trial by combat and military strategy. One phrase that captures the literature is “embattled reason”. Going back for hundreds of years in philosophy the metaphorical language of philosophical work has forged an association between masculinity and reason. Reason so conceived is seen as under threat from feminine emotion, temperament and mystery. In 2009, when many faculties in the humanities had around 40% women, philosophy still had only 20% women. Women in philosophy such as Professor Helen Beebee reported such a pugilistic atmosphere in philosophy departments that the decision to pursue professional philosophy involved an expectation of opening oneself up to having one’s work “publically trashed on a regular basis.” (Lewis, 2009). This idea, that women are disproportionately put off by the combative atmosphere of academic philosophy departments, may go some way to explaining the phenomena of low numbers of women in philosophy. But it does not explain or even critically assess the combative atmosphere itself. Rooney (Rooney, Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation and Embattled Reason, 2010) uncovers logical reasons why the combat structure of argument opposes the truth seeking norm. She points out that the “loser” of an argument makes the most epistemic gains, whereas the “winner” of an argument may possibly make no epistemic gains. If knowledge is the goal, then losing arguments should be seen as preferable. She points out that respectful disagreement is necessary and desirable in philosophy, but adversarial or combative argument is not. But we are hampered by what she calls the *argument-as-war* metaphor that is so deeply entrenched that we may find it difficult to say what we mean by expressions such as *opponents, adopting and defending positions, scoring points,* or simply *winning and losing arguments,* without relying on the war and related sport metaphors.

In Rooney (2012) she points to a practice she calls “default scepticism” whereby in a philosophical context a speaker A makes a statement and the audience member B will try to come up with any objection possible. The rationale behind this practice is the Devil’s Advocacy rationale proposed by John Stuart Mill. The highest level of certainty achievable by human beings is a position that is open to and can withstand all objections. So in a philosophical community, when someone proposes a theory, it is the responsibility of the other members of the community to prove it wrong or otherwise dispute it. This ideal is especially strong in universities with historical ties to Logical Positivism and Popper’s falsifiability desideratum. Good scientists, it is ventured, try their utmost to prove their hypotheses wrong. If, after trying their very hardest to prove the hypothesis wrong, it still stands, then it can provisionally be accepted as scientific knowledge. If philosophy is seen as a conceptual branch of science, then this same ideal can be applied to philosophical practice.

This ideal in practice produces a nit picking approach to philosophical criticism. In the worst case it can seem as if the only response that a philosophical paper can elicit is an objection. All other responses (for example, agreement) are condemned to silence. I recognise the phenomena from my own experience. When giving a talk, the “questions” are not generally speaking requests for information, but are objections in the interrogative mode. When in the audience, a good question is one that rattles the speaker and makes him concede that he has made an error. This phenomenon led me to conclude that analytic philosophy is not persuasive, since more often than not I would leave a talk convinced of the exact opposite of what the speaker was proposing, although I may never have come across the topic in my life previously.

One problem here is that as this culture becomes entrenched, then any proposal, however serious and important, will be torn to shreds and unheard due to a barrage of nit picking and petty objections. Sadly, the more interesting, creative and important the thesis, the less likely it is to survive this process. Feminist philosophy is particularly vulnerable to this kind of systemic silencing. The net effect of this well intentioned default scepticism is that it exhausts and intimidates those who are sensitive to criticism and are not naturally combative. It also weeds out interesting and socially progressive philosophy and in favour of plodding, pedantic and over complicated philosophy. It favours those who are aggressive, thick skinned and enjoy conflict but have very little interesting to say.

When one thinks of qualities that constitute a good philosopher, aggressiveness, combativeness and thick skin aren’t what immediately spring to mind. The thought that women’s absence from philosophy is explained by a lack of aggressiveness, combativeness and insensitivity on the part of the typical woman is surely a terrible indictment on the state of philosophy. Being able to take criticism may or may not be an epistemic virtue, but being able to ignore criticism is certainly not an epistemic virtue; it is a well-studied narcissistic cognitive bias that leads to over confidence in your own beliefs. In so far that it is true that aggressiveness and insensitivity to criticism are entry requirements into professional philosophy, it is bad news for philosophy regardless of any value attached to gender equality. A way of winning arguments made famous by tyrants, dictators and totalitarian states is to silence your opponents. The more the structure of academic philosophy focusses around the goal of winning arguments, the more the strategy of silencing one’s opponents will lead to financial and prestigious success. I hope I don’t need to make explicit that the strategy of silencing one’s opponents is the very opposite of good philosophy. But the combative atmosphere of professional philosophy and the competitive career structure of contemporary academia make silencing one’s opponents both possible and desirable.

In my own experience of analytic philosophy garnered from many conferences and from a long association with a UK University in the analytic tradition, the argument-as-war metaphor was apparent and was manifested in various framework propositions. By framework propositions I mean that they were in a shared space of agreement that cannot be challenged.

Knowledge must be *justified* by *strong arguments*. Theses are *defended* or *championed*. The *logical space* is *mapped out* and *positions* are *held*. *Rules of engagement* are often stated. People who hold different views are called “*opponents*”. Blind review is considered important to eliminate unfair *advantages*.

Senior philosophers get subordinates to *survey the logical space* and then find a *position* within that space to *defend* or *attack*.

It is considered a professional necessity to keep track of the names of people who first made “*moves*” in debates. This takes the form of “*citations*”.

This creates a scoring system, the number of citations, which dictates rank. Universities are ranked and funded appropriately. The ranking of a University depends on the ranking of the individual philosophers in the faculty.

Features of professional academia such as impact studies, blind peer reviewed quality journals, citation counting and strict observance of intellectual property, all contribute to the competitive combat structure of philosophy. The feedback loop begins and ends in the structure of academic funding. Winning arguments is a way of gaining prestige and promotion. This creates a top tier of philosophers who have won many arguments. This in turn raises the perceived value of arguments and argument winners.

This feedback loop explains the male bias in academic philosophy. But the male bias does not serve the interests of men or philosophy. It has already been said that the combative atmosphere of philosophy departments is what puts women off. I am offering an alternative hypothesis: the dominance of combative argument puts off philosophers and people, men and women, who are interested in philosophy understood as the love of wisdom. At the same time, it attracts and creates a certain type of person, a person who enjoys winning and becomes good at winning arguments. This type of person is much more likely to be male, because of the impact of testosterone on behaviour.

## Combat philosophy unappealing to the general public

A sign that the predominance of argument in philosophy leads to bad philosophy is its loss of appeal to the general public. Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, should be, and is, central to any human culture. But to focus on English speaking philosophy since the 1970s, it has been noticed that people who have risen to the very top of the profession are almost entirely unknown outside the competitive field. Champions such as Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett, David Lewis and Timothy Williamson have all been lorded as the most important philosophers of their time, but very few intellectuals not directly involved in philosophy have heard of them. Even within professional philosophy, it seems like these apparent giants are very quickly forgotten. There is certainly an appetite for philosophy in the general public and popular philosophy books; films with philosophical content; and philosophical discussions are everywhere. But the philosophy profession itself doesn’t seem to be a part of this philosophical discourse.

An illustrative example is David Lewis. A recent survey of citation statistics found that David Lewis had more citations than all women combined! Yet outside professional philosophy and maybe linguistics, he is virtually unknown.

On the topic of David Lewis, by all accounts he was a very pleasant man and not the image of a testosterone fuelled warrior. There is a broader point to be made here. Winners in war and in combat tend to be cool rather than hot. A well trained killer or assassin does not shout or stamp his feet. Winners in combat are characterised by mental discipline and flattened affect. In so far as philosophy has been associated with military superiority it is Stoic philosophy, the philosophy of mental control and detachment, that stands out. Both the British and the Roman empires had a strong strain of stoicism in their militaries. In martial arts, provoking the opponent into anger is a common tactic. Once someone becomes angry, their ability to argue coherently or fight efficiently is impaired. On the contrary, the testosterone formed philosopher will appear civil and polite, calm, collected and focussed. The only sign that something is amiss is that truth will be routinely sacrificed to personal victory.

## The Way Forward: Non Violent Philosophy

We might ask what alternative there is to argument based philosophy. If we agree that the generation and dissemination of wisdom and knowledge should be the goal of philosophy and science, then there are many practices that could be and are developed and nurtured in the service of wisdom. Curiosity, experiment, exploration, narrative, sharing and problem solving can all be harnessed in the generation and dissemination of wisdom and are not essentially competitive and are non-violent. Narrative based philosophy has a good history including Voltaire, Nietzsche, Plato, Murdoch and Sartre.

Children learn best when they feel safe and loved. With the assurance of loving, safe care, children feel free to explore their environment and engage in creative play. This feeling of safety and love has recently been associated with oxytocin. It is likely that the same is true for adults, and that the promotion of a feeling of loving safety will encourage curiosity, experiment, exploration, storytelling, sharing and problem solving. A loving, safe environment is more likely to produce good philosophy than a combative competitive environment.

Adrenalin and oxytocin are counter indicative, in other words, higher adrenalin levels create lower oxytocin levels. Learning is enhanced by oxytocin, whereas adrenalin enhances combat. In a recent study, men were shown to be more responsive to social feedback and have better learning outcomes after receiving a dose of oxytocin. This was especially apparent when the feedback came in the form of a woman’s face. In other words, creating a de- adrenalized non-competitive atmosphere could actually improve men’s ability to listen to women. (J Hu et al 2015)

## Conclusion

The ideal is to nurture non-violent philosophy. A non-violent philosophy would be more creative and efficient, more popular with the general public and more inspiring. De-emphasising argument in philosophy could create a better atmosphere for the creation and dissemination of wisdom. This would create better philosophy that would be more useful and enriching for the wider community. It would also be likely to result in a greater gender balance in professional philosophy.

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1. For example, if she provided the court with an alibi and witness who testified that she was in fact not at the scene of the crime when it was committed, then the statement of the witness will not give her grounds to believe that she is innocent, and thus will not contribute to her wisdom in so far as knowledge of her innocence contributes to her wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In these cases, it might be supposed that Dawkins and Law are putting their arguments forward in the spirit of educating others. I am sure this interpretation of their motives is correct. But the point remains. What they are teaching is not that God doesn’t exist, but that these are ways of arguing the case for atheism. I do not think this is a black and white issue, and I am sympathetic to the idea that public atheists do a service to people who are tricked or coerced by an organised religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is a lot of work on attitude polarisation and it is not my intention to summarize it, here is one of many articles that discuss the psychology involved (Taber, Kuscova, & Cann, 2009). But many studies have shown that people, when presented with mixed evidence on a polarized topic will interpret and weight the evidence and argument in a way that support their prior belief, or supports the belief of the group they are in. This has the effect that argument rarely persuades people to change their beliefs and more commonly increases division and polarisation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am assuming familiarity here, but for the sceptic reader here is a blog post complaining about non philosophers unable to understand philosophical argument: http://www.philosophyetc.net/2006/05/problem-with-non-philosophers.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the Armed Forces in the UK, female participation is on the rise and has risen from below 10% to above 14%. The USA is similar. Private security workers have a 92%/8% gender ratio. Women and men are segregated in top level football, rugby, fencing, boxing, wrestling, and the majority of track sports on the grounds that if men and women were to compete directly there would be no top level female participation in sport. Games such as snooker, darts and chess are also male dominated without an obvious physical story as to why. There is no value judgement being made here. It is not obvious that people of different genders should be involved in sport or soldiery in equal proportion. The point is rather that competitive sport and combat are more attractive to men than to women on average. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Many of these statements are supported in Ch.3. (Goldstein, 2001). This book, that won an award for the book of the decade 2000 -2009, examines the role of gender in war. In chapter 3 it emphasises that testosterone fluctuations are responses to changes in social status rather than physical victory, and that there is little evidence that women share these responses. Victories in the law courts and accepting MA certificates in a ceremony are situations that have been shown to lead to a testosterone boost. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)