

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

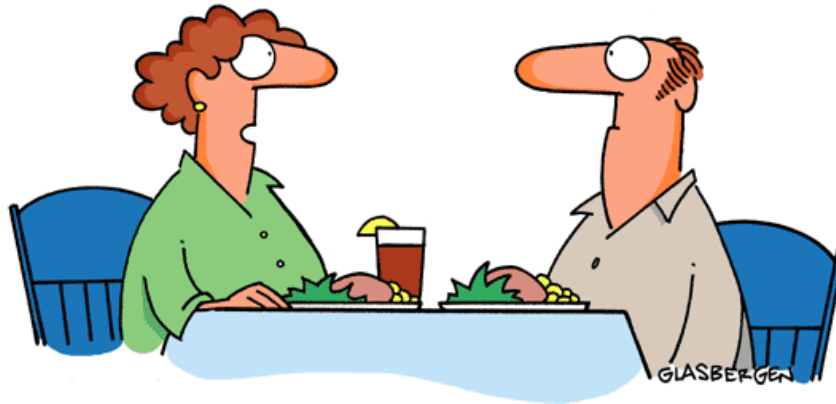
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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 892

One of the very best rules of conversation is to never, say anything which any of the company wish had been left unsaid.

—Jonathan Swift



**“This is the nicest conversation we’ve had in weeks.
Let’s not spoil it by talking.”**

SOME RULES FOR GOOD CONVERSATION

Mortimer J. Adler

The meeting of two minds may consist in their understanding of one another while still in disagreement or it may consist in their coming into agreement as a result of their understanding one another.

All impersonal conversations, whether theoretical or practical in aim, should strive to conclude with a meeting of minds in one or the other form in which that can be achieved.

Practical conversations are often unsuccessful because misunderstanding prevents them from reaching a decision. Even with sufficient understanding present, disagreement can block the way to action.

Theoretical conversations that engage persons in the pursuit of objective truth about a certain matter may not end with a meeting of

minds but may still be profitable for all concerned. The pursuit of objective truth is a long, arduous, and difficult enterprise. A good conversation may help the individuals engaged in it to make some advance toward their goal, but it will seldom if ever enable them to reach it with finality and incorrigibility.

About any matter of objective truth, the ultimate goal is universal agreement, but about certain matters of this sort, it may take until the end of time to achieve it. The pursuit of truth has many stages. At each stage progress may be made and yet still fall short of the goal aimed at.

With these general observations noted and heeded, let us consider how persons engaged in such conversations or discussions should proceed with regard to achieving understanding and agreement, at least *pro tem*, if not for all time.

The first rule to be followed is this. Do not disagree—or, for that matter, do not agree—with anyone else unless you are sure you understand the position the other person is taking. To disagree before you understand is impertinent. To agree is inane.

To make sure that you understand, before you disagree, exercise the courtesy of asking the other person the following question: “Do I understand you to say that . . . ?” Fill in the blank by phrasing in your own words what you think you hear the other person saying. He may respond to this by saying to you, “No, that is not what I said or not what I meant. My position is as follows.” Then, after the other person has restated his position for you, you should once again try to state in your own words what you have understood the other to say. If the other still dissents from your interpretation, you must continue with the question and answer procedure until the other tells you that you have at last caught the point, that you understand him precisely as he wishes to be understood. Only then do you have the grounds indispensable for intelligent and reasonable disagreement or agreement.

This procedure is time consuming. It requires patience and persistence. Most people anxious to get on with the discussion bypass it. They are willing to risk being impertinent or inane by disagreeing or agreeing with what they do not understand. They are satisfied with merely apparent disagreements or agreements, instead of seeking a genuine meeting of minds.

Real as opposed to apparent agreement occurs when two persons, concerned with a certain question to be answered, understand that

question in exactly the same way yet give incompatible answers to the question on which their minds meet in mutual understanding.

Apparent as opposed to real disagreement occurs when two persons, concerned with a certain question, do not understand that question in exactly the same way. When their minds have not met in mutual understanding of the question, the incompatible answers they give to it constitutes a difference of opinion that is not a genuine disagreement, even though it may appear to be such. Real disagreement occurs only when, with their minds meeting in mutual understanding of the question, they then give incompatible answers to it.

When two persons find themselves in real disagreement, a meeting of minds about that very disagreement still remains to be achieved. It takes the form of understanding their disagreement. To achieve this, each must forsake partisanship with regard to his own position, and substitute for it a kind of impartiality with respect to the position taken by the other person. What I mean by an attitude of impartiality is trying to understand why the other individual holds the view he does. Each person should not only be able to state the position of the other in a manner that the other approves, he should also be able to state the other person's reasons for holding that view.

All of us should be aware of the moral obligation that the pursuit of objective truth imposes upon us. If we find ourselves in real disagreement with others, we should be tireless in our effort to resolve that disagreement. We should never desist from trying to overcome it and reach agreement.

If you find yourself in genuine disagreement with the position taken by another, you should be able to explain the grounds of your disagreement, by saying one or more of the following things.


1. "I think you hold that position because you are uninformed about certain facts or reasons that have a critical bearing on it." Then be prepared to point out the information you think the other lacks and which, if possessed, would result in a change of mind.
2. "I think you hold that position because you are misinformed about matters that are critically relevant." Then be prepared to indicate the mistakes the other has made, which, if corrected, would lead the other to abandon the position taken.

3. “I think you are sufficiently well informed and have a firm grasp of the evidence and reasons that support your position, but you have drawn the wrong conclusions from your premises because you have made mistakes in reasoning. You have made fallacious inferences.” Then be ready to point out those logical errors which, if corrected, would bring the other person to a different conclusion.

4. “I think you have made none of the foregoing errors and that you have proceeded by sound reasoning from adequate grounds for the conclusion you have reached, but I also think that your thinking about the subject is incomplete. You should have gone further than you did and reached other conclusions that somewhat alter or qualify the one you did reach.” Then be able to point out what these other conclusions are and how they alter or qualify the position taken by the person with whom you disagree.

If a particular conversation ends with understood agreement about a matter of objective truth, we should not regard that as finishing the matter. More remains to be done in an effort to understand the presuppositions and implications of the agreement reached. If it ends with understood disagreement, more also remains to be done.

The cautionary remark that is relevant here consists in the advice that there is another time and place for pushing matters further. Stop for the time being and return to the subject on another day. This is especially sound advice if a conversation reaches an impasse, as many conversations do when their duration is too limited.

Finally, let me say that good conversation calls for an exercise of moral virtue. It requires the fortitude needed to take the pains necessary to make it good. It requires the temperance needed for a moderation of one’s passions. Above all, it requires the justice needed to give the other person his due. 

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