

Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save his face? He didn't ask for your opinion. He didn't want it. Why argue with him? Always avoid the acute angle. During my youth, I had argued with my brother about everything under the Milky Way. When I went to college, I studied logic and argumentation, and went in for debating contests. Talk about being from Missouri, I was born there. I had to be shown. Later, I taught debating and argumentation in New York; and once, I am ashamed to admit, I planned to write a book on the subject. Since then, I have listened to, criticize, engaged in, and watched the effects of thousands of arguments. As a result of it all, I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument – and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes. Nine times out of ten, an argument ends with each of the contestants being more firmly convinced than ever that he is absolutely right. You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? Well, suppose you triumph over the other man and shoot his argument full of holes and prove that he is *non compos mentis*. Then what? You will feel fine. But what about him? You will have made him feel inferior. You have hurt his pride. He will resent your triumph. And –

A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still.

Real salesmanship isn't argument. It isn't anything even remotely like argument. The human mind isn't changed that way.

- Dale Carnegie
How to Win Friends and Influence People, p. 112.

**PAPER TOPIC:
CRITICALLY ASSESS CARNEGIE'S ARGUMENT IN
THE PASSAGE.**

A Critical Assessment of Carnegie On Arguments

by
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This passage from *How to Win Friends* is seemingly paradoxical, though surely not intended to be by its author, Dale Carnegie. What is the paradox? Carnegie advances an argument against the possibility of advancing arguments. Therefore, if Carnegie succeeds in proving his conclusion, his proof is a counterexample to his conclusion and his conclusion is disproved. If he is right, he is wrong. In which case he wasn't right to begin with; in which case it doesn't follow, after all, that he must be wrong. Taken all in all, the presentation seems self-undermining, like a snake swallowing its own tail. Where will it all end?

Let us examine the beast more closely. Logically, the argument may be circular, but on the page it has a beginning. Let us start, where Carnegie does, with a question – with four, in fact: “Why prove a man wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save his face? ... Why argue with him?”

The first may *seem* fair. If you want to determine whether arguments are good for anything, why not begin by asking: what might they be good for? But actually the question begs the question by *assuming* the only possible point of arguing is to prove people *wrong*. This omits obvious alternatives. For instance, one might want to prove

people right. Perhaps my friend Smith has a certain belief P . He doesn't *know* P is true, but he *suspects* it and would like to *know* it. I argue with him. We two put our heads together, consider possible points of view, objections and responses. I end up proving he is right. Surely Carnegie has no objection. Certainly Smith will not lose face. Probably he will thank me for helping him.

Question four - 'why argue with him?' - is much more neutral. But even it assumes too much. Carnegie presumes to assess the value of arguments - that is, of *all* arguments. But perhaps the argument in question is not a two-party affair at all. Perhaps I am a scientist trying to establish whether the universe will expand forever, or else collapse back on itself. So I construct an argument. Whatever I conclude - whether my argument is any good or not - I am in no danger of disliking myself, or losing face in front of myself.

It is, of course, possible that I am not alone here. Perhaps I will offend scientific colleagues if I arrive at conclusions that contradict their cherished beliefs. But surely it is possible for them to be won over to a new way of thinking by force of argument. (Isn't this what Carnegie is trying to achieve himself?) No self-respecting scientist would refrain from arguing just to avoid offending colleagues. No scientist who did so could hope to retain the respect of his colleagues.

One can reinforce this point by noting that Carnegie's second

question – “is that going to make him like you?” – presuppose something extremely doubtful: that I argue to make people like me. This overlooks the glaring possibility that the point of a given argument might be to show, to demonstrate, facts about the world – whether people like it or not.

Carnegie’s whole presentation seems to hinge, crucially, on a quite simple equivocation between two distinct senses of ‘argument’. First, an argument may be a verbal dispute between two or more persons. Second, an argument may be a set of propositions to establish another proposition – i.e. the sort of thing one studies ‘logic and argumentation’ to get good at constructing and taking apart. Call these distinct senses, respectively, ‘Argument₁’ and ‘argument₂’. Carnegie seems to be driving at the notion that getting in shouting matches with people – argument₁ – is not a particularly profitable way of spending one’s time. This is plausible. But from there Carnegie leaps straight to the conclusion that logic and argumentation – argument₂ – are therefore suspect.

This obviously does not follow, and is fundamentally at odds with Carnegie’s own procedure. He himself employs logic and argumentation, for better or worse, to prove the uselessness of verbal conflict, like so: “You can’t win an argument. You can’t because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why?” Carnegie’s

answer: because no one likes to lose, and the point of argument is to make people like you; therefore, winning amounts to losing. But, of course, this conclusion – in addition to being derived argumentatively – rests squarely on the doubtful premise that the point of arguing is to make people like you.

It would seem to follow that the paradox alluded to at the start – Carnegie is right if he is wrong, wrong if he is right - is not very interesting after all. What Carnegie is saying is just that if you try to succeed in one way (arguing) you will fail in a more important way (making people like you). But this claim is at once ambiguous (because of the trouble concerning 'argument') and doubtful (again, because of 'argument'). Why would you think the only point of arguing – in any sense - was to make people like you? Perhaps because the only point of doing *anything* is to make people like you? Or because all good things in life come from *being able* to make people like you? So everything is either worthwhile in itself, or a way to make people like you, or else worthless? These and other potentially interesting thoughts may be lurking in the background here. But Carnegie offers no argument - argument₂, that is – for any of them.

Dummy Answer 2:

In the quoted passage, Dale Carnegie makes some good points, but they are obscured by his formulation of them. Carnegie writes as if his main thesis concerns the nature of argument – specifically, its uselessness. In fact, Carnegie does not have anything against arguments. (And a good thing, too, since he makes several of them.) Indeed, Carnegie does not have anything terribly interesting to say about argumentation. Properly understood, the interesting points he makes concern human pride and the futility of telling people things they do not want to hear. There is no point being a messenger if the message is going to be ignored and the messenger killed.

The *proof* that Carnegie has nothing whatsoever interesting to say about his official subject-matter – argument - is a simple one. He fails to distinguish between, on the one hand, verbal disputes – i.e. shouting matches between two or more people; and, on the other hand, 'logic and argumentation', as he puts it. Carnegie lumps it all under the heading, 'argument'. But logic and shouting are not *one* thing. They are not even terribly similar things. It is hard to see how talking as if they were one thing could fail to produce nonsense; which is pretty much what Carnegie ends up with, taken at his word. (How could anyone hope to provide an argument against argument, after all? The performance is simply ridiculous.)

But all this confusion simply goes to show that, in fact,

Carnegie's focus is elsewhere – on perennial weaknesses of human nature. As he says: "A man convinced against his will/Is of the same opinion still." There is a lot of truth compacted into this couplet. In the course of our lives – wrapped up in private, narrow interests, as we tend to be – it is easy to lose sight of the fact that many of the beliefs of those around us about the world around us are not just beliefs. They are, in addition, treasured private property. No one likes having their property taken by force. No one likes being robbed. In the heat of argument, it is easy to lose track of this obvious fact. Carnegie is trying to drive it home with sufficient force that we *will* remember it – too much force, probably: since his point ends up spilling over the whole domain of argumentation.

How might Carnegie have made his point more precisely and clearly? He might have begun by taking a page out of Plato's book. In the "Euthyphro" Socrates asks the young priest: "What sorts of things are they which, when causes of argument, are causes of anger and enmity?"¹ The answer, Socrates says, is that people can usually *argue* without becoming *angry* if the question concerns something like size or number. But if the question concerns *right* or *wrong*, *good* or *bad*, *beautiful* or *ugly*, then the argument is likely to go unresolved, with bad feelings on all sides the only lasting result.

¹ <http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/philo/writings/dialogues/euthyphro/euth4.html#3>

Why is that? Socrates does not really investigate further. He moves on to other things. But Carnegie has an answer, and it is a plausible one: pride. People want to think well of themselves. People want to believe they are good and righteous and worthy. Their concepts of right and wrong tend to be tailored accordingly. Challenges to these concepts are almost inevitably keenly felt as threats to self-worth and self-esteem. Very few people are willing to consider seriously that they might be severely morally flawed. Therefore few people take at all kindly to arguments that challenge their notions of goodness, rightness, and so forth.

It seems to me that Carnegie's focus on pride as the primary reason why arguments about certain topics never seem to get anywhere, is simple and plausible. Plato does not offer so simple an answer – though he hints at it dramatically, having Euthyphro leave so abruptly at the end of their discussion of 'holiness'. Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for murder on the grounds that he – as a priest – is especially qualified to render judgments about such things. If he were to admit he does not have any understanding of 'holiness', that would be tantamount to admitting not just that he is confused, perhaps an idiot, but a reckless idiot as well. To admit that would be too painful; so he has to run away. Anyone will run away if left with no way to stay and 'save face', as Carnegie puts it.

If Carnegie has a serious fault (above and beyond being guilty of clouding the issue with talk about 'arguments') it is that he is too complacent in his apparently serene conviction that 'salesmanship' lies self-evidently at the heart of healthy human relations. It is true that if I am a salesman – trying to sell someone a car, say – the *last* thing I want to do is drop the hint that I think the potential customer is an idiot who doesn't know about cars, let alone a morally bad person. But there is more to life, surely, than selling people things. Improving people – improving ourselves – is often hard and painful. The feeling of being in the wrong is always unwelcome, but sometimes necessary.

And personal improvement depends on a willingness to acknowledge our faults, from time to time, so that we can correct them. It is true that we may sometimes argue that our fellow human beings are in the wrong for no better reason than that doing so gives us a pleasant feeling of moral and intellectual superiority. Arguing can be a game, with winners and losers. This is pride rearing its head again, together with the joy of competition. And it may be that Plato and Socrates are hardly free of this vice. (Certainly a Socrates that followed Carnegie's teachings would have lived longer.) Even so, it is not out of the question that, by arguing that our fellow humans are in the wrong, we sometimes do them a favor and a service – if only they can bring themselves to see it and admit it.

Carnegie might argue back that he is, in fact, writing a book about salesmanship. It is unfair and uncharitable to read good advice about how to sell things as if it were bad advice about how to live our lives. Nevertheless, the tone of the passage – and the strict meaning of Carnegie’s specific claims – all point towards a very broad, sweeping conclusion. Carnegie certainly writes as if he is giving us advice for *life*, not just for business. Successful salesmen are, in his eyes, *model* successful people. So it seems fair to fault him for over-generalizing from the latter to the former.

Dummy answer 3:

Since the dawn of time, man has argued about what arguments are and whether they are any good. Confucius argued about it in ancient China. Plato argued about it in ancient Greece. Prof. Holbo argued about it in lecture. Dale Carnegie argued about it in the passage I am going to discuss. And I am arguing about it in this paper right now.

What is an argument? An argument is a series of statements to establish a conclusion. Alternatively, it is just a verbal shouting match.

Are arguments any good for anything? Arguably, not. Dale Carnegie asks, ‘why prove a man wrong?’ No reason, apparently. Since: how can you do it? How can you really prove that anyone is

right or wrong about anything? It seems that, no matter what you argue, there are always doubts on the other side. For example, maybe we are in the Matrix right now. How could we know that we aren't? We think that we aren't. But maybe that is just because we are in the Matrix.

In the passage, Dale Carnegie talks a lot about how he argued with his brother a lot when they were young, and when they lived in Missouri, which is in the United States. Later, Dale Carnegie "taught debating and argumentation in New York; and once, I am ashamed to admit, I planned to write a book on the subject." I guess this is supposed to show how argumentation is useless. It wouldn't be shameful if there were any use to it, after all.

Dale Carnegie concludes by saying that, "You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? Well, suppose you triumph over the other man and shoot his argument full of holes and prove that he is *non compos mentis*. Then what? You will feel fine. But what about him? You will have made him feel inferior. You have hurt his pride."

Real salesmanship isn't argument. It isn't anything even remotely like argument. The human mind isn't changed that way. I guess I think this is right. Even so, I think that Plato is pretty interesting, too. I think that Plato likes arguing, and thinks there is

value in it. And who am I to say that a famous philosopher like Plato is in the wrong?