

## A few polite responses to my critics

(0) *Why do you always have to turn every conversation into an fight?*

By your admission, you feel we are having an fight. Since, by my admission, I feel we are simply exchanging ideas, it seems to me that you have turned this conversation into a fight.

Not remembering our past conversations exactly, I do not wish to comment on them, except to say that I may indeed have turned them into fights in the past, or even in the recent present. However, I have no desire to start fights with anybody, friend or foe, and if you see me starting one, I ask you kindly as a friend to point this out to me, so that—in case I agree with you— I can work towards bettering myself.

I apologize if you have gotten upset or felt hurt by misinterpreting my intentions.

(1) *Don't you dare do that again.*

I'm sorry if you were hurt, but I can promise I meant no harm. Thus there is no reason to continue to be angry, or to resent my actions. What we need to do now is find a way to coexist more peacefully in the future.

Since we are all free human beings, threats from individuals mean nothing to me, and in fact I am loathe to aide someone who can only communicate his feelings in the form of demands.

It is you who wants something from me —ie behavioral change— , and the only way you can get it is by persuading me to give it to you. Fortunately, I'm a pretty easy guy to reason with: if you point out the offending behavior, explain to me why it has hurt you, and suggest something practical and reasonable that I can do to avoid hurting you in the future, I will seriously consider it.

Please keep in mind that, not being perfect, I can make no promises that I will never act in this way again, even if I decide to follow your suggestion. However, know that I do not mean to do you any harm, and so it would serve you (and your emotional well-being) well to keep this fact in mind, should I hurt you again.

Finally, if, despite my intentions, you do not see any change in my behavior over a long period of time; or if I do not wish to implement your suggestion, you may wish to reevaluate our relationship with this in mind. It is possible that we are simply incompatible, and there is no reason to try to keep a person like me in your life.

(2) *You always have to be right.*

You are probably referring to the fact that several if not tens of times in our past conversations, I have not agreed with you, or held firmly to my position in a manner you find stubborn.

I do not feel that this has anything to do with 'right' or 'wrong'. Rather, if I do not agree with you, I will not take your side. Many of the topics I discuss with my friends are

topics I have given a great deal of thought to. Very likely I once held your position, and abandoned it for reasons I am trying to convey in our conversation.

Why be uncomfortable simply because someone disagrees with you? No one solution is right for everybody, and while I may not agree with your viewpoint, I am not trying to say that you should feel my viewpoint is right or that yours is wrong. Simply put: I am not trying to “win”; rather, I want us to share ideas in friendly conversation. Even friends can disagree.

(3) *You never listen to anyone but yourself.*

What if you're wrong? What could I say that would convince you otherwise? Please ask yourself what it would take to convince you otherwise.

I will tell you flatly that I don't talk to people I don't want to listen to; so the fact that I'm talking to you means that I want to hear what you have to say. (I just may not agree with what you have to say — see (2) .)

In the worst-case scenario, I am misleading myself by thinking I want to hear you, and in fact I am just talking to you to shove my ideas down your throat. In such a case, I am probably so delusional that you had better walk away quickly.

(4) *You like to hear the sound of your own voice.*

You seem to be saying that the reason I talk to people is not to communicate with them, but just to get on a soapbox and spout my own ideas.

I have thought long and hard about my opinions, and I find many of them to be nonconventional and downright interesting. So you are correct, in the sense that I like to share these ideas with other people, to get their reactions and comments.

The most important point is that I like to hear the sound of your voice, too! So please, let's share! And if you don't want to hear what I have to say about a particular subject, we don't have to talk about it.

(5) *Controlling your feelings is unnatural.*

What is natural and what is not? I can't see how playing soccer is natural, but people do it, and enjoy it. Same goes for poetry and oral sex.

I'd agree with you that controlling your feelings is unnatural, in that it seems to take conscious effort to overcome instinctive action and reprogram yourself.

But what should we be doing with our energies? Perpetuating “natural” behavior that we don't like? Or finding ways of changing what comes naturally, to fit our desires?

Controlling my feelings is one of the best unnatural things I've ever done, right up there with oral sex.

(6) *You can't reduce life to an equation.*

I feel that there are two components to this statement. I will deal with both, but you may disregard either if either is inapplicable.

First is the assumption that because I love mathematics, I treat people too simply and one-dimensionally, misled by the simplicity of manipulating a mathematical equation. First of all, mathematics is anything but simple, even for those who are trained in it and proficient at it. Second of all, it is not the case that I approach human relationships mathematically, but rather that I approach mathematics, human relationships, and every aspect of my life, all in the same way. That way may seem clinical or lifeless to you: but please don't worry about me — I'm very, very happy. If you think my life might be improved living it differently, tell me about it! (But remember (2) .)

Second is the more contentful claim which the metaphor cloaks: viz, that I oversimplify life and the range of human emotion. You may be mistaking my solution for my take on the problem! In fact I feel that life and human emotions are incredibly complex — more complex than we can know at this point. Thus I propose we should not pretend that we understand ourselves perfectly, or speculate on the whys and wherefores of our actions. To live like this is to live in fear that we are other than we think we are.

Rather, we should cling to the simple things we want and are important to us, and branch out tentatively from there. Sometimes the data of day-to-day life seem to challenge these deeper "truths" of our existence. We should feel free at any moment to disregard those data which we have strong reason to believe are merely flukes, rather than turn our world on end because of them. For we may be misinterpreting the data; and if the flukes are really signs of a severe, deeply-rooted problem in our lives, we will surely find out about it soon enough. But if we proceed from a strong base, we should assume that we are on the right track, and not waste time with our fears and our interpretations of our emotions. Should we be wrong, let us not seek out that fact — let it be proven to us, to our satisfaction!

I have found that through such an approach, I have been able to interpret the smaller details of my existence far more meaningfully. As a result, my life has a purpose and direction that makes me consistently happy — happier than I have ever been living life any other way, be that way more naive or less.

(7) *You have said that you don't like X, but you do X all the time.*

If I don't like X, then I don't like X. If I do X all the time, then I do X all the time. One has little to do with the other.

If I wish to resolve the seeming contradiction —and I may not, in the case that I find reason to exclude my own behavior from my aesthetical judgement—, I must decide which is more important to me: my desires, or my "natural" behavior. (Recall that by "natural" I only mean "that which comes naturally to me at present".)

If I decide that my behavior is more important to me, then what has happened is that I have realized that my desires were perhaps naive and unrealistic, and I will try to

recast my desires more sensibly. (For example, I recently felt that I should not engage in any manner of sexual activity with anyone unless I was tested with them beforehand. I flagrantly violated this “rule”, and after much deliberation I realized that the “rule” was far too restrictive. Now I feel that, before getting tested, I should simply not engage in any manner of sexual activity involving genitalia.)

If I decide that my desires are more important, then I need to find a way of breaking my natural habit. This could be very tricky, and will almost certainly involve the support of my friends. (For example, prior to last summer, I felt that I was not getting enough exercise, and not eating healthy, yet for several months I did not exercise, and did not eat healthy. Believing my desires to be more important than my habits, I spent the summer just a minute’s walk from the gym, and prevented myself from eating at junky restaurants by not leaving the house with extra cash.)

But in either case, the solution arrived at would effect an improvement to my life, and that would be the sole reason I would adopt such a solution; I have very little interest in purging my life of seeming contradictions, just for consistency’s sake.

And this applies to you, because I would appreciate it if you, as a friend, would help me, both in choosing the right path, and in taking it. I can’t see any reason for you to tease me because of my seeming contradictions; and if there are reasons, you could undoubtedly convey them more effectively. (See (1) .)

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