

Civilised arguing

Thurstan Brewin[†]

Civilised arguers (whether face to face or in print – ink or electronic) should not argue as antagonists, or even as advocates, as this can sour the atmosphere and lead to mere adversarial point scoring. ‘In quarrelling the truth is always lost’¹.

It is better to argue more as judges do, aiming to be fair, slowly edging towards as much agreement as possible, rather than each fighting his or her own corner.

Trust each other’s sincerity. There is not much point in arguing unless you do. Always be prepared to modify your initial view. Fortunately, losing an argument in private does not usually make an enemy in the way that it can so easily do in public.

Define terms and continue to do so during the discussion. Otherwise you can quickly slide into talking at cross purposes. No need for pedantic assertions as to correct meanings. Not at the moment anyway. Just working definitions for the duration of the discussion. Only when you explain what you mean by the words you are using can anyone say whether or not he or she agrees with you. Ambiguity makes good, quality argument impossible.

When your fellow arguer pauses for breath, call a halt and show immediately that you have been listening and say if, so far, you agree or disagree with what has been said, giving your reasons. Nothing is more frustrating than talking to a person who is thinking only of the next point he or she is going to make as soon as the opportunity arises.

Gradually build up areas of mutual agreement and disagreement. And do not let false logic turn one into the other: First speaker: ‘Not all patients want to hear the whole truth.’ Second speaker: ‘I don’t agree. I have known many who do.’

‘That’s no solution,’ is unhelpful if all that is being offered is a suggestion that might improve matters. And when one of you is strongly against something, do not accuse him or her of being in favour of the opposite. It is not necessarily so.

Do not exaggerate what your opponent has claimed, or the enthusiasm with which they have claimed it. Leave that – and other forms of polemic and innuendo – to public speaking, where it seems almost inevitable. In any case, if you need to exaggerate views in order to demolish them, it suggests that your position is weak in the first place.

Avoid that hoary old gambit, so popular in the correspondence columns of medical journals, in

which – stung by some criticism – you start your letter by telling your critic that part of what he or she says ‘is correct’, as if you were his or her teacher.

Do not say, ‘I’m not convinced that the present situation is ideal.’ Nobody ever said it was. And be careful before you accuse your ‘opponent’ of oversimplifying or of making generalisations. Generalisations are essential to any discussion of broad truths.

Do not say something wounding – then follow with ‘Where’s your sense of humour?’ The perfect arguer, this paragon of virtue, will eschew such shady tricks.

Gentle, friendly ridicule is permissible when exposing weak reasoning. It stops everything becoming too solemn. But it should be used only against someone who knows how to give as good as they get.

It should not be necessary, but you may need to stress that you are not agreeing with every belief of someone you quote, just with some of them. Avoid criticising other members of the organisation your opponent belongs to. Stick to the views of the two of you. Forget the presumed views of others not present.

Finally, loyalty and conviction do not help reasoned argument. As with conflicts of interest they should be frankly declared.

Friends will tell you that I often fail to live up to these precepts. It’s true. *Do what I say, not what I do.*

Reference

- 1 Publilius Syrus 45BC.

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[†] We regret that Dr Brewin has died since writing this article.