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abcd35. Dealing with Difficult People

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Philosophical discussions

Here are a few ways to deal with difficult people from the discussion point of view. There are university courses on this topic, but here I would like to build a list of how to deal with difficult people in the philosophical setting.

I don't claim this list is exhaustive nor that the explanations are complete but, it is a start.

Fallacious Thinkers

Some people know they are guilty of fallacious thinking, but do it anyway in order to gain an advantage. They will deny that they are thinking fallaciously even though they know it. That is because they gain a great advantage when thinking this way and they don't want to give that up. They will launch all sorts of attack scenarios if they are called to task on their thinking. Point out to these people that this particular point is a fallacious argument. See the web site <http://www.don-lindsay-archive.org/skeptic/arguments.html> for more on fallacious thinking.

Rumour Starters

When some people see that they cannot hold their place in the discussion they feel compelled to launch a rumour to somehow discredit their opponent. This is a particularly nasty behaviour but politicians and religious people do it all the time with no feelings of regret at all. When someone starts a rumour you should call them on it and stop it right at the beginning.

Attackers

Attacking the opponent using some personal attack instead of dealing with the issues is a very common form of fallacious thinking. When losing an argument they just attack and forget all about the argument. Clear thinkers are not swayed by this, but onlookers may be. Point out to these people that this particular point is an attack rather than a part of the discussion.

Name Callers

Resorting to calling someone names is a juvenile behaviour that many adults have not lost. Name calling makes them feel good. It is the only thing left that they can think of so they do it. Point out to these people that name calling is not productive.

Boasters

These people want you to know their status. They want you to know how much they think they have accomplished, how well known they are, how many good deeds they are doing, how much money they make, how many tasks they are involved in, how many important people they know and so on and so on. They may reason that this is all supposed to influence their opponent in some way. The boasting is supposed to lend credibility to their side of the argument or so they think.

Name dropping is akin to boasting. (See who I know. They are very important and so I must be too.) However, people who can really think just discount all this boasting and may call them to task on it. Clear thinkers want to know the reasons for things and the viewpoints a person has and the reasons why those view points are there. Clear thinkers don't care much about the status. Point out to these people that boasting is not necessary and that you feel an affront to it.

Self Aggrandizing

This is akin to boasting, but taken to obvious levels. It is designed to make themselves look more important than they really are by rhyming off seeming accomplishments that have nothing to do with the argument. Point out to these people that you wish them to stay on topic.

Tit for Tat

Criticism is an Olympic sport I think. This technique is again a juvenile response. Some people just did not grow out of it. If an opponent gives a criticism, rather than address the criticism the person gives a criticism back. That makes them feel good, but does not advance the discussion. Maybe the criticism should not have been given in the first place, but we are not perfect. Point out to these people that the criticism was not intended to elicit another criticism back, but rather to be helpful.

Appeal to Fear

Instilling fear in the opponent may not work with strong-willed well-adjusted people who have good self esteem, but listeners can be influenced by using fear as a weapon when the arguer's position is not supportable by clear thinking.

Using fear may also be an attempt to attack the person as well. Again, politicians and religious people have learned very well how to use fear as a tool. Point out to these people that fear tactics are repugnant to you and will not work on you. Make it clear that this tactic is a very low level attempt at control and that you don't like it.

Feign Moral Indignation

This one is as old as the hills. My lifestyle is better than yours. I am right and you are wrong. My idea of morality is the only right one. The truth is that the human species has several ideas of morality and these have changed over the history of the human race. No one is right or wrong, but some arguers will make that claim. Point out to these people that their particular moral point of view is good only for themselves, and does not apply to anyone else.

Launching Anger

Some people cannot control their responses and anger just comes out in them. Others launch anger deliberately to evoke a response and throw their opponent off guard. Clear thinkers see through this and call them on it. It is usually not used again because then they begin to look foolish when they are called on it over and over again. Point out to these people that this particular response is an angry one. Ask that anger be kept out of the discussion.

The Fundamentalist

Forget about trying to have an intelligent discussion with these people. They do not want to think clearly. They only want your money. That is what recruitment is all about. These people reject clear thinking and use centuries old responses to questions to justify their position. These ancient responses work very well with people who cannot think clearly.

However, if you want to test your own thinking patterns then getting into a discussion with a fundamentalist is a good way to practice clear-thinking. Just don't be of the opinion that you will change them because they are out to save you and nothing will stop them from that. Except clear-thinking on your part that is LOL. Point out to these people that this particular fundamentalist point is a fallacious argument and that you do not believe in their position.

Failing to Admit When One Is Wrong

No one is right all of the time, but some people will never admit they are wrong even once. Sometimes just walking away is the only solution with these people. Point out to these people that they should admit that they were wrong on that point.

Failing to Apologise

This one is legion. Some people just can't apologise even when the other person does first. Other people never initiate an apology. Sometimes apologies are necessary. Sometime they are useless. It is always nice to try though, in case it offers some hope of moving on in the discussion. Ask for an apology if you think you are owed one.

Failing to Admit When an Opponent Knows More about a Topic That You do

Some people are more skilled than others. Some people have studied more in depth on specific topics than others. If a person obviously has expert knowledge in a field then acknowledging that may be correct. The problem comes when someone thinks they have special knowledge on a topic when they have only average knowledge, and some people think they have special knowledge on EVERYTHING. Acknowledge a person when they make a good point. Leave the argument at the end of it, by giving a complement to your opponent.