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## **Part I: Key Ideas**

Deborah Tannen repeatedly makes the point that our culture has grown accustomed to using argument to reveal truth. Interestingly, I think every paper I have written for this class has addressed the examination of the sources for truth. Perhaps the teaching of virtue remains at the forefront of rhetorical theory, but its pedagogy is always in costume.

One of Dr. Tannen's most salient points is illustrated by public discussions. She points out that we gather contrasting individuals with the most polarizing views to debate on topics of conversation [Tannen, p.3]. In doing so, we lose sight of the common middle ground and are forced to choose adversarial sides. Topics that do not require debate are forced into contest. Instead of promoting brainstorming we opt for head banging. We lose valuable cooperative middle ground because we have been conditioned to think that truth is only born from opposition.

Tannen questions the frequency with which we categorized dialogue into polarizing opposites. She calls the propensity to pit discussions into these opposing stances "agonism." This term reflects an automatic warlike stance between opponents.

This tendency to polarize discussions leads people to automatically look for opposing views where none need exist. She uses the example of Holocaust denial [Tannen, p.11]. This results in much wasted time and energy fending off unnecessary challenges to creative and scientific works.

The inclination toward adversarial dialogue is shown in the use of war and sports competition terminologies. Debaters are said to go to war with each other, to trade blows, and positions are referred to as corners (boxing corners) or camps (military encampments) [Tannen,

p.13]. This creates an atmosphere of animosity and an us-versus-them mentality that can impede intellectual and social progress.

The alternative is to acknowledge our proclivity to this type of aggressive dialogue and take steps to choose the wording that mitigates its effects. We should look for commonalities and branch out from there. We must understand that adversarial formats should not be the automatic mode of engagement [Tannen, p.7].

## **Part II: Selected Passage**

Tannen writes, "If you begin with the assumption that there must be an "other side," you may end up scouring the margins of science or the fringes of lunacy to find it. As a result, proven facts, such as what we know about how the earth and its inhabitants evolved, are set on par with claims that are known to have no basis in fact, such as creationism" [Tannen, p.11].

Tannen discusses a phenomenon that I would call "nullifying induction." It occurs in conversation when one person makes a point, and the interlocutor searches his or her mind for why that point might not have merit. This is nullifying induction. It is how we test our interlocutor's point. The degree to which we succeed or fail in nullifying our interlocutor's point advances the conversation. This is a very natural tendency. It is so prevalent in conversation that often, if you want your interlocutor to make your point for you, you can make the opposite point. To which, your interlocutor will respond with the desired application, even if the person might have resisted doing so otherwise.

Tannen's objection is the exaggerated use of nullifying induction to produce meritless contradicting scenarios. By suggesting the scenario, the original point is weakened by the possible existence of an exact opposite point, even if the scenario is baseless. This is often enough to dissuade those to whom the original scenario inconveniences. As an unknown author once said, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

### **Part III: Connections with Other Readings or Events**

Obviously, Dr. Tannen's concern would result in a heated debate with the Sophists, who would argue that truth naturally comes from *dissoi logoi*. However, Dr. Tannen is not objecting to the use of debate or the clash of ideas; instead, she is objecting to the perception that it is the automatic response to any proposal.

I am prone to debate. This class has caused me to examine the starting point of my argument. Our readings and discussions have caused me to agree that persuasion only occurs with an audience with whom I first find common ground. As you have seen by now, I reflect a lot on my experiences with fundamentalist religious opinion. For example, and as is also mentioned by Dr. Tannen, I have concerns about religious encroachment in public schools regarding views on evolution.

My wife's parents are staying in my home this week. They are here visiting from Germany, where they are protestant missionaries with fundamentalist beliefs. They have been missionaries most of their adult lives, starting their work after graduating from Bob Jones University. This is why my wife was born in Chile and grew up in Spain. She was a missionary kid.

I love my mother and father-in-law, and I welcome them in my home. However, all such visits are filled with endless, but civil, religious debate. Their first night here, my father-in-law bemoaned the inability to mention God in the public school class rooms (what he really wants to do is start each day reading the Bible to the class). I responded that it wasn't that people didn't want God mentioned, it was that we do not want to deal with the fundamentalist rejection of science. This began our debate on evolution.

He stated "science has yet to observe an instance of one species turning into another species." This let me know that the last time he has studied this issue was by reading Henry Morris' anti-evolution books written in the 80's. I promised to provide some examples of speciation, and our conversation would continue later.

I began writing a response to Carey, my father-in-law, and I asked myself, "Where could I find common ground." I decided it was in our desire to have a moral society. I wrote him a response regarding speciation and biological evolution, and then I wrote a response about the evolution of morality. I acknowledged that, even as a secularist, I appreciated the fact that churches try to teach morality, and there is really nothing to replace this in American society. For this, even atheists should be grateful to churches, regardless of the lack of complete agreement on issues of ethics. However, I proposed that modern Christians do not get their morality from the Bible; they get it from it from the same place secularist do- public discourse. In fact, modern Christians should find the morality of the Old Testament especially outside of their values (namely due to the many instances of genocide and the horrible treatment of women). I suggested that because the same biblical author (who he believes to be Moses) who proposed multiple campaigns of genocide and established laws for fathers to sell their daughters into slavery, could not be an author who possessed revealed knowledge from a supreme being about how humanity came into existence.

Whether you agree with my approach or not, my point is that I tried to start from a common ground and branch out. As Burke said, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" [Burke, *The Rhetoric of Motives* New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950: 55]. I doubt I was completely successful in removing the combative structure of the conversation, but I did try to weave commonality of views into the discourse.

Also, as Dr. Tannen points out, I spent a lot of time responding to my father-in-law. This is time I probably should have spent on my homework. Time will tell if my efforts were wasted.

If you are interested in reading what I wrote to him, you are welcome to read the following (speciation and the evolution of morality):

<http://www.TalkingTimeline.com/misc/Speciation.doc>

[http://www.TalkingTimeline.com/misc/OT\\_Validity.doc](http://www.TalkingTimeline.com/misc/OT_Validity.doc)