

The Secret to Getting Along With Others

I had already completed 16 years of schooling when I took a class to prepare for entrance exams to law school (I decided not to go). First order of business for nailing the exam: the study of logic. My mind was absolutely blown. I was stunned to discover that there are rules for thinking, proofs for making sense or spouting nonsense.

Discovering this changed me, but I was also slightly angry: why had no one told me this many years ago? Why was I only now discovering that logic is a discipline that makes sense of all the others?

You can laugh at my reaction, but in my generation of schooling, logic as a course of study had long ago been dropped. I have no idea why. You can look back at curricula dating from the Middle Ages and see that logic was central, always. There are rules for thinking, and not too much point in attempting to think rigorously without knowing something about them.

I cite the case as an illustration of how a knowledge gap in a vital area can be devastating and destructive to everything else you think you know.

The Logic of Social Activities

I would like to add another case in point. All my life I've heard about [Dale Carnegie](#)'s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The title always struck me as vaguely cynical. This book is going to teach me to manipulate other people to become my friends so I can manipulate them more? No thanks. Alternatively, I figured that a book this old (written in 1934) and this highly recommended must have content that is

already woven into the cultural fabric.

Oh sure, I figured, it probably includes some silly sales chestnuts like: address people by their names and smile a lot. I don't sell used cars, so such habits don't matter to me.

The first time I heard the book recommended by someone I highly respect was two years ago. I was doing a seminar with FEE president Larry Read. A student asked us both what he should be reading to really improve his life. I answered with some piece of interwar Viennese economics literature. Larry shocked me (and others in the room) by suggesting *How to Win Friends*. Even then I delayed picking up the book for two years, until, independently, Danny Sanchez of FEE suggested it.

A Practical Treatise

Fine. I snagged a copy and started reading. Everything I thought the book about turned out to be wrong. This is not about manipulating others. It is about training yourself to be a good person toward others and thereby feel a greater degree of happiness in your own life. What makes the book different is that it starts with a premise: a happy life is about living in harmony and mutual benefit with others.

This book is a logic manual for social engagement, the success or failure of which turns out to profoundly affect your personal happiness.

Who are these others? Coworkers. Fellow students. Professors. Administrators. Church members and pastors. Neighbors. Mom, Dad, sister, brother, spouse. Shopkeepers. Salespeople. Service workers. Flight attendants. Uber drivers. Cooks and servers. Bank tellers. Loan officers.

Just think about your daily life: unless you are sitting alone in a room, you are dealing with other people. And even given

this reality, the topic of precisely how to do this is as much neglected as logic in the curriculum. People are not trained to do this. This book fills in that gap.

Commercial Society

We live in a commercial society, which I would define as: a social setting that provides as much opportunity as possible for everyone to serve each other in mutual benefit. This is our reality and the reason for wealth and prosperity.

Economists have a technical name for it: the division of labor. What this means in social terms is that we all need to figure out a way to be valuable to others and for others to be valuable to us. That money changes hands is incidental. The commercial society is about human relationships.

And yet, we have spent precious little time at all in schooling learning about how to do this. In fact, schooling is the opposite of a commercial setting. There are authorities and peons. We learn to comply with rules and meet static standards of success. We are not rewarded (or even punished) with anything substantial for whether and to what extent we are actually valuable to other people and other people do not treat us as adaptive agents. Everyone is in compliance mode.

Dealing with Others

The rest of life is not like this. We are forever being asked to deal with others. We can deny this all we want, but here is a hard fact about ourselves: our self-perceptions are to a huge extent determined by what we believe that others believe about us. And yet, we spend precious little intellectual energy thinking about how to elicit good vibes from people around us. I find this remarkable.

That it is in our self-interest to be valued by others is not

actually obvious. Look through the bookstore at the self-help or religious section. Most of the books are based on the mistaken view that we live isolated, wholly internal lives. They are all about what I should think about myself, how I should look within and gain a clearer perception of my philosophy, how I should root out hidden failings, or how I can reconstruct the way I think to gain a better understanding of myself.

All these works suffer from the same failing: they are solipsistic rather than dealing with the actual thing that brings suffering and heartache to our lives, which is usually about failed relationships with others around us. How we see ourselves is practically contingent on how we are treated by others.

(As a historical matter, liberalism provided the first robust theory of community and the relations between individuals. It is the greatest smear of liberal theory, dating back to the early 19th century, that freedom and community are opposed. Another variant of the smear, coming equally from the far right and left, is that libertarianism celebrates “atomized individualism,” dismisses community, faith, family, and so on – an invented critique structured to substitute anti-liberal institutions.)

The Real Terror of Jail

A quick story from my own life to illustrate. I was once arrested (failure to pay a traffic ticket) and thrown in the slammer. The event turned into something like a metaphysical crisis for me. I sat in jail alone. The people who controlled my life cared nothing about me. The people who did care about me could have no control over my fate. It only took a few hours, but I could feel perceptions of myself change.

Nothing I had ever done in life counted for anything. It didn't matter if I was articulate, smart, well mannered, from

a good family, talented, had written tons and that I had valuable skills. None of this counted for anything. I was nothing but a bag of bones – at least I was tempted by that thought.

I know this sounds melodramatic, but it did have a huge impact on my life. I would never again take my relationships with people around me for granted. I would never again choose to ruin a friendship rather than cultivate one. Jail changed my whole sense of how I would deal with other people, and thus did it change how I would see myself. (The experience also gave me a new-found love of human rights and liberties.)

In any case, Dale Carnegie's book is different because begins with two premises: 1) we live in society which means that our relationships with others matter enormously for the quality of our lives, and 2) there is nothing we can do to control others; we can only control how we deal with others, whatever that reality is. The rest of the book is about reality.

It can be shocking at times. You need not only to pretend to care about what others think, say, and need; you need actually to care. You need not win arguments. When you do something awesome, you should find ways to give credit to others, not just as a way of being nice but also because it is actually true that your success depends on others. You should seek to ennoble other lives around you and be empathetic with their plight.

Your Self Interest

All of this is about being alert to others around you, getting out of your own head to see the world as others see it. Why should you do this? Here is the twist: because it is in your own interest to do so. All this will make you more successful and therefore happier.

To be clear, this book has nothing to do with personal piety. It is a practical manual for realizing your dreams. It doesn't

intend to achieve this, but following the advice in this book will make you a better person and therefore help you realize your own value. It is a paradox: you have to start caring about others, who in turn start to value you, in order really to believe that you are a valuable human being.

As it turns out, there is a logic to living and functioning well in cooperation with other people. This book is the roadmap. I'm only giving the briefest look, because I'm not actually interested in giving away spoilers. If you want them, there are plenty of places to find them. What I will say is what Larry said to those kids that day: this could be the most valuable book you will ever read. It could turn your whole life around.

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