

How to Win Arguments When You Haven't a Leg to Stand On

A number of studies have shown links [between depression and internet use](#). This being the case, who better than the 19th Century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) to be named as the official philosopher of the internet?

For thorough-going gloom, it is hard to beat Schopenhauer. ☒
“Life is an unpleasant business,” he said as a young man to explain why he wanted to be a philosopher. “I have resolved to spend mine reflecting on it.” A photograph taken the year before he died, with his touseled hair, wizened face and grimly-set mouth, is a portrait of a life dedicated to proving that life is all about suffering.

And, of all the things that made Schopenhauer suffer, none, perhaps was more painful than the stupidity of critics who failed to appreciate his originality, depth and acuteness. For most of his career he was either ignored or disparaged, so he had plenty of time to reflect upon how mistaken they were and why. After his death he was recognised as a towering landmark of modern philosophy – but by then it was too late for him to revise his opinion of dim-witted humanity.

Fortunately for us, Schopenhauer made good use of his opponents' errors. He gathered them together into a slim volume which appeared in English in 1896, long after his death. It was republished in 2004 as [The Art of Always Being Right: Thirty-Eight Ways to Win When You Are Defeated](#) (available at a bargain price on Kindle).

In the age of Twitter (and the Maestro of Twitter, Donald Trump) there can be no better guide to argumentation on the internet than Schopenhauer. Brief op-eds, comment boxes and Twitter demonstrate every day – every minute – the truth of

his cynical observation that argument is “the art of disputing, and of disputing in such a way as to hold one’s own, whether one is in the right or the wrong”.

Why don’t people take the truth more seriously on the internet? Why do so many disputes escalate into scorched earth battles? Schopenhauer’s explanation is characteristically pessimistic:

it is simply the natural baseness of human nature. If human nature were not base, but thoroughly honourable, we should in every debate have no other aim than the discovery of truth; we should not in the least care whether the truth proved to be in favour of the opinion which we had begun by expressing, or of the opinion of our adversary. That we should regard as a matter of no moment, or, at any rate, of very secondary consequence; but, as things are, it is the main concern. Our innate vanity, which is particularly sensitive in reference to our intellectual powers, will not suffer us to allow that our first position was wrong and our adversary’s right.

What if you find yourself in the awkward position of realising that your opponent is right or that your own position is hopelessly weak? Schopenhauer comes to the rescue with 38 devious tricks for victory. You need look no further than the comment box beneath a controversial article on the internet or a heated discussion amongst talking heads to see how relevant they are.

For instance, here is some advice for the self-confident and arrogant:

“When your opponent has answered several of your questions without the answers turning out favourable to the conclusion at which you are aiming, advance the desired conclusion,—although it does not in the least follow,—as though it had been proved, and proclaim it in a tone of triumph. If your opponent is shy or stupid, and you yourself

possess a great deal of impudence and a good voice, the trick may easily succeed.” (Trick 14)

If you know how to get under an opponent’s skin, you can try this:

“This trick consists in making your opponent angry; for when he is angry he is incapable of judging aright, and perceiving where his advantage lies. You can make him angry by doing him repeated injustice, or practising some kind of chicanery, and being generally insolent.” (Trick 8)

Similarly, a hot-headed opponent can be tripped up egging him on:

“Contradiction and contention irritate a man into exaggerating his statement. By contradicting your opponent you may drive him into extending beyond its proper limits a statement which, at all events within those limits and in itself, is true; and when you refute this exaggerated form of it, you look as though you had also refuted his original statement.” (Trick 23)

If you are debating with another expert, but see that you are losing, you can use the ignorance of your listeners as a weapon:

“If you have no argument ad rem [pertinent to the argument], and none either ad hominem, you can make one ad auditors [to the audience]; that is to say, you can start some invalid objection, which, however, only an expert sees to be invalid. Now your opponent is an expert, but those who form your audience are not, and accordingly in their eyes he is defeated; particularly if the objection which you make places him in any ridiculous light.” (Trick 28)

Colour your language.

“Of all the tricks of controversy, this is the most frequent, and it is used instinctively. You hear of ‘religious zeal,’ or ‘fanaticism’; a ‘faux pas’ a ‘piece of gallantry,’ or ‘adultery’; an ‘equivocal,’ or a ‘bawdy’ story; ‘embarrassment,’ or ‘bankruptcy’; ‘through influence and connection,’ or by ‘bribery and nepotism’; ‘sincere gratitude,’ or ‘good pay.’” (Trick 12)

This stratagem is very, very useful so long as no one is fact-checking the debate – and normally no one is:

“You may also, should it be necessary, not only twist your authorities, but actually falsify them, or quote something which you have invented entirely yourself. As a rule, your opponent has no books at hand, and could not use them if he had.” (Trick 30)

In some circumstances, mock humility works a treat, preferably accompanied by a smirk and a wink at the audience.

If you know that you have no reply to the arguments which your opponent advances, you may, by a fine stroke of irony, declare yourself to be an incompetent judge: “What you now say passes my poor powers of comprehension; it may be all very true, but I can’t understand it, and I refrain from any expression of opinion on it.” In this way you insinuate to the bystanders, with whom you are in good repute, that what your opponent says is nonsense ... This is a trick which may be used only when you are quite sure that the audience thinks much better of you than of your opponent. A professor, for instance, may try it on a student. (Trick 31)

The Assumption of Effortless Superiority is an excellent way of kicking the ball into the long grass.

“If you are confronted with an assertion, there is a short way of getting rid of it, or, at any rate, of throwing suspicion on it, by putting it into some odious category; even though the connection is only apparent, or else of a loose character. You can say, for instance, ‘That is Manichaeism,’ or ‘It is Arianism,’ or ‘Pelagianism,’ or ‘Idealism,’ or ‘Spinozism,’ or ‘Pantheism,’ or ‘Brownianism,’ or ‘Naturalism,’ or ‘Atheism,’ or ‘Rationalism,’ ‘Spiritualism,’ ‘Mysticism,’ and so on.” (Trick 32)

Schopenhauer was not as Machiavellian as these cynical ploys suggest. Within the limits of his own metaphysical framework, he was a seeker after the truth. His motto was *vitam impendere vero* (to dedicate one’s life to the truth) and sophisticated evasion disgusted him. A life of discouragement and rejection had made him a keen observer of how little the truth is respected in public discussion. He would have understood how Twitter mobs weaponise words.

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