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The Art of Argumentation

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THE ART OF ARGUMENTATION

GUIDE 1.0

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“I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this, and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don’t even invite me.”

— Dave Barry

INTRODUCTION

By arguing, I mean argumentation rather than a verbal brawl or a meaningless contest in which people one-up each other. An argument is a purposeful exchange with the purpose being to settle or explore an intellectual dispute. The ideal argument is a cooperative venture in which both parties attempt to arrive at the truth. Ideal arguments rarely happen.

For many people, arguments are intimidating experiences in which there are winners and losers, and they are too often the



latter. As with physical contests, the winner is assumed to be superior; the loser often feels inferior and humiliated. This is a twisted and debased view of argumentation. After all, the loser is the one who benefits the most from the encounter because he gains knowledge or eliminates an error. The winner may know nothing more at the end of the argument than when he first opened his mouth. Nevertheless, it can be tremendously frustrating to know you are correct on an issue and yet be unable to convince anyone else of that. It leads to the painful feeling that you are intellectually inadequate.

There is an art to arguing, and the person who wins often does so for no other reason than that he is more skilled. A person who is flatly wrong can out-argue someone who has evidence and logic on his side, merely by being adept. The most important skills in argument have little to do with taking a college course on logic or having an encyclopedic base of knowledge. (Of course, these factors are not to be despised.) Nor does arguing well depend upon raw intelligence or the content of your beliefs, although, again, intelligence and sound beliefs offer real advantages. The art of argumentation depends much more upon how you approach ideas and

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intellectual exchanges. This guide will make you more effective at arguing regardless of whether the content of your beliefs is correct or whether you have attended university.

*“That’s the beauty of argument; if you argue correctly,
you’re never wrong.”*

— Christopher Buckley

People spend immense time reflecting upon their emotional lives and physical well-being but very little time reflecting upon who they are intellectually. This is true even of those who are ideological, because they confuse and conflate the content of their beliefs with their basic approach to ideas. What you believe is only part of who you are intellectually. Who you are also refers to the manner in which you approach all ideas; it includes the intellectual habits you’ve formed, which make your approach to an argument into intellectual second nature.

There are simple, practical steps that can lead to becoming far more effective in communicating and in handling the obstructive behavior of others. These steps provide a framework with which you can acquire a more benevolent attitude toward ideas and toward your own mind.



OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CLAIMING YOUR INTELLECTUAL SELF

Begin by showing some benevolence toward yourself.

“Man is so made that by continually telling him he is a fool he believes it, and by continually telling it to himself he makes himself believe it. For man holds an inward talk with himself alone, which it behooves him to regulate well.”

— Pascal, *Pensées*

People have intellectual problems in the same manner they have emotional ones; for example, you might have trouble concentrating on ideas, a fear of speaking in public, or trouble organizing thoughts, especially if they have emotional content. You can easily become your own worst enemy. You can walk away from an unpleasant exchange with the feeling of being stupid, hopeless, unintelligent. Don't. Recognize your reaction for what it is: a feeling that says nothing necessarily true about you. Or, rather, it says something important about your intellectual self-esteem, and about which things need to be changed.

Run a thought experiment. Imagine a close friend comes to you for advice on a painful problem. The first thing she does is launch into a brutal tirade against herself. Would you respond, “Damn straight! What a loser you are!”? Or would you reassure her and tell her to lighten up and learn from the experience? In other words, would you be an enemy or a friend? You need to display the same sense of benevolence toward your intellectual self as you do toward a good friend. If you have obstacles, then calmly assess them and take the necessary steps to improve.

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The first step is to eliminate the notion that you are not smart enough to argue well. People are as critical of their intelligence as they are of their appearance. One reason is that they judge their intelligence by bizarre standards—by IQ tests, by comparisons with other people, or by school grades. An IQ test is a single, arbitrary, and culturally biased exam that cannot measure the general intelligence or talent of an individual. Why? A person who performs poorly on one type of test or task may do very well on another type. The first question a neutral observer would ask would be “Intelligent or talented *at what?*”



A virtuoso violinist may score at the lowest level on a math test; a star athlete may be tone deaf when it comes to music. IQ tests that judge children based on a mythical norm do great harm; an intelligence is assigned to them and it can follow them through life. Forget IQ tests.

Also forget school grades; they are based on how well you parrot back answers. They represent memorization and conformity, with little or none of the critical thinking that is the lifeblood of a vibrant intellect. As for comparison with other people, that comes from your insecurity, not from your curiosity.

“Do stuff. Be clenched, curious. Not waiting for inspiration’s shove or society’s kiss on your forehead. Pay attention. It’s all about paying attention. Attention is vitality. It connects you with others. It makes you eager. Stay eager.”

— Susan Sontag

The second step is to realize you are going to stumble; you are going to make mistakes. Fear of making mistakes and appearing foolish is a powerful barrier to thinking clearly and speaking out. Although our fears may be consciously experienced as a burden, most of us have made arrangements of convenience with them. We may complain about them, but complaining is more comfortable than confronting them. And yet confront them you must, at least to some degree, if you want to argue well. Accept that making mistakes is an inevitable and healthy part of learning; you cannot achieve excellence without falling flat on your face over and over again. Learning itself is a process of moving from ignorance toward knowledge, and it assumes you don’t already know what you are doing. The essential thing is that you want to know.

“Was it you or I who stumbled first? It does not matter. The one of us who finds the strength to get up first, must help the other.”

— Vera Nazarian, *The Perpetual Calendar of Inspiration*

Stand up for your intellectual rights. (These are actually more matters of etiquette or civility, but thinking of them as rights may help you insist upon them more readily.) Always remember,

- **Everyone has the right to not be interested.** You are under no obligation to remain trapped in a conversation that offers you nothing. No one has an unconditional claim on your time, and it is no breach of civility to politely say, “I’m sorry but I’m not interested” and walk away.



- **Everyone has the right to not understand.** Don't view this as a sign of inadequacy. Never apologize for not understanding a point. Ask the person who is speaking to repeat his point or to rephrase it. (He is likely to be pleased that you are paying attention.)
- **Everyone has the right to be uninformed.** No one can know everything. The worst thing you can do is to become embarrassed and fake knowledge you don't have. Exercise the intellectual right to say, "I'm not familiar with that."
- **Everyone has the right to make a mistake.** In fact, it is inevitable. Yet many people argue endlessly rather than admit they are wrong. It is much more honest to simply say, "You're right. I'm obviously mistaken about that one point." This is not an admission of weakness; it is a sign of strength. Besides which, most people will know you are wrong anyway and they'll admire your honesty.
- **Everyone has a right to a change of opinion.** Changing your mind is part of the learning process. If someone convinces you of something, then it is a sign of intellectual honesty to say, "You've persuaded me." The person who did so deserves the acknowledgement.
- **Everyone has a right to disagree.** When opinions that offend you are aired, it is important to disagree. (In some situations, this is not possible. More later.) You needn't get into a fight; you needn't do more than state, "I disagree," and then walk away. But you shouldn't fall into the habit of remaining silent because you are afraid to speak up. Display intellectual courage, and it will become a habit that serves you well.

Many people argue endlessly rather than admit they are wrong.

Intelligence and courage may come down to having good intellectual habits.

DEVELOPING THE HABIT OF REASONABLENESS

*We sow our thoughts, and we reap our actions;
we sow our actions, and we reap our habits;
we sow our habits, and we reap our characters;
we sow our characters, and we reap our destiny.*

— Charles Albert Hall



In his engaging book *The Uses of a Liberal Education*, the philosopher Brand Blanshard explained, “The end of education is reasonableness. The first point to note about such reasonableness is that it is a disposition or habit. Habit, not knowledge, is the main thing we take with us from a college education.... [W]hat is essential is not information at all, but the habit of reasonableness.” A habit is nothing more than a characteristic way of acting that has been established by repetition so as to become automatic. A habit becomes your second nature.

Habits can be specific behaviors: You lock the front door after entering the house; you drive a familiar route without thinking about it. More complex or general habits consist of a network of smaller ones that reinforce each other. For example, if you habitually defer to an authority figure, you will have developed a network of supporting habits such as lowering your voice in his presence, avoiding eye contact, and giving brief answers. This makes the general habit—whether it is a good or bad one—difficult to break because you are actually breaking a series of supporting habits.

Nothing is more important to arguing well than developing good intellectual habits. They cumulatively result in the general habit of reasonableness. Once entrenched, the habits become your second nature and your automatic response to intellectual situations that otherwise would have left you battered.

The word “habit” has fallen upon hard times. You hear about drug habits and breaking bad habits. A great deal of negativity is attached to the word, but classical Greek philosophers—especially Aristotle—viewed habits in a very different manner. They considered habits to be neither good nor bad in themselves but to be powerful tools that could be used toward either good or bad ends. In answer to, “How do human beings achieve happiness?” Aristotle replied that happiness was the byproduct of good habits by which people preferred acts and things of substance, in the correct amount and in the correct order.

*“Plato did once chide a child for playing with nuts,
who answered him, ‘Thou chidest me for a small matter.’
‘Habit’ (replied Plato) ‘is no small matter.’”*

— Montaigne, *Essays*

In his accessible book *Aristotle for Everyone: Difficult Thought Made Easy*, the philosopher Mortimer Adler distinguished between different types of habit. He explained, “Persons who have developed the skill of playing tennis well possess a good habit, one that enables them regularly to play well. Persons who have acquired the skill of solving problems in geometry or algebra have a good habit.” The former is “a good bodily habit”; the latter is “a good habit of mind.” There are also habits of action by which you



make choices without having to go through the process of debate; for example, you don't have to decide not to drink every night because you have developed the habit of moderation.

The words “good” and “bad” in this guide are not used in a moral or judgmental sense. Rather, the guide assumes that readers want to hone their intellects. If so, then some habits are useful (good) and others are obstructive (bad). Accordingly, when a habit is called good, it means the habit will help you to achieve the goal. To some extent, that's what classical Greek philosophers meant by the word “virtue”—a useful habit for those who wished to lead a good life.

You don't have to decide not to drink every night because you have developed the habit of moderation.

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

— Aristotle

The ultimate intellectual goal is to develop the habit of reasonableness. This is the intellectual habit of basing your conclusions and actions on evidence. It is not a dry, academic thing. Reason involves reveling in the enjoyment and power of your own mind. It means embracing the joy of reflectiveness, which Blanshard considered to be a subcategory of reasonableness. Reflectiveness is the act of keenly observing and drawing inferences based on observations. Blanshard commented, “Reflectiveness is just an extension of this habit [of reasonableness]. The plain man is related to the reflective man as Dr. Watson was to Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is renowned for admonishing the constantly confused Watson, “You see but do not observe.” Which one of them would you rather be?

The habits that cumulatively result in the habit of reasonableness can be called virtues.

THE INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

THE ART OF LISTENING

Argumentation consists of speaking and listening. Poor listening habits can badly damage your ability to argue. And yet many people use the other person's discourse as an



opportunity to compose their own next sentence, waiting impatiently for him to take a breath so they can interject. Do you truly listen? Or does your mind wander or cloud over? Do you become impatient and interrupt constantly?

Listening well is not a passive activity; it is active evaluation that usually occurs on two levels. The first is a focus on the literal content of what you're hearing: "What does he mean by 'common good'? Where did that statement come from? That statement contradicts the book I read last month." The second level of listening is a focus on emotional content being expressed through body language and vocal inflection. Sometimes the emotions are louder than the words, and attention will shift between the two levels depending on what the speaker is doing. If he is shouting in your ear, you'll pay more attention to the emotional content. If he is dispassionate, you may concentrate entirely on the words. You must listen because you cannot argue cogently unless you know what has been said, and what it meant.

Many people use the other person's discourse as an opportunity to compose their own next sentence.

"Why do people always assume that volume will succeed when logic won't?"

— L.J. Smith, *Nightfall*

INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

This is the most important of the habits and virtues that support reasonableness. It means:

- **You never pretend to know more than you do.**
- **You state positions as accurately as possible.**
- **You admit errors.**
- **You acknowledge any uncertainty.**
- **You credit good arguments on the other side.**



Honesty also means being willing to test your own beliefs by holding them up against evidence and argument. The truth should be more important than maintaining a position.

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INTELLECTUAL COURAGE

Intellectual dishonesty often results from a lack of courage. Arguing a position means taking a risk. When you try to verify a statement by comparing it to the evidence of reality, it is always possible that statement will be falsified. A belief you hold will be proved wrong, and you may have emotion invested in it. Courage requires a willingness to test every belief you have despite your attachment to them.

It takes courage to speak up when those around you voice offensive opinions. You need not elaborate or be hostile, but it is important to say, “I disagree,” because you are establishing the habit of courage. People will say, “What’s the big deal?” They should ask themselves a question: “If it is no big deal, why is it so difficult to speak up and say those two words?”

“Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’”

— Mary Anne Radmacher

INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

An insatiable curiosity is the best defense against the fear of appearing foolish. Consider an example. Adults are often unwilling to learn skills that children pick up easily. A forty-year-old who longs to play the piano may refuse to do so because she feels that she is too old to practice the scales; she’d be embarrassed. Or, perhaps, she wants to learn skiing but is unwilling to start out on the kiddie slopes with five-year-olds. Children do not have a similar fear of falling on their faces. When coupled with courage, curiosity is the secret to being intellectually young forever.



INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

You are responsible for what happens to you and who you are intellectually. Unpleasant people try to make you feel inadequate. It is human nature to be upset by boorish behavior, but that doesn't mean you are helpless in the face of it. There is at least one thing over which you exercise control: your reaction. For example, if your mind clouds over when listening to an unpleasant argument, you can use the situation as a way to inwardly explore why your mind is fogging over. Taking responsibility can be frightening because it leaves no room for passivity or for blaming others.

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INTELLECTUAL RESPECT FOR OTHERS

We all know someone who speaks as though the words were rubies dripping from his lips. He is irritating, especially to those who do not recognize the behavior as insecurity. People who interrupt can be equally annoying. As you become more expert at arguing and critical thinking, there will be a temptation to put people like that in their place. Unless the person engages in a personal attack, don't. Remember how it felt when you were treated with disrespect, and try to be tolerant. There is time enough to lose your temper with people who are being hostile or purposefully rude.

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

This is not false modesty or a refusal to be proud of your accomplishments. This is the realization of how much you have to learn from the world and from the people around you. It is the recognition that at any given time you could be wrong about some aspect of what you are saying.

“If one has to say, in an argument, ‘I am intelligent! I do know things!’ then one might as well stop arguing.”

— Orson Scott Card, *Children of the Mind*



INTELLECTUAL SIMPLICITY

Speak as simply as it is possible to do without stripping your ideas of subtlety and your language of elegance. Be as direct as possible about your beliefs and in the language you use to present them. Don't try to join the intellectual elite by making obscure references and using deliberately academic jargon. Some professions evolve their own vocabularies, and it is appropriate for colleagues to use such language among themselves.

Too often, however, these experts speak to outsiders in catch phrases that seem intended more to exclude than to communicate. Or they choose to speak down to other people instead of speaking simply and as human beings. Ideas and language are tools of communication, not weapons to wield for status.

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DISPASSIONATE THINKING

Some people think being dispassionate means being cold and unemotional, but that's an unfair characterization. Being dispassionate simply means that, when assessing intellectual matters, you try to be guided by the evidence and the arguments rather than by your feelings. Putting emotions in their proper context is not a sign of psychological pathology; it is a sign of health.

WITH WHOM ARE YOU TRYING TO COMMUNICATE?

“Method is not less requisite in ordinary conversation than in writing, provided a man would talk to make himself understood.”

— Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*

It is very often not possible to win over the person you are directly addressing, especially if the exchange is a written and published one. The person to whom you speak directly may be so entrenched in his position that no persuasion is possible. And, yet you persist. Why?



Because individuals who listen to or read the exchange are an entirely different matter. Many will be open to your arguments, and their presence makes it even more important to remain composed, to remain reasonable. The arguer who loses his temper, becomes sarcastic, or resorts to ad hominem attacks is the one who will lose the respect of thinking people in the audience.

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Certainly, some listeners or readers will cheer on the boorish behavior, much as people spur on slugging matches or a sporting event. Those are not people you can reach with a good argument anyway.

Or, rather, your best chance of reaching them is through the example you present of civil behavior. The situation is similar to what the Quaker Richard Gregg described as “moral jiu jitsu” in his book, *The Power of Non-Violence*. Jiu jitsu involves using an opponent’s attack against him, making the attack benefit you. Gregg wrote,

If one man attacks another with physical violence and the victim hits back, the violent response gives the attacker a certain reassurance and moral support. It shows that the position of violence on the victim’s scale of moral values is the same as that of the attacker. A mere display of either fear or anger by the victim is sufficient to have this effect. He can rely on the victim to react in a definite way. The attacker’s morale is sustained, his sense of values is vindicated.

But suppose the assailant, using physical violence, attacks a different sort of person. The attitude of this new opponent is fearless, calm, steady; because of a different belief, training or experience he has much self-control. He does not respond to the attacker’s violence with counter-violence. Instead, he accepts the blows good-temperedly, stating his belief as to the truth of the matter in dispute, asking for an examination of both sides of the dispute, and stating his readiness to abide by the truth. He offers resistance, but only in moral terms.

Similarly, if you respond in kind to anger, rudeness, or another offensive behavior, you validate the other person’s behavior and lose the high ground. If you refuse to surrender civility—which is the verbal equivalent of taking a blow good-temperedly—then you show the other person up as brutish; he is either uninterested in presenting his ideas or unable to defend them.



“I always cheer up immensely if an attack is particularly wounding because I think, well, if they attack one personally, it means they have not a single political argument left.”

— Margaret Thatcher

Gregg focuses upon unbalancing an opponent and, perhaps, winning his respect. Gene Sharp, the leading contemporary theorist of nonviolence, uses the term “political jiu jitsu” and considers the effect on third parties who are watching a brutal exchange. (For more on Sharp’s approach, see his book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*.) Imagine a Quaker being beaten by a bully. Some in the crowd will attempt to stop the savagery. Others will cheer it on until the bitter end. But a significant number of watchers will grow increasingly uncomfortable because the ongoing brutality begins to grate against their sense of decency. They become increasingly sympathetic to the man who takes a blow and refuses to return it; they become hostile toward the incessant bully.

In arguments, the one who remains civil and reasonable is in the position of the Quaker. He wins the approval (if not the agreement) both of those who step in to stop the verbal brutality and of those who watch with increasing discomfort. They are uncomfortable because the ongoing offensiveness grates against their respect for civility and truth. Those who were previously neutral are now more open to his ideas because they respect how he handles the argument. Those who were previously sympathetic to the other person’s ideas are often less so. Being civil is not only an intellectual virtue, it is also good strategy.

“The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating.”

— Mahatma Gandhi, *On Non-Violence*

APPROACHING ARGUMENTS ANALYTICALLY

Give as much conscious thought to your intellectual self as to your sexuality or to the other defining aspects of your identity. That includes analyzing the framework of arguments. Before entering an argument or soon thereafter, the most important question to ask is, “What do I want from this encounter?”

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WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?

Many answers are possible. You might simply be in the mood for a vigorous exchange, or you might just want to hone your skills. Perhaps you are testing a new line of argument, or backing up a friend, or picking the other person's brain for information. Identifying the goal, or the lack thereof, helps to avoid many arguments that offer you nothing and go nowhere fast.

But be realistic about your goal. If you are arguing with a devoted socialist, for example, do not expect to change his mind in the course of one conversation. Too often the unspoken goal is precisely that: to convince the other person that he is wrong and you are right. This is self-defeating because the other person's reactions are not under your control. No matter how effective and eloquent your arguments may be, there are people you will never convince. The devoted socialist may have a deep emotional commitment to political causes. In arguing with him, you confront not only ideas but also emotional barriers that a trained psychiatrist would struggle to overcome. Choose a more achievable goal. For example, you might want to familiarize yourself with how a socialist argues a particular position.

“You cannot reason people out of a position that they did not reason themselves into.”

— Ben Goldacre, *Bad Science*

ASSESS THE CIRCUMSTANCES

Once you identify a goal, consider whether the circumstances favor its achievement. Is dinner being served in ten minutes? If you simply want to size a person up, then ten minutes may be more than enough time. If you want to debate an issue, then starting ten minutes before dinner or the start of a movie is bad timing.

Your failure to be convincing may be due entirely to circumstances: a crowded party, loud music, constant interruptions. It is also self-destructive to enter the conversation with the presumption that if you are good enough you should be able to convince the other person. Never put your intellectual self-opinion on the line over factors that are out of your control.



“Don’t start an argument with somebody who has a microphone when you don’t. They’ll make you look like chopped liver.”

— Harlan Ellison

DETERMINE WHAT KIND OF ARGUMENT IT IS

Perhaps it is a factual dispute; for example, are Ford cars more reliable than Subarus? The best way to resolve the disagreement is to look up the evidence on both sides. Of course, many people enjoy disagreeing at length about cars, sports, and the like. Such disagreements do not frequently lead to a hostile end.

Perhaps it is a theoretical dispute; for example, the other person maintains that socialism is more efficient than laissez-faire capitalism. It is important to find out his definitions of both, and of efficiency as well. That’s the beginning of being able to assess why he believes socialism is superior. Also try to determine how emotionally invested he is in the belief, because that is the key to whether the conversation will end badly.

Perhaps it is a moral dispute; for example, the other person insists it is immoral to eat meat. Ask how he came to this conclusion, because no one arrives at a strong moral position without going through an emotional process or one of reasoning.

In either case, lower your expectation of persuading him. Why? Ask yourself, Which strong moral principle that you hold could be fundamentally altered by a single conversation? Probably the answer is none. A moral principle is a fundamental belief, and the best you can expect is to argue around the edges of it, that is, to rouse small doubts about peripheral issues. Perhaps those seeds of doubt will eventually take root.

Tailor your argument to the type of dispute

DETERMINE WHO HAS THE BURDEN OF PROOF AND WHAT THAT PROOF REQUIRES

When discussing any issue, the burden of proof is presumed to rest on the person making a positive claim. The proof required is evidence presented in a logical manner.



There are several reasons for the burden being placed on the person who makes a positive claim. One reason is the comparative difficulty of proving a negative. For example, you say to a person, “Prove to me you are not a murderer.” He argues that every minute of his life has been supervised and no one has seen him kill anyone. “Ah,” you respond, “what if your witnesses are lying. After all, if you are a murderer, they may be doing as you tell them because they fear for their lives.”

In frustration, he finally throws up his hands and yells, “This is crazy! I can’t prove I’m not a murderer. All I can do is point to the absolute and glaring lack of evidence that I am one.” He places the burden of proof on you or anyone who asserts he is a killer.

The non-murderer has done something else interesting. He has successfully met the standard of proof required of anyone who asserts a negative, such as, “I am not a murderer.” He points to the absolute lack of evidence for the positive claim. If the assertion had been different in content, perhaps he could have proven it false by showing that it resulted in an impossibility, such as a contradiction.

“I wasn’t around when Kennedy got shot. Not being born yet is a pretty good alibi. Still, if the cops ask where I was, tell them I was with you.”

— Jarod Kintz, *The Merits of Marthaism, and How Being Named Susan Can Benefit You*

FIND OUT WHAT WOULD RESOLVE THE DISAGREEMENT

Too many arguments wander aimlessly. Instead of allowing this to happen, ask the other person, “What, in principle, would it take to convince you that I am right? Or, at least, what would be necessary to make you doubt your position?” If nothing short of a sign from God would change the person’s opinion, then his opinion is dogma and is not based on evidence or logic.

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If the other person's position is based on evidence or logic, then he should be able to state what would falsify it. (And you should be able to do the same about your position.) For example, he tells you Hispanics are less intelligent than Caucasians. Ask, "What evidence would convince you that position is wrong? High IQ scores by Hispanics?" When you ascertain the specific facts or points of theory that would alter his opinion, you have isolated the most productive direction in which to take the exchange.

DETERMINE THE POINT AT WHICH TO END THE CONVERSATION

This is not the same as determining when you have won, because winning may be an unrealistic goal. Knowing when to end the conversation means one of two things:

- 1. You know what point in the conversation would constitute a satisfactory end for you. For example, if the other person has claimed women are less intelligent than men, and later yields ground by amending his position to admit that some women are more intelligent, would this satisfy you? If not, what would? Perhaps your goal is to convince third-party onlookers, and when you perceive this has occurred, you end the argument.**
- 2. You know the point at which a satisfactory resolution is not possible. This is the point at which further discussion is useless and likely to result in ill will. Walk away.**

*“What ho!” I said.
‘What ho!’ said Motty.
‘What ho! What ho!’
‘What ho! What ho! What ho!’
After that it seemed rather difficult to go on
with the conversation.”*

— P.G. Wodehouse, *My Man Jeeves*



KEEP A LEASH ON THE TOPIC

Most people are not skilled at arguing, and their conversation resembles a stream of consciousness. If you are enjoying the exchange, this is not a problem. If you are arguing to convince third parties, however, you will not want the conversation to run wildly off in all directions. Rein it in. Perhaps you are discussing your company's sexual harassment policies and the other person wanders onto the question of whether there should be free donuts in the morning. Politely insist, "That's an interesting point but we were discussing the sexual harassment policy. Why don't we hash that one out before turning to donuts?" If the other person continues to wander, ask "Why do you change the subject? Don't you want to talk about the policies?"

ASK PROBING QUESTIONS

For example, politely ask the other person, "Why do you believe that's true?" or "Were you an eyewitness to that event?" A well-timed, well-delivered question can accomplish several goals, including:

- **Provide information to you.**
- **Make the other person's confusion evident through his inability to answer.**
- **Bring his thinking into focus for him.**
- **Derail an aggressive person by putting him on the defensive.**

ARGUING IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF GOOD WILL

In our culture, it is normal for people to become defensive even during mild disagreements, and this reaction often comes across as slightly hostile. In many cases, this is because the other person has been treated badly in the past—that is, he has been made to feel foolish, stupid, inferior. The first recourse with such a person should be patience; treat him as you would wish to be treated.

One reason exchanges become adversarial is because few people know how to argue well. Even if you have become skilled in argu-

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ment, the person with whom you are arguing may not be. This is where showing respect for the other person comes in, because it is the single best way to preserve good will. Enter every argument by assuming the other person is a reasonable human being and your intellectual equal.

The more skilled you become, the more patient you should be with others, provided they are not intentionally hostile or insulting. Human beings invest a great deal of ego in their beliefs; their beliefs become part of their self-esteem. If you decide to continue an argument with a person who is on edge because of embarrassment or some other reaction, then do so by being as fair and civil as possible. If your assumption of good will proves to be false, you can always break the conversation off without having violated your own intellectual ethics. Or you can stay and flex some intellectual muscle.

***“Good manners have much to do with the emotions.
To make them ring true, one must feel them, not merely exhibit them.”***

— Amy Vanderbilt

The following rules of argument etiquette will help to establish and preserve good will if you choose to stay.

- 1. Never purposely embarrass anyone. As you become skilled, it will be easier to embarrass people, especially those not able to defend themselves. Don't. By doing so, you lose the respect of the other person and of anyone else within ear-shot. The stab of satisfaction you feel at humiliating an adversary reflects poorly on you, and onlookers recognize an act of gratuitous cruelty when they see one. Moreover, such an attack means you are backsliding into bad intellectual habits. Brute reason is as inexcusable as brute force. If you are on the verge of using it, walk away.**
- 2. Give the other person time to consider a point. If the person has backed into an intellectual corner, do not badger him by pushing him hard against the wall. Your purpose is not to punish but to explore ideas and, perhaps, to persuade the other person or third parties.**

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3. When the person has conceded a point, move on. Do not dwell upon it for the joy of being correct over and over again. Do not return to it with remarks like, “Are you sure about that? After all, you were wrong about that other point.” Such boorishness will convince the person who was honest enough to admit being wrong to never do so again in your presence.
4. Acknowledge when you make an error. Intellectual honesty works both ways. When you make an error, admit it freely and without embarrassment, then move on. Before doing so, perhaps you can point out that the mistake does not affect your main point, which you should restate. Do not tolerate the other person gloating or hammering away at you; however. If he does, cut him off and ask, “Is this how you treat someone who admits a mistake? What would you do if I conceded your main point—ridicule me?”

“Just consider how terrible the day of your death will be. Others will go on speaking and you will not be able to argue back.”

— Ram Mohan Roy

5. When you are uncertain of something, say so. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say, “I don’t know.” This is not only a sign of intellectual honesty, but also a way to avoid making a fool of yourself. When you do claim certainty thereafter, people will take you more seriously.
6. Be candid about the reliability of your information. For example, if you witnessed an event, your statements are more reliable than if you heard about it second hand. Don’t claim certainty on the basis of gossip or a casual account.
7. Be tolerant of small slips. Everyone makes foolish remarks from time to time. Instead of scoring points on the person, allow the remark to pass or allow him to back away gracefully. This one strategy alone can create tremendous good will and prompt the other person to be gracious in return.

“The most important tactic in an argument next to being right is to leave an escape hatch for your opponent so that he can gracefully swing over to your side without an embarrassing loss of face.”

— Stephen Jay Gould



8. Acknowledge good points. Give credit where credit is due. Say, “That’s an interesting perspective,” or “I’ll have to think about that,” or “You’re obviously right on that point.” This level of courtesy is rare and you will acquire a reputation for fairness based on such remarks alone.
9. Avoid an ostentatious display of knowledge. Never argue just to display your cleverness. This is as offensive to most people as an ostentatious display of wealth, which usually causes resentment, not admiration.

“They dispute not in order to find or even to seek Truth, but for victory, and to appear the more learned and strenuous upholders of a contrary opinion. Such persons should be avoided by all who have not a good breastplate of patience.”

— Giordano Bruno

ARGUING IN THE ABSENCE OF GOOD WILL: DEALING WITH MALICE

“In all the ills that befall us, we are more concerned by the intention than the result. A tile that falls off a roof may injure us more seriously, but it will not wound us so deeply as a stone thrown deliberately by a malevolent hand. The blow may miss, but the intention always strikes home.”

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*

Some arguments resist all efforts to establish and maintain good will. The foregoing tactics will not work and should not be used in the face of open malice. Often the best response is to walk away. The situation is not an exchange but a confrontation. Just as bullies enjoy beating people up, their intellectual counterparts enjoy humiliating others. This is particularly true in academia, in business rivalry, among those filled with envy, or among those who bear you a grudge. As the saying goes, “The fights are so bitter because so little is at stake.”



But there are malicious situations from which you cannot break away. It could be a formal debate, or a work conference in which your competence is questioned in front of superiors. The other person could be a loved one or friend whom you desperately want to reach; or a loved one or a friend might be the target of an intellectual bully and need rescuing by you. Eavesdroppers may have gathered around a conversation who seem genuinely interested in the ideas; you direct comments at the other person but it is the gathered crowd you are actually addressing. Then, again, you might simply want more practice at handling hostile encounters.

“It is as useless to argue with those who have renounced the use of reason as to administer medication to the dead.”

— Thomas Jefferson

If you don't walk away, then the following advice will be of assistance. These are common tactics of intimidation or humiliation used by the malicious in arguing:

PSYCHOLOGIZING THE OPPOSITION

This involves ignoring the content of your statements and analyzing you psychologically instead. For example, you might dispassionately defend science and technology on the grounds that they extend the human lifespan. The other person responds, “Why are you so afraid of death?” He is psychologizing you.

“I have nothing but respect for you—and not much of that.”

— Groucho Marx

Never answer the psychological query. The subject is not your emotional problems or inadequacies, although he is trying to shift the conversation to that topic. The subject is whether science and technology benefit human beings. Rein in the conversation. Reply, “I'm really not up for a therapy session right now,” or “My psychology is not the topic. Why don't you respond to what I just said, and tell me whether it's accurate or not?” If he persists, you have to decide whether to walk away or to remain. If you choose the latter, then stay civil because a loss of temper may be what he's hoping for. You may try to turn the tables on him instead, but this is a tricky maneuver because the other person is probably better at psychologizing than you are.



PSEUDO-INTELLECTUALIZING THE ISSUE

This tactic involves evading the real issue by using ideas and language to obscure rather than to clarify. Just because he uses intellectual terms doesn't mean the other person is dealing with intellectual matters. You make a telling point and, in response, he replies, "I assume, of course, you have read Dr. XYZ's essay on this question in the November 2001 issue of *The PsychoBabble's Journal of Sophistry*?" Thus, he appears to answer you without coming within a zip code of doing so.

Don't go down the road to which he is pointing you. Say instead, "Why won't we talk about Dr. XYZ after you answer my point?"

He may pseudo-intellectualize by using technical jargon, overly academic language, or other gobbledygook. In his book *The Power of Words* Stuart Chase offers an example of goobledygook. "Voucher expenditures necessary to provide adequate dental treatment required as adjunct to medical treatment being rendered to a pay patient in in-patient may be incurred as required at the expense of the Public Health Service." Chase translates, "Seems you can charge your dentist bill to the Public Health Service." If the other person does this to you and you decide to stay, ask him to translate what he just said into English. This is likely to make listeners laugh, and he doesn't want that.

"Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them."

— Thomas Jefferson

HIDING BEHIND AUTHORITY

This form of intimidation frequently includes quotations culled from various authorities, from Einstein to Aristotle, Freud to Martin Luther King. The other person's intent is to stack up authority on his side of the argument and to make you disagree with the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Sometimes citing authorities can be valid. For example, when you are arguing genetic theory, then quoting a famous geneticist on point is valid. But if you are dis-



cussing morality, the genetics expert ceases to be an authority and quoting him has no relevance. Besides which, famous thinkers have been notoriously wrong. Both Aristotle and Plato defended the institution of slavery; does that mean we should return to the antebellum South?

Another authority behind which the other person commonly hides is the majority. The argument runs, “Everyone accepts this as true. Ergo, it is true.” But the majority is nothing more than a collection of individuals, all of whom are fallible. Truth is not a matter of popular vote.

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PULLING A POWER PLAY

Everyone has encountered the person who throws out the challenge, “Convince me.” The person is not open to persuasion and he is not inviting an honest discussion. He relishes the power of having you solicit his agreement by obeying his snap-of-the-fingers command for you to be convincing. The game is rigged against you with the other person being the final and only judge of success; even if you succeed, he will certainly not tell you. This is a fool’s game. Tell him you don’t perform on command or that convincing him isn’t an ambition of yours.

Another type of power player is the person who listens to your argument and says, “Why should I care?” It sounds like a question but it is a dismissal. It shifts the ground away from the topic under discussion and onto psychology—his psychology. The honest answer is that you don’t know. His motivations are his own. Consider an example: After you demonstrate that $2+2=4$, you have fulfilled the obligations of arguing well. The question “Why should I care?” now demands that you motivate the other person into caring about what is true or false. Not only is that an inappropriate request, it is also a feat beyond your ability, and beyond anyone else’s. His emotional motives are his own responsibility and problem. If he doesn’t care, he should not be discussing the issue. The fact that he is discussing it indicates a level of caring, which shows that the question is a ploy.



CONCLUSION

One of my favorite quotations comes from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. It comes when Jo reads a passage from a short story she's written: "And the good fairy said, I won't leave you money or pretty dresses but I will leave you the spirit to seek your fortune from your own efforts."

These are the circumstances into which most people are born. Not naturally beautiful or handsome. Not rich. But with their wits about them. Use your wits, use your intellectual fortune, and every other fortune is possible.



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