

Impasse

I've spent over 30 years arguing about ideas. During those decades, I've learned a lot. I've changed my mind. I've changed minds.

Normally, however, arguing about ideas is fruitless. Tempers fray. Discussion goes in circles. Each and every mental corruption that Philip Tetlock has explored rears its ugly epistemic head. You even lose friends.

When a conversation goes off the rails, I'm sorely tempted to bluntly assess the other party's deep intellectual flaws. (As I repeatedly barked at my mom when I was a teenager, "When will you get it through your thick skull that...?") You don't have to master Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to predict the results. The other party typically has the temerity to bluntly assess *my* deep intellectual flaws, which in turn sparks an even more unpleasant, fruitless, and potentially friendship-ending exchange.

The wise approach to fruitless argument, rather, is to politely disengage. Yet how can you do this without counter-productively moving the conversation from bad to worse?

The classic move is to make "one last point," then terminate the conversation. Again, you don't have to master Carnegie to predict the results. The other side rushes to get in *their* "one last point" and the cycle of suffering resumes.

A better approach is to meekly announce, "I can't think of anything else productive to say." Alas, this is still red meat in the eyes of many disputants. "Aha, so you can't even answer my brilliant arguments. Typical!"

The best ejector button I've discovered so far is a single word: "Impasse." You can stretch it out to, "I fear we've reached an impasse," but even that provides a hand-hold for the other party to say, "Oh, we've reached an impasse, eh? Speak for yourself." When you say, "Impasse" and stop talking, the conversation swiftly ends. The other side won't like it, but at this point you should meet further taunts with a silent shrug. While this might spawn a grudge, it's less likely to do so than further wasted words.

Admittedly, if your real goal is to manipulate the other party into purging you, your best bet is probably Agree and Amplify. But if that's your goal, you have no need of my help.