

Common Sense Principles of Discussion

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Effective and civil discussion is absolutely essential in reestablishing science on its firm foundation. Since discussion has in recent times become less and less clearly centered on its purpose – which is to get to the truth – we find we have developed bad habits of discussion. Indeed, it often happens that, despite our good intentions, discussions degenerate into incivility. It is our hope that the following thoughts will help restore the right emphasis and civility in conversation.

1) The aim of discussion is to arrive at a precise statement of a problem and a true answer. It is profitable if progress in achieving this goal is made even if there is not ultimate success.

2) The first step in critical thinking must be to *state a problem clearly* in the form A is B, or at least that A is not B. Many disagreements arise from not being clear about what problem is to be solved.

3) If you are speaking to someone who has more education and knowledge in the field under discussion, give deference to him. This means that conversation will not equally split with each person speaking 50% of the time. Clearly, the one who has more knowledge will necessarily have to spend more time relating it.

a) The receiver of knowledge should not resent the giver merely because the giver gives more, i.e. speaks more. Indeed, like the receiver of a wonderful material gift, the spiritual gift of knowledge should be received with sincere appreciation. Few who receive a gift of gold will respond with accusations of unfairness about the inequity involved of them not being able to respond in kind. Rather, most will receive it with great thanks and enthusiasm as lottery winners do. Since the spiritual gift of knowledge is literally infinitely more valuable, the gratitude of the receiver of knowledge should be immense.

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b) One essential way of showing gratitude to the giver, which is also an exercise of justice, is to remember his gift and acknowledge him to others. Remembering is key in the process of finding and verifying trustworthy sources, for one needs to remember who has given what to be able to note whose information is reliable.

c) The giver should always act and respond charitably to the receiver, never using his knowledge as a club to assert superiority. Instead, the giver should remember that his own knowledge is ultimately itself a gift. Even first hand knowledge is not our own, for it ultimately comes from the external world, which in turn is from God.

d) Both sides should be grateful for the opportunity for discussion, because, if nothing else, it is an opportunity to be present to your fellowman, through the exercise of the highest human power: the intellect. After all, you are conversing with a being made in the very *image of God* and in that very conversing you are manifesting and seeing manifested that image, which is man's intellectual power. Beyond this, the receiver should be thankful for the new understanding he receives and the giver for the new perspective opened up to his own mind by carefully answering the points made by the receiver. For each party, it is the opportunity to serve his fellowman.

4) If you say something inappropriate or wrong be quick to apologize and/or acknowledge it. If you are the recipient of such an act be quick to forgive the offense.

5) If there is a significant relational problem between the parties of the conversation, recognize it and discuss *it*; don't let it become a subtext to the discussion. Nothing kills a conversation faster than arguing about something without letting the other know that one is arguing about it. Bad feelings result, and they linger and become detrimental to future conversation as well.

6) We should not be afraid to acknowledge when we don't know something. Yet, it is sometimes hard to phrase a question in a way that doesn't make us look more ignorant than we actually are. To overcome this dilemma, and the feeling of inadequacy that may result, it may help to use a form of discussion like the following: "I thought that x was y, because z. Can you explain to me why you think x is not y."



7) Since conversation should always be directed toward truth, one should never just end a conversation abruptly without thought. As much as possible, *plan the closing*; try to summarize the conclusions that have been reached and the areas of disagreement still to be ironed out. In this way, the goal of conversation is advanced while respecting the practical truth that reaching a particular truth often takes more time and effort than can be had in one conversation. Alternately, one could plan a topic of discussion that will fit within the available time or vice-versa.

8) Always try to put the best face on what your discussion partner is saying. St. Thomas was known for stating the opponent's argument better than the opponent himself had. One must do this not only to refute a bad argument, but to protect and explore the truths contained in his argument. Remember: your opponent may be – indeed, in his area of expertise he probably is – right.

9) St. Thomas Aquinas says “It makes no difference who said it, but only if it is true.” The attitude of the discussants must be an honest attempt to find a true solution to the problem, not to claim superiority, or to impose agreement, or deceive. Again, no one need be ashamed to admit a mistake or feel inferior *merely*² because they must learn from another.

10) Honesty in discussion is made easier when discussants are courteous, giving the parties the sense of security needed to be open with each other. They must indicate that they are willing to learn from the other and, even when there is disagreement, recognize that *even in error* there is always some truth that should be recognized by all. Remember error is a perversion--a twisting-- of some truth. A wise rule is, “Seldom deny; always distinguish.” Interpret the person's words and frame your responses in such a way as to give him the benefit of any doubt. Find the maximum amount of truth in what he says rather than the minimum. Look for the key truth that is propelling his argument. Yet, be careful to not let a false courtesy take hold and become a means to avoid the real discussion and postpone *ad infinitum* an important point. One must attack the error, which is distinct from the person holding it.

² Of course, in some particular case, it may be that a man has, due to his own deliberate action or by deliberate omission, kept himself from seeing some truth. There normally is and should be shame associated with such behavior. Yet, this is something beyond the mere act of learning from another.



11). Discussants must be ready to consider their fundamental presuppositions and possible biases. “A small error in the beginning leads to big errors in the end.” Most persistent disagreements arise from foundational principles that are not clearly realized, formulated, or admitted. If your partner is gifted, has studied more deeply and profoundly than yourself, and is more educated in the fundamentals, one should carefully and respectfully listen to understand the important fundamental you may have missed.

12) When arguing a point, don’t start with a pathological or extreme case. Start with the situation in its healthy, proper state; understand it first, *then* move to understand the pathology. In the pathology-versus-health analogy, if one doesn’t know what it is to be well, sickness cannot be understood.

13) Every assertion must ultimately be rooted in sense experience, and discussants must be willing to point out the facts on which their assertions rest. This goes even for statements of *faith*, since our trust in those wiser than ourselves must be guaranteed by evidence of their trustworthiness. It must be admitted by all discussants that we often must trust reliable persons for information since no mere man can experience firsthand all the facts and have all the training necessary to solve all problems.

14) Don’t get bogged down in technical details; especially avoid tendencies to use the details as an excuse to avoid the larger more difficult – but probably more important – problem. The flip side of this is once the larger difficulty is solved the details cannot be ignored; don’t let the solution of the generic be an excuse to avoid the details and the technical work. Obviously, different professions will have different tendencies, and one must know his own temperament to guard effectively against these extremes.

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He is author of The Science Before Science: A Guide to Thinking in the 21st Century and A Kid’s Introduction to Physics (and Beyond); he has been interviewed in many media outlets. In addition to his professional articles, Dr. Rizzi recently authored the ground breaking texts Physics for Realists-Mechanics and Physics for Realists-Electricity and Magnetism (both recommended by the journal of the American Association of Physics Teachers).

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