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**Reason and Persuasion**

**Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I**

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Book designed by John Holbo.

The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

## Chapter 4      How To Read This Book, Part II: Reason & Persuasion

### 1

NOW I'VE GIVEN you a cartoonish Platonic synthesis of Heraclitus and Parmenides: the Theory of the Forms; Being and Becoming. Objections have occurred to you. I would not be surprised if they turn out to be good ones! I will be quite properly shocked if I have succeeded in converting you to Platonism on the basis of cow cartoons! (How many cows? Give the dancing cows a rest!)



Our three dialogues do not explicitly address metaphysical issues about the Forms and/or possible divisions between visible and intelligible realms. Why, then, have I belabored these issues at such length?

Because if you read these dialogues, you can't help wondering what Plato is getting at. They all end with unanswered questions. We want answers!

I won't leave the reader in the dark. I think Plato's answer is: we won't get answers until we embrace something like his Forms. But once we **do** accept such a view, we **can** expect answers. We can hope to arrive at definitive accounts of the likes of holiness, virtue and justice. These subjects will become technical; not mathematical, but like mathematics: sharp-edged, conceptually pure, precise. But if the theory of Forms seems speculative and implausible, this is disappointing. It would seem these classic works of philosophy by Plato exist to cajole us into believing something we probably aren't prepared to believe. This chapter will try to do better, not so much in terms of metaphysics and epistemology but in terms of the character of ethical problems themselves.

The former prisoner descends back down into the Cave to help his fellows, allegedly turning new-won metaphysical insight into political wisdom. Socrates predicts this individual is in for rough treatment. "Wouldn't he be mocked at? Wouldn't it be said that his upward journey had wrecked his eyesight, that this showed it was not worthwhile even to try to travel upward?"

If there is one element of the Cave myth that is surely spot-on, this is it.

Plato is, of course, one of the most famous and influential thinkers in history. He is in no danger of outright neglect. Yet it is common for readers to react negatively, dismissively. The Theory of Forms is not **the** problem but exemplifies it. And, please note: Plato anticipates the problem.

What **is** the problem?

A friend comes over to your house. 'I'm worried my dad may have murdered someone. What should I do? Should I go to the police?' Minus his self-righteous self-confidence, this could be Euthyphro. Naturally, you tell your friend: 'Well, let's sit down and define 'holiness'. That will provide you with an answer.'

No, of course you don't say that!

Why would you think you could define 'holiness'? Even if you could, why would pulling down the dictionary from the shelf help your friend in a life crisis?

**That's** the problem. There is something about Plato's whole approach that seems so pedantic, hence head-in-the-clouds wrong-headed! It's **so** wrong, it's hard even to **say** what is wrong with it! (Many people feel this way.)

Partly it's that incessant demand for definitions. But what's wrong with demanding definitions? Suppose, instead of coming to you, your friend went to see a trusted lawyer-friend. 'You think your father murdered someone and you don't know what to do? Well, let's consider very carefully how the law defines 'murder'. You may think this approach to the problem sounds a little cold and calculating, but it is not crazy. Definitions are often useful, sometimes necessary. Legal cases are one sort of context where this is typically true. Science is perhaps an even clearer case. Scientists don't always need definitions, but sometimes they need the very sharpest ones.

Maybe, then, what seems so odd about Plato is that he thinks ethics could be a technical subject for experts — a science. But suppose your friend went to his priest for advice. Hardly an odd thing to do. Isn't a priest a kind of technical expert? Why can't there be technical expertise about ethics? (The root of 'science' means **know**. You **know** right from wrong. Right? So **you're** an ethical scientist. Sort of?)

It still seems crazy to try to solve these problems by defining 'holiness', doesn't it?

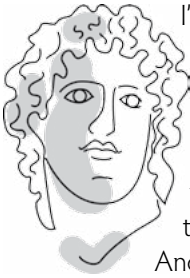
## 2

Let me frame this problem in terms of another substantial passage from Plato, from the dialogue **Symposium**. It isn't about anyone named 'Symposium'; it isn't about an **academic** symposium — seminar-style discussion of some intellectual subject. In Greek the word means **drinking party**. That's the dialogue's dramatic setting: a drinking party, at which various guests are giving speeches in praise of love.



The speaker I will quote is Alcibiades, a very real, very controversial figure in ancient Athens. Let me introduce him briefly: handsome young aristocrat; born to rule; brilliant military leader — until he betrayed Athens. It's a long and tangled tale. Alcibiades apparently committed acts of recreational vandalism against certain holy things. Then, when called back from Sicily, where he was leading the army, to stand trial for these impious acts, he went over to the enemy, the Spartans.

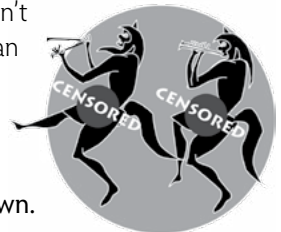
And one more thing: Alcibiades was a 'student' of Socrates. Plausibly this is one of the motivations for Socrates' denial, in **Apology**, that he teaches. Alcibiades' handsome face is exhibit A in any argument that Socrates corrupts the youth. Here he is, drunk as a lord:



I'm going to try to praise Socrates, gentlemen, by means of comparisons. He may well think I'm doing this to make fun of him, but this comparison is for the sake of truth, not mockery. For I say he resembles those Silenus figures you can see standing in the statuary shops, the ones the craftsmen have made holding pipes or flutes, and when you open them up they are seen to contain beautiful images of gods.

And I also say he resembles the satyr Marsyas. As to your resembling these in external form — even you yourself won't contradict that, Socrates, but I'll go on and say that you are like them in every other respect as well! You are a lewd, insolent person, are you not? If you won't admit it, I've got witnesses right here. And aren't you a pipe-player? One much more extraordinary than the satyr?... (215b)

Satyrs are goat from the waist down, man from the waist up, with leering goat-face and horns. They are goatish in their appetites, especially from the waist down.

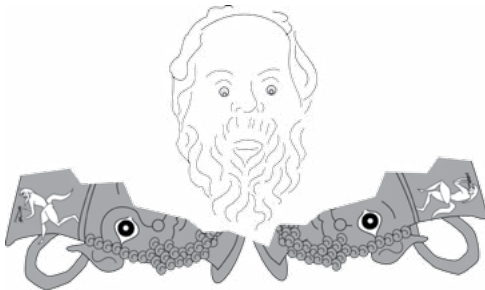


It is indeed true that representations of satyrs look astonishingly like representations of Socrates. And satyrs are followers of Dionysus, beautiful god of wine and madness. So Socrates at a drinking party seems in character as a satyr-like figure. Silenus is another follower of Dionysus: satyr-faced — broad, flat-nosed, thick-lipped, big-eared but human-legged and a drunk.



A bust of Silenus with pipe and flute, satyr instruments, would be indistinguishable from the bust of a satyr. (Perhaps there was a tendency to conflate the two? In some versions satyrs are Silenus' children.)

At any rate, Marsyas was a satyr who (in some versions) challenged Apollo to a music competition and (in all versions) was flayed for his presumptuousness. He was skinned alive. If you imagine the ugly outer face of these statues as Marsyas, the symbolic act of cracking them open, peeling their surface back, looks a bit sinister. If Alcibiades is comparing Socrates to Marsyas, is he dropping hints about — or foreshadowing — Socrates eventual, unhappy fate?



We don't know what these statues Alcibiades refers to were like. Nesting dolls, with a Dionysus inside? A clay piggy-bank (goaty-bank?) you cracked to get at some treasure? Some later writers seem to think these **silenoi** were hinged boxes of some sort.

In place of this image that has been lost, let me offer an image that has been preserved. Our 'satire' descends from an early Greek comedy form — so-called **satyr plays**. We have ancient representations of beautiful young actors gazing, like Hamlet at the skull, at what appear to be flayed satyr/Socrates skins: namely, the masks they will wear in the performance. Picture Alcibiades that way, addressing Socrates. Maybe.

Skipping a few sentences ahead, he continues:

For example, when we listen to anyone else — even someone who is quite a good orator — giving a speech, it has practically zero effect on us. But when we hear you speak, or hear your words spoken by someone else — even if the speaker is a rather poor one, and be the listener woman or man or youth — we're thunderstruck and entranced. In fact, gentlemen, if it weren't that it would make me seem completely drunk, I'd tell you all under oath about the extraordinary experiences I've been put through by his words, things I still feel even now! For whenever I hear him, I'm worse than some religious fanatic. My heart skips a beat and tears spring to my eyes listening to his words, and I see many other people having the same experiences. Listening to Pericles, or to other skilled orators, I thought: He speaks well. But nothing like this happened to me, my soul wasn't cast into turmoil or compelled to follow along like a common slave. Our Marsyas here, on the other hand, has often put me in such a state that I thought my life wasn't worth living as it was. And you can't say any of this isn't true, Socrates. Even now I'm conscious that if I were willing to open up my ears to him I wouldn't be able to withstand him, and would suffer the same things all over again. He forces me to admit that, inadequate as I am, I neglect myself while I attend to Athens' affairs. So I stop up my ears by main force and flee as if from the Sirens, because otherwise I'd sit down beside him till I was an old man. And there's one experience I've had, only with this man, something no one would expect in me: I've been made to feel ashamed. He is the only man before whom I feel ashamed. When I'm with him I'm aware that I can't do anything other than what he tells me to, but as soon as I leave him I'm a slave to the honors of the multitude. So I become a runaway and flee him, and when I see him I'm ashamed about the things we had agreed on. Often I think it would be a better world without him among us, but then, if such a thing were to happen, I know perfectly well I would feel much worse than ever. The result is that I really have no idea what to do with the man... (215d-216c)



...There are many other marvelous things for a person to praise in Socrates, and though you might well liken most of his doings to those of another, on the whole he's like no other man on earth, past or present, and that is the truly astonishing thing about him. For someone might say that Brasidas and others are like Achilles, or Pericles like Nestor and Antenor, and there are many others one could make the same comparisons about. But of this singular man, both in himself and with respect to his words, you will find no likeness at all, whether you search among men of our time or of the past — unless, as I did, you compare him and his words to the Silenoi and Satyrs. Because I skipped over it earlier, but it's not just in his person that he resembles these. His words also are extraordinarily like the Silenoi that open up. When someone hears Socrates' speech, it seems totally ridiculous at first: he wraps himself up in words and language that are like the skin of some lewd Satyr — for he talks about pack-asses and smiths and shoemakers and tanners, and he seems to be saying the same things all the time, so that an inexperienced or ignorant man will probably laugh at everything he says. But when they open up and you can see what's inside, you'll see that they are the only words with meaning inside of them, and are the most divine, having beautiful images of virtue inside, and also having the widest relevance — in fact, being completely sufficient for the study of anyone who wants to become a good and honorable man. (221c-222a)



You don't need to know who Brasidas or Nestor or Antenor are to get the point. Warriors, wise men and leaders are familiar from myth, legend, story and song. You even see a few around town! But Socrates is singular. Let's work backwards from the end — from the point Alcibiades says he should have started with. Not just the man, Socrates, but his **arguments** are superficially ugly. They seem so crude and coarse!



That is, even though Alcibiades begins by saying he — and everyone else — feels more affected by Socrates' speeches than by those of any orator, it is also the case that Socrates does not **immediately** have this affect. At first you are put off by the sheer crudity of the approach.

What thought could flip you across that conceptual divide? From dismissing Socrates as a comic goat to venerating him as a golden god?

## 3



Let's try to get clearer about what it is that typically **bothers** people about Plato — about Socrates. In **Republic**, one of Socrates' friends — Adeimantus, a sympathetic fellow — attempts a diagnosis:

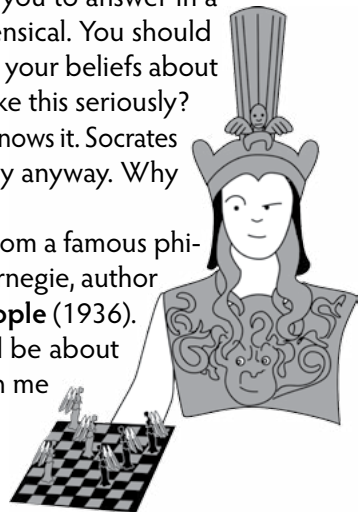
No one can contradict the things you say, Socrates. But each time you say them your audience has an experience something like this: they think that because they are inexperienced players of the game of cross-examination, they are tripped up by the argument — a little here, a little there, at each of your questions. When all these small concessions are added together in the end, they find they fall flat, fallaciously contradicting their own starting points. Just as novice game players are in the end trapped by masters, and cannot move, so this lot are trapped and have nothing to say in this different sort of game, played not with counters but with words. Yet they aren't the least bit inclined to accept the conclusion for all that. (487b)



But why does it **seem** this is just a game? Why would the words Socrates worries about seem like mere counters — like a checker or a pawn? We **really use** these words in everyday life. 'Justice'! That's no toy. If you say 'that's not fair!' and I inquire why not, and you say something about 'justice', and I show you your answer implies something you yourself cannot possibly believe, what then? Apparently you are somewhat confused. No one forced you to answer in a way that implied something false or nonsensical. You should conclude that you should probably modify your beliefs about fairness and/or justice. How can you **not** take this seriously?

Still, Adeimantus is right. Plato obviously knows it. Socrates has little effect on people, not permanently anyway. Why not?

Let me answer by means of a passage from a famous philosopher — not Plato this time, but Dale Carnegie, author of **How To Win Friends and Influence People** (1936). In fact, much of the rest of this chapter will be about Carnegie. But how can Dale Carnegie teach me to read a book about Plato?





Carnegie is the Plato ... of the self-help section of the bookstore. These shelves and shelves of 'how to' and 'success' are footnotes to him. And yet Carnegie is, to an impressive degree, perfectly **anti**-Platonic. So if you can just get **him** (he isn't **so** hard to understand) you simply add a 'not': you've got Plato.

I know! Carnegie is not considered a philosopher. Bear with me. One of the things that makes these play-meets-problem-set-with-no-answer-key dialogues puzzling is that Socrates is arguing with non-philosophers. Euthyphro is a priest. Meno, an inspirational speaker and aspiring public figure and military man. (Part-time dreamer, full-time schemer.) Cephalus and son, immigrant businessmen. Thrasymachus is a sophist. (Like Dale Carnegie, although Thrasymachus' book would probably have a less friendly title.)

It would be strange to read, say, a modern chemistry textbook written in dialogue form. But it would be even stranger to read one in which the author puts forward technical ideas about chemistry by engaging in semi-hostile, mock-dramatic debate with fictional opponents who aren't even chemists. It would be strange for someone who didn't know about chemistry to **want** to engage in hostile debate with a chemist about chemistry. It would be frustrating to watch, if what you wanted was to learn chemistry — although it might be funny. There might be a train-wreck fascination. This, in effect, is what Plato gives us. And there surely **is** a reason: namely, this is how philosophy goes and, perhaps, has to go. Because, unlike chemistry, everyone **thinks** they know about philosophy, because everyone has ideas about life and how to live it. There isn't any boundary between philosophy, as a special field of study, and the attitudes of ordinary men and women. Philosophy is bound to be not just a matter of philosophers talking academic shop with philosophers. It is a matter of philosophy arguing with non-philosophy (because non-philosophy often **is** philosophy.) But how do you stage such an encounter productively? Isn't this just going to devolve into comedy?

Speaking of 'arguing': it's a funny old word. Let's get on with the story.

#### 4

Dale Carnegie recalls being a foolish young man at a party, hearing another guest misattribute a quote. Young Carnegie was eager to jump in. (It wasn't the Bible! That was Shakespeare!) An older friend kicked him under the table: "Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you? Why not let him save his face? He didn't ask for your opinion. He didn't want it. Why argue with him? Always avoid the acute angle." This was much-needed advice to a young loud-mouth.

During my youth, I had argued with my brother about everything under the Milky Way. When I went to college, I studied logic and argumentation, and went in for debating contests . . . Later, I taught debating and argumentation in New York; and once, I am ashamed to admit, I planned to write a book on the subject. Since then, I have listened to, criticized, engaged in, and watched the effects of thousands of arguments. As a result of it all, I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument — and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes.



Nine times out of ten, an argument ends with each of the contestants being more firmly convinced than ever that he is absolutely right.

You can't win an argument. You can't because if you lose it, you lose it; and if you win it, you lose it. Why? Well, suppose you triumph over the other man and shoot his argument full of holes and prove that he is **non compos mentis**. Then what? You will feel fine. But what about him? You will have made him feel inferior. You have hurt his pride. He will resent your triumph. And —

"A man convinced against his will  
Is of the same opinion still."

...Real salesmanship isn't argument. It isn't anything even remotely like argument. The human mind isn't changed that way.<sup>1</sup>



Carnegie is giving perfectly sound advice: you catch more flies with honey. (Gadflies? Get a flyswatter.) Yet what he is saying is absurd. He is making an argument against the possibility of making good arguments. This looks like a job for...Socrates!



My good Carnegies, no doubt you are right and I am dull not to see it, but I have one little question. What is an argument, according to you? You say you have witnessed thousands, and have just offered one yourself, so you must know...

- 1 Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, (Pocket Books, 1981), pp. 116-7. The reference is to the current edition, but the passage is from an older edition. The revised edition omits the final lines: "Real salesmanship... the human mind isn't changed that way."



Despite the fact that what Carnegie is getting at is plain sense, there isn't a good way for him to define his subject without contradicting himself. This is not just because sharp definitions are hard to come by. The problem is ambiguity. Carnegie uses 'argument' to mean **verbal fight**. But 'argument' also means **set of premises and conclusions, in which the premises are grounds for accepting the conclusions**. This is more elaborate (although you might want to polish it further, for a formal occasion.) But it is a perfectly ordinary use of 'argument'. Arguing is reason-giving. An argument, in this sense, has nothing to do with fighting. It doesn't even have to do with **doing**. It doesn't have to do with **people** — no more so than an abstract truth like  $2 + 2 = 4$  has to do with people.

Why do we have one word that means (1) verbal fight; (2) those highly abstract things you meet in math books and scientific texts? They don't seem the same at all. Why do they have the same name? You know what ambiguity is: the thing that lets us make puns, which aren't usually deep puzzles. 'Bank' refers to the sides of rivers and to financial institutions; 'duck' means a bird and a thing you do to avoid getting hit on the head. The ambiguity in 'argument', on the other hand, is no accident. It grows out of an ambivalence we humans feel about ... arguments (for lack of a better word).

Let's start with etymology. You might think the root, 'arg', comes from the sound people make when you try to prove they're wrong: '**Argh!**' But no. It's the same as **argent, silver**. The original meaning was something like **shine, be bright, white, clear**. In Latin **arguere** means **clarify, show**. But the frequentative of that verb — the thing you are doing if you argue a lot — is **argutare: babble, talk nonsense**. We think of intelligent people as bright. But, at least as English speakers, we have no positive word for the character



trait of **practicing brightness** — that is, habitually clarifying. Just plain old figuring out what's what. What we have is 'argumentative': word for people who get in fights; which, as Carnegie will tell you, is not a bright way to live. Getting back to Carnegie, let's call the argument-types he doesn't like — the fights — **AF's**. Let's call the justificatory structures **AJ's**. Carnegie offers an AJ to the conclusion that AF's are a waste of time.

His argument no longer looks necessarily self-undermining. But is it good?

It seems, my dear Carneges, that when you taught me to “avoid arguments, like rattlesnakes and earthquakes”, you did not teach me correctly. For, unlike those other things, these things, the arguments, are sometimes good, sometimes bad for a man. And when they are good, even if such cases are but one in ten, as you say, they are among the most precious. For arguments are the very things for teaching which things **really are** good and bad. Your own argument is a perfect illustration. You **do** think your argument is a good one? — Yes, Socrates. — And that it is about what is really good, and what is not? — Yes. — If we knew a small number of precious items lay concealed in a great pile of dirt, wouldn't it be worth our while to sift the pile, to find this treasure? — Certainly. — Then, instead of butting heads, shall we put our heads together, to see if we can sort out which is which in our case, and in every other case we might encounter?

But you can't just separate out the AF's from the AJ's, like sorting trash from treasure. Why not?

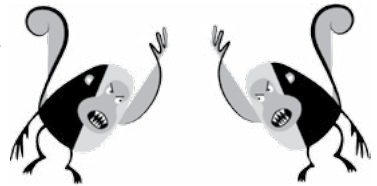
Sometimes we say people are ‘arguing’ when they are, literally, just screaming abuse, like monkeys in the zoo. That could be pure AF.

Some of the things printed in science texts, on the other hand, may count as pure AJ. Proofs in mathematics might be the very clearest cases.



But most cases will be mixed. Mostly, when people have an AF, they have it by means of an AJ. Mostly, when people are moved to construct an AJ, they are provoked by involvement in some AF. (Setting people straight and getting in fights go together. That's all I'm saying.) So if you ‘watch’ a lot of arguments (note how Carnegie assumes arguing is a spectator sport, though math proofs aren't so action-packed) what you see are people justifying their conclusions. But **really** they are striving to justify themselves. Or just to beat the other guy.

Arguing is a dominance display. Deer grow big antlers, the better to butt heads. The brighter sort of monkey grows grand, elaborate philosophies, for much the same reason. Thus, the subject matter of any given argument (politics, culture, some headline, who forgot to take out the garbage) is not what is **really** at issue, not at the human level.



Arguments are opportunities to display and enforce our sense of status and self-worth. From another Carnegie book: "Our so-called reasoning consists in finding arguments for going on believing as we already do." And: "They had chosen their topics because these topics permitted oratorical development. They had no deep, personal interest in the arguments they were making. And their successive talks were mere exercises in the art of delivery."<sup>2</sup>

## 5

Let's step back. What is the point of an AJ? What should it be? To **justify**; that is, establish whether (to what extent) a given conclusion is true (warranted by reasons/evidence.) The point Carnegie is making by his anti-argument argument might be expanded and summarized — a bit provocatively — as follows: people don't care about that thing AJ's are good for. People want to know **that** they are right, which is not at all the same as wondering **whether** they are. Or it's just a game for them. The debater's motto: **my conclusion, right or wrong**. This seems like a very cynical view of what people are up to when they are apparently trading reasons to believe. But it would be hard — pointless — to deny that there is a good deal of truth to it. But is it the whole truth?

Hardly. Scientists construct arguments, to justify theories and claims. Nothing Carnegie says about "avoiding argument as you would rattlesnakes and earthquakes" could apply to working scientists. "Real salesmanship isn't argument." This fails to consider the (surely obvious) possibility that there might be cases of argument that aren't supposed to constitute acts of salesmanship. Carnegie seems to have forgotten that sometimes people make arguments in order to figure stuff out. Furthermore, if we are so worried about personal rivalries and squabbles over beliefs-as-property, it is worth pointing out that scientific

discoveries — truths about the world, valid arguments, sound theories — are paradigm cases of what economists call 'non-rivalrous goods'. Once you've got them, everyone can share in the goodness.

We needn't rake Carnegie over the logical coals, forcing him to concede this logical point. He will surely grant it. He is in favor of science, always adopting a respectful tone when he mentions famous scientists by name. He doesn't think science is just egghead nonsense. So why did he formulate his conclusion too broadly?



2 Dale Carnegie, *The Quick and Easy Way to Effective Speaking* (Pocket Books, 1962), p. 139,140.



Probably Carnegie would reply that no one is going to mistake a book called **How To Win Friends and Influence People** for a treatise on scientific method. There is no danger that he will corrupt scientific youth into not bothering with all that 'knowing what you are doing' stuff. The need for competence at whatever you do is a truth that needs no reinforcement. Yes, there are incompetent people, but no one thinks that's good, **per se**. By contrast, there really are people who want to develop better 'people skills', who think speech and debate might be a good way to do that. They aren't wrong. Confidence is key. Being able to speak effectively to groups is necessary for anyone who aspires to be any sort of leader. But these people need reminding that aggressive habits they may have, that may be reinforced in the process of confidence-building, are bad, producing results the opposite of what we really want. In short: don't argue with everyone!

So if we will just read Carnegie's anti-argument argument as aimed at the type of reader it is aimed at — aspiring sellers/leaders who might take speech-and-debate tactics a bit too far — all will be well. This makes a lot of sense. But some pieces still don't fit. Carnegie says he is "ashamed" he once thought of writing about "logic and argumentation." Carnegie is almost never rude — disdainful, dismissive. But here he is, rude to all the world's logicians. Why go so far out of his way to drag them into his seminar on salesmanship, just to (falsely) accuse them of being bad salesmen? The fact that Carnegie doesn't actually think there is anything shameful about being a scientist or technical professional only makes this more mysterious. Where's the harm in teaching what you yourself admit is necessary? Pushing the point: it's not as though there's a bright line, or even a gray line, between **those** people — the ones who need to be able to think things through — and regular folks. As Carnegie himself emphasizes, a key ingredient of personal success, whatever you do, is cultivating the capacity to stand back, to reflect and analyze in a detached, objective, moderately impersonal manner.

Everyone needs to be a little bit of a scientist, at least some of the time.

**You**, for example!

You have a **problem**! (It's like you've known me all my life, you cry!)

What should you do? Stop wasting nervous energy, for starters. Tossing and turning all night is not the way. State exactly what the problem is. What's the worst that could happen? Good. Now suppose it does. How bad is that? It's probably not the end of the world. Once you've seen that life will go on ... life can go on. But we don't want the worst to happen, do we? Now that we've calmed ourselves down a little: how do we ward off the worst

case? Break the problem down. Figure out what you want. Assemble the facts. Settle on a course. Pursue it. If you are wrong, you're wrong, but at least you've done your best. Agonizing more wouldn't have made it any better.

This is all common sense, certainly not rocket science (however hard it is to remember that at 3 AM.) Instead of worrying, think it through. But that might as well be: argue. Arguing just **is** thinking through. **Stop worrying and start arguing.**

Why didn't Carnegie write a book with that title, instead of peddling this anti-argument argument nonsense? At this point Carnegie might want to wipe the 'argument' slate clean, if we are just going to get hopelessly hung up on this one word. In **How To Stop Worrying and Start Living** he has a chapter about "How to eliminate fifty percent of your business worries." In **Win Friends** he makes a related point: "Dealing with people is probably the biggest problem you face, especially if you are in business. Yes, and this is true if you are a housewife, architect or engineer." He cites research suggesting that, even in technical fields, "about 15 percent of one's financial success is due to one's technical knowledge and about 85 percent is due to skill in human engineering — to personality and the ability to lead people" (xiv).

I don't know about those numbers. But let's grant for the sake of argument (that word again!) that there's plausibility to it. It just goes to show, **not** that we can separate people into 50/50 or 85/15 piles — persuasion professionals vs. people who need to understand what's going on; rather, that we can't. There are times when everyone needs to be both reasonable and persuasive. That's fair enough. But everyone needs persuasion more than reason? We're going to need an argument!

## 6

Let's try this. You might assume some of Carnegie's books are for everyone who wants to lead a happy life — that is, everyone. Others, like **Win Friends** and **The Quick and Easy Way To Effective Speaking**, are for 'persuasion professionals', i.e. sales and marketing people, leaders; those whose job is to stand in front, bringing others around to their way of thinking. But Carnegie would say that's not right. When he says arguing isn't salesmanship he's **not** just advising the marketing department. Success in life **is** salesmanship. The products may not be literal goods for sale. But life is a matter of getting people to buy **your** goods. What **you** think is good. Your first good is **you**! You want your life to be worth something. How do you propose to drive the price up and keep it up?

But why buy **that**? Maybe even the most rational philosophers, with their elaborate arguments, can be viewed as bringing their goods to the market of ideas (their Form of the Good, in Plato's case). But it doesn't follow that selling is all there is to it. Or that selling is the stage of the process that demands most care. As if writing a good book were the incidental part, marketing it the only truly deep, essential problem. (Who would buy a book, let alone write one, if everyone thought that way?) Also, in shifting ground like this, we appear to have gotten ourselves completely turned around.

At first it made sense to denounce argument, even though scientists need it, because Carnegie was addressing salespeople, not scientists. Now it turns out the real reason it made sense to denounce argument, even though scientists need it, is that everyone is mostly a salesperson, including the scientists. So which is it? Do we need two senses of 'salesperson', to go with our two senses of 'argument'? Two senses of 'scientist'?

## 7

Back to the drawing board! At the start of **Stop Worrying** Carnegie quotes the French thinker, Paul Valéry. "Science is a collection of successful recipes."

That's an interesting thought.

Valéry is hinting that science is both broader and shallower than we may tend to assume. It's broad in that there is no sharp division between scientific activities and more everyday ones. It's shallow in that the reason why it's broad is that Plato's picture of science (see Chapter 3) is exactly wrong: science is **not** a special form of cognition distinguished by its concern with a special class of objects or truths outside of the realm of ordinary experience.

This isn't **just** Plato's picture, please note. There's something Platonic about the popular stereotype of the scientist as solitary brainstormer who ascends into rarified, exclusive realms of ideas, or digs deep down, to grasp and pull up hidden truths by the roots.

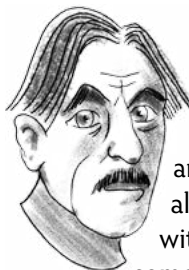
This stock image of the Nutty Professor, brilliantly out of touch with everyday life, can do double-duty as a paradigm of science itself. Not every scientist is Einstein, but they must all be like him in some essential way.

Conclusion: science is a special, highly distinctive, non-ordinary way of knowing.

Ergo, a scientist is **not** just a jumped-up cook!







No (Valéry will reply), science is a knack, a trade you pick up, hanging around others who picked it up by hanging around others, back to their fathers' fathers (like any trade.)

The scientific method is a grab bag of what has worked and will, presumably, continue to do so — until it doesn't, which also happens. Success in science is a matter of messing about with what you think you know until, if you are lucky, you hit on something new. Then in the bag it goes.

Let's subdivide this point. (Please note: we aren't saying it is right, only worth thinking about.) The science we know consists of reproducible results. If it's not reproducible, it's not science. But if it **is** reproducible, it's a recipe. The science we don't know consists of things out there on the frontiers of discovery and invention. They aren't science yet (otherwise they wouldn't be out there, they'd be in here.) Discovery/invention is experience, guesswork, tinkering, a pinch of **a-ha!**, a lot of sniffing around what's promising and turning up one's nose at what isn't, and a dollop of dumb luck. This isn't a recipe because it isn't **even** a recipe. (It should be so lucky!)

Maybe this gives us some sense as to why reason — "logic and argument" — could turn out to be less important than we might have thought, even in science. But, then again: no. The point isn't that scientists don't need to know what they're doing, but that the nature of their knowledge might turn out to be different than thinkers like Plato dreamed. Humbler, perhaps. But that still doesn't make persuasion the key. It makes no more sense for a cook to read Carnegie than a scientist, seemingly. It's not as though you can persuade that burnt dinner to un-burn itself by making friends with it — no more so than you can flatter a refuted theory into un-refuting itself.

Why **does** Carnegie quote Valéry? First, he wants to emphasize what he teaches is as 'scientific' as anything. Because it works! Carnegie's results are, he claims, reproducible. But now we've gotten turned around again. First, salespeople were not scientists, different species entirely. Next, scientists were just a species of the salesperson genus. Now, salespeople are sprouting up a species of scientist. So which is it?

Here's a clue. Carnegie admits — emphasizes — that none of his recipes are new. We hereby arrive at the rather comforting thought that we can all be great scientists, not without difficulty, but without special **intellectual** difficulty. Great science can just be obvious stuff we already know. From the introduction to **Stop Worrying**:

You and I don't need to be told anything new. We already know enough to lead perfect lives. We have all read the golden rule and the Sermon on the Mount. Our trouble is not ignorance, but inaction. (xx)



**We know enough to lead perfect lives!** Think about that. Do you think the man is right? (Half right? Has he got a point?) Is this fortune cookie foolishness. Plain common sense? Or a bizarre paradox that undermines our cherished assumptions about the value of knowledge? Is it comforting? Vaguely depressing? (Both, on alternate days?) Will this thought inspire you to get up and go, or make you lazy and complacent? Are Carnegie's claims crude on the outside but golden on the inside? Or golden on the outside, crude on the inside?

Let's crack the case, best we can. Carnegie is compressing at least three levels of argument to the conclusion that argument is — not useless (we've seen that's too strong.) Better: **minimally** useful.

Let's go back to assuming you've got a problem. You need to stop worrying (as opposed to thinking.) I could prove it, from premises you would accept. But it's not intellectually difficult to grasp that tossing and turning all night, to no good end, wastes energy. So you need to undergo a serious mental shift, get your head on straight. Turn your gaze away from those nervous shadows on the black cave wall of worry. The thing casting those shadows is your problem. Turn around and face it. Then crawl up past it to the sunlit world of effective action — Life itself! The Good!

And yet: this spiritual shift, migration from the cave into the light, will only amount to reminding yourself of what you always knew, all along! Intellectually, it's trivial.

Don't tell me my problems aren't serious! I didn't say that. Intellectually, it's trivial. First, it's interpersonal. (How did I know? There's no trick. Unless it's medical, most problems are interpersonal.) Now that you have stopped worrying, have seen your problem for what it is, you should basically know what to do. Don't yell at them, recriminate or fling abuse. Put down **Stop Worrying** and pick up **Win Friends**. The best way to deal with enemies is to eliminate them. Make friends.

How do you do that? Don't nurse grievances or hold grudges. Don't hate. Such things don't pay. Turn the other cheek. Judge not, lest ye be judged. See from the other fellow's point of view. Now: do the right thing. (Wasn't that easy?)

Was that really three levels into one? Yes. 1) Turn worries into problems; 2) think it through; 3 do the right thing.

Carnegie runs the three together because the basic techniques are the same at each level: our habits, analytical methods, the practical steps we take. These are aspects of the same basic, simple, known-it-all-along truths. The Golden Rule — harmonious reciprocity — goes a long way toward stopping worry. It disciplines you to step back from yourself. It is also an analytical tool, because empathy — seeing from the other fellow's point of view — is a crucial source of facts you need to understand problem situations. (Why is this person not doing what I want?) Then, with the facts in, the proper response is probably a straightforward application of the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. The customer is always right because I am always right.

The Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount aren't usually shelved with all those other bright, glossy sales and marketing pamphlets in the self-help and success sections. But for Carnegie these moral teachings amount to timeless techniques for closing (as the salesmen say.) Of course, they should not be seen as **mere** marketing gimmicks. Carnegie is not setting out to trivialize some of the deepest ethical wisdom the world's great religions and cultures and civilizations can provide. He's doing his best to move in the opposite direction. You basically have to spend your life selling yourself, if nothing else. Find some way to make salesmanship a rich, full, satisfying, career ethos. If this is life, philosophize it!

And please note: Carnegie isn't just giving advice for dealing with **other** difficult people. Some of the most difficult people are **me**. Techniques for interpersonal closing are techniques for intrapersonal closure.

Stop worrying and start living!

8

But isn't all this just utterly, perfectly ridiculous? Nobody thinks a statue of Carnegie gets to sit up there on the Great Sage shelf next to that bust of Socrates. (Maybe Valéry gets to go there? He kept getting nominated for the Nobel Prize, although he never won.) Successful self-help author, sure. Great Philosopher?



But what higher form of philosophy could there be than successful self-help? Yes, but there's a world of difference between helping yourself by selling a ton of books and **truly** being successful at 'self-helping' others (whatever you call it when people help people help themselves).

Are you saying "stop worrying and start living" is bad advice? Carnegie's books have nothing helpful to say on the subject?

Well, no... But pretty much only the sales and marketing people seem to like him much. Isn't that sort of a bad sign? Put it like this: to 'win friends' (that's Carnegie's game) is to treat **people** like **things**, like pawns. We say of a selfish personality: he's a **user**. Stay away from people like that! To teach someone to be more like that? That sounds like teaching bad people to be worse. To earn money selling books that make bad people worse sounds like one of the worst things you could do with your life. Dale Carnegie is a salesman. Salespeople are manipulative. They play on our emotions, mess with our heads, nudge us toward the shelf with the things **they** want us to buy. At best, this is annoying; at worst, enraging. What if everyone were like that?



Surely the fact that Carnegie is a user who teaches people to be users should be Carnegie's secret shame, not that he once liked logic.

But here comes Carnegie's predictable — blandly sensible, folksy — reply. Look here, friend! Nothing wrong with making friends! That doesn't mean molding them like clay in your hands. Of course it's an affair of emotion, not reason. (You want life to be an affair of pure reason?) If your dear wife asks whether she looks alright, and you think her dress is not so nice, but it's too late for her to change, the correct thing to say is 'dear, you look lovely!' That's not mind-control or disrespect. Complimenting your wife, on appropriate occasions, is a time-tested recipe for reproducibly pleasant results. Marital science in action!

But surely there's more to life than telling white lies in trivial social settings!

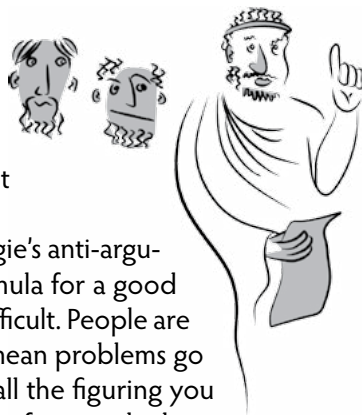
You think a happy marriage is a trivial setting? Making 'reciprocity' your watchword makes you some moral monster?

— Well ... no.

What's the problem?

— That's it! You don't seem to see real problems! Social justice! Politics! Nothing wrong with being an agreeable, empathic person. But suppose two customers are in a heated argument. Are they **both** right, just because 'the customer is always right?' How can you say 'no!' when the time comes, if you only say 'yes' to everyone?

But Carnegie has a reply. Take these two fighting customers (if they interest you so much.) Either they are reasonable people, in which case we should emphasize the ways in which they are both potentially right. Or at least one isn't reasonable. If so, all the more reason not to bother trying to reason with him.



We should call the police, or the hospital, or just ask him to leave. Maybe you can't smooth the world's troubles away by making friends. But for sure you can't **refute** the world's troubles!

Now, I think, we are near the core of Carnegie's anti-argument outlook on life. Life is hard, but the formula for a good life, insofar as there is one, isn't intellectually difficult. People are people. Of course, saying it like that doesn't mean problems go away. But figuring out what you should do — all the figuring you **can** do — is mostly a matter of keeping in mind a few simple things everyone already knows but most forget just when it matters most.

Man is the animal who forgets what kind of an animal man is. We're so smart we're dumb like that. What about all the genuine technical problems, above and beyond that? Here an important qualification is necessary. If you have good people skills you can procure the technical assistance you need. On the other hand, if all you have is technical specialization in some area, that won't be sufficient. That area, whatever it is, isn't Life. But you've got your life to live! Conclusion: people skills are the only true master skills. They travel across all fields, applying equally in public and private. Everywhere you go, those at the top — those who are successful, happy — have these skills.

If specializing in Life is what philosophy aims at, the true philosophers are the 'people people' — which is to say, the salespeople.

## 9

I think we have pulled up the root of Carnegie's hostility to "logic and argumentation." He wouldn't object to contributions to any other technical field; wouldn't be ashamed of having thought of writing a chemistry textbook, for example. But logic and argumentation, unlike chemistry, seems to hold out the promise of **technical achievement that is also completely general**. Logic and argument is about everything, so if it breeds success, it breeds success at **everything**. This is a mistake. Good human relations skills — nothing else! — afford that sort of general leg-up. Logic's domain of use is narrower.

But don't you need logic and argumentation wherever you go? (Haven't we gone over this already?) Yes, but only an ordinary, healthy capacity for thinking through — nothing so fancy that you might need a book on the subject. True, you can be a persuasive fool and a failure, but those who are persuasive successes do not succeed through superfine capacity for logic-chopping, let alone through technical training in that sort of thing.

How do we **know** that? We know it because (write this down!) **we know that we already know everything we need to lead perfect lives!** But everything isn't perfect, is it? Look around! Ergo, we've got a leadership gap to fill, not a knowledge gap. We need to work on our persuasion skills — people skills.

But do we know this thing Dale Carnegie is sure we **know** — about knowing everything that we need to know, that is? Let me put it less confusingly (although it is educational to see the number of times you need to keep saying 'know' to gauge Carnegie's indifference to the value of knowledge.) Let me also remind you how we got off on this tangent. The puzzle was this: why doesn't anybody listen to Socrates? As Alcibiades says: at first everyone thinks his arguments look like ugly toys. As Adeimantus says: when Socrates refutes people, they feel it is just a game. They may be amused or annoyed, but it never crosses their minds to **change** their minds. Why not?

In part, the explanation must be the one Carnegie offers in the passage I quoted. People are proud, don't like to lose, don't like feeling forced. But that can't be the whole story. When people lose at chess they don't refuse to admit it, even if they don't like it. At least some of the rest of the story seems to have to do with other things Carnegie hints at as well. How could I (of all people!) be wrong — how could it all fall apart for me — at a basic conceptual level, when it comes my wise thoughts on **justice, virtue, or holiness**? It just doesn't seem possible that any mere mousetrap of an 'if you accept A and B you must give up C or D' technical combination could trap me (**me**, of all people!) where ethical questions are concerned. But why not?

Because **I already know it all**, at least right from wrong. There can't be intellectual surprises in this area. So the more devastating my dialectical defeat at Socrates' hands, the less plausible defeat seems, quite apart from my bruised pride.

## 10

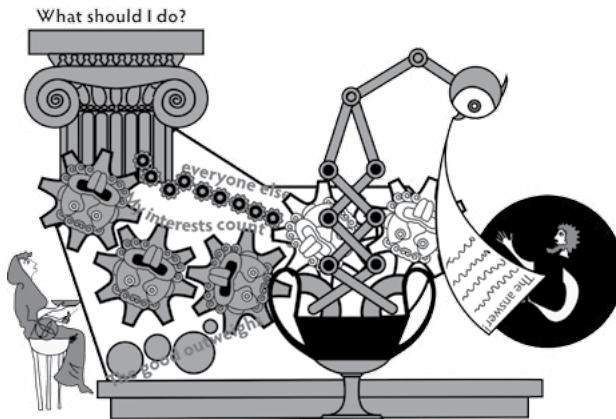
Furthermore — here we make a significant, sudden shift: new idea strides onstage! — **no one knows about this stuff anyway**. The human mind isn't built for it, or maybe it's the world. Human affairs are too rough yet subtle — too complex, contextual and ... plain **practical** for any of these toy arguments to have force. The fact that Socrates acts as though it is possible to know it all, tidying up life like a geometrical diagram, shows he can't know a damn thing about it.

Where did this new thought come from, all of a sudden? **No one knows?** Is that supposed to follow from other stuff? — because it sounds as though

it doesn't follow at all. Surely Plato/Socrates can't be wrong **both** because we already know it all about Life, **and** because no one really knows anything.

No, that doesn't sound quite right. Still, despite the fact that these thoughts don't seem to fit, they work together very effectively to preclude serious consideration of, so to speak, technical possibilities.

What does that mean? Technical matters are things I can be ignorant of and/or wrong about. There can be experts who know a lot better than I do, to whose judgment I am happy to defer, and even pay for the privilege. This could be anything from shoemaking to nuclear physics. But (to repeat): I can't be completely ignorant of, or completely wrong about, ethics — the meaning of life; basic questions of how I should live. Also, life problems never get solved to three significant decimal places. Conclusion: ethics can't be technical.



What does Plato think? Perhaps the opposite, all down the line. We certainly do **not** know enough to lead perfect lives. We might be capable of coming to know enough to lead perfect lives, at least better ones than we are leading — but only if we can bring ourselves to admit we don't know **yet**. And only if we can bring ourselves to admit that the move from ignorance to knowledge may very well be technical. Or, if that makes it sound too much like we need to build a machine: ethics may be crucially a matter of **thinking through**, using logic and argument — those things Carnegie is ashamed of — to look for potentially surprising answers to our questions about life, about everything.

Alcibiades marvels that Socrates is unlike anyone who came before. His arguments, too. And yet: maybe nothing else makes sense. Plato wants to urge this as at least a possible view, not just of his teacher but of ethics generally — of philosophy generally. Carnegie emphasizes the Golden Rule. Maybe



it doesn't make much sense to hypothesize that the Golden Rule could be just plain wrong. Still, perhaps Golden Rule 1.0 is best regarded as a buggy beta. It might well need upgrading to Golden Rule 2.0, a more stable application — less liable to crash.

## 11

Why write philosophy as a cross between a play and a problem set with no answer key? My answer, in a nutshell, is that the dialogue form allows Plato to construct arguments (in the justification sense) while considering what arguments (in the fighting monkey sense) are like; how they go. How do these levels interact? What happens when (transcendent, angelic, robot-like) logic crash-lands onto primate anthropologic?

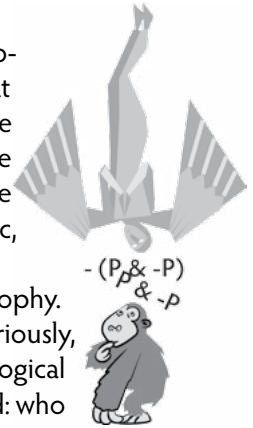
There may be no more serious question in all of philosophy.

The way to read Plato is, simply: take the arguments seriously, in the abstract logic and argumentation **and** the anthropological senses. But this advice isn't easy to follow. So answer instead: who do you agree with? Who do you trust? Plato or Dale Carnegie?

I don't mean to set up Carnegie as a straw man, as if obviously the great Plato must be the wise one and your job is to see that. Most people think more like Carnegie. Most people might be right. It's not as though Carnegie lacks for sensible-seeming things to say about dealing with difficult people and disciplining yourself to stop worrying in unhelpful ways. I also don't mean to set up Plato and Carnegie as though they are the only two philosophers who have ever lived. What is important to see is what a deep problem the likes of Carnegie poses for Plato. The Carnegies of the world may be what



drives Plato to compose these odd hybrids of pure abstraction and human drama: **dialogues**. Plato wants to argue with (and exhibit what it is like to argue with) people who are not just skeptical about the merits of his arguments but are fundamentally — yet oddly intermittently — skeptical about the merits of argument itself. Yet inclined to argue!



## 12

Let's step back for a second look at that strange new thought that occurred a moment ago. Where did 'no one knows anything' pop up from, all of a sudden? Let me finish out this chapter by answering that question, which may help the reader think about who is more right, Plato or Carnegie.



Let's turn back to the point where the following objection was made to Carnegie: you don't seem to see **real** problems. 'Be agreeable' is good advice but doesn't, in itself, answer anything. 'Stop worrying, analyze, then do the right thing' is not a formula for figuring out what the right thing is. At best, you've cleared a space for thinking, but you haven't filled it. And you seem strangely hostile to any attempts to fill it, theoretically. Why is that?

What does an ethical problem look like, theoretically?

Problems in ethical theory are often made vivid, particularly in introduction to philosophy classes, as hypothetical dilemmas. To take a classic example (due originally to a philosopher named Philippa Foot):

A trolley car is out of control. In its path are five people who will be killed unless you throw a switch, sending the trolley down a different track where, unfortunately, another person — but only one — is sure to be killed. What should you do?

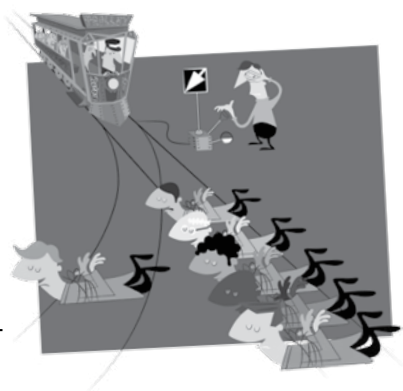
There is no Carnegiesque solution. Oh yes, it's a 'people problem', if you want to call it that; but not one that can be smoothed by people skills or salved by advice to avoid worry.

What factors are we forced to weigh and balance in such a case? On the one hand, it seems reasonable that the good of the many should outweigh the good of the few. So I should throw the switch. On the other hand, it seems categorically wrong to kill. Perhaps letting five die, doing nothing, is more permissible than actively killing one, even if the results are worse, absolutely? So I shouldn't throw the switch. But how can it be better to act in a way that produces worse results overall? So I should throw the switch. But how can I possibly have the right, and authority, to decide who lives and who dies? So I shouldn't throw the switch.

Theoretically, the 'you should count consequences and act to maximize the good' view is **consequentialism** (also called utilitarianism.) The alternative theoretical stance that you have (or might have) absolutely strict duties, perhaps including a duty not to kill, is known as **deontology** (from a Greek root that basically means **that which is binding**; hence, duty.)

So which theory is right?

That is the signal for the trolley car of ethical theory to leave the station! It rattles and puffs down the tracks — should/shouldn't/should/shouldn't. We



don't know which track it will end up on. We hope it doesn't just go round and round forever.

But in any case, Carnegie has failed to catch the train of thought. He has nothing to contribute to ethical theory in this sense.

Shouldn't he have at least something to say?

Before hearing Carnegie's reply, let's push another objection against him. Carnegie obviously thinks the 'human engineering' skills he teaches are basically non-technical. That's what makes these skills so marvelously portable. For example, you can be the leader of a team of technicians without having to understand all that stuff yourself.

This is already problematic: how can you know better than a group of experts how to do their jobs unless you at least **know** how to do their jobs? But let's grant there might be some sense to the notion that leaders lead **people**. If you are heading up a team of engineers, constructing a bridge, you don't have to know how to build a bridge yourself, without having it fall down. You only have to know how to hold a team together, without it falling apart. You need to understand engineers, not engineering. There might even be some Socratic table-turning at this point: the secret of leadership is being wise in ignorance.

But aren't people complicated? Don't they have lots of twitchy, moving parts that easily get out of balance and proper alignment? Isn't an engineer who can build a bridge that won't fall down at least as complicated as the bridge he builds, only in a different way? So management — leadership — must be technical, since it's about a complex subject matter. And you, Mr. Manager-Leader, whichever it is: you are people, too! Mustn't management be **self**-management, in the first place, hence self-knowledge? Mustn't **that** be technical, given the complexity of the subject? Shouldn't we expect a lot of crucial logic and argumentation to come first about what parts make up a person, how they should interrelate and function? This **can't** be common sense. It's obviously **not obvious** how people work. You have a book titled **The Leader In You**. But there's a little scientist in me, too. I'm not **sure** I shouldn't be trying to grow him instead of the leader — or in addition.

Either Carnegie really has some theory about how people work, in which case he should argue for it. Or he doesn't, in which case it's hard to take him seriously as a practical expert on 'people skills', since he isn't obviously a qualified technical expert on people.



Let me give what I think would be the Dale Carnegie response to both challenges, which is really very simple.

These philosophers, with their toy train sets, toy people tied to toy tracks, and little toy switches you can throw! It's like they think philosophy should be a book entitled **How To Start Worrying Without Starting Living**.

Either you really have to throw switches like that or you don't. If you don't, it's a game. Play as you like, so long as you don't take it too seriously. But if you have to throw real switches, toys don't help. Of course we know life is full of dilemmas. In **Stop Worrying**, I discuss cases of military leaders called upon to make awful decisions. Here is Admiral Ernest J. King, of the US Navy, during World War II. "I have supplied the best men with the best equipment we have and have given them what seems to be the wisest mission. That is all I can do. If a ship has been sunk, I can't bring it up. If it is going to be sunk, I can't stop it. I can use my time much better working on tomorrow's problem than by fretting about yesterday's. Besides, if I let those things get me, I wouldn't last long" (6). **There's** the solution to your toy trolley problem. Do what seems wisest.

King, behind his desk, had to deal with any number of highly technical problems — equipment, intelligence, logistics, politics, and the enemy was no push-over either. Mostly he delegated technical problems to 'the best men', and rightly. Equally surely, he faced any number of ethical dilemmas: what should I do with these lives in my hands? That doesn't mean he faced, let alone attempted to solve, technical ethical problems.

Is it 'right' to send one ship on a suicide mission in the hopes of saving that convoy of five? That's harder even than the trolley problem because there are no pat, story-problem guarantees. You might lose all six.

If you pick up a book of academic moral theory, selling some consequentialist or deontological set of principles, some moral mathematics, you'll prob-

ably just doze off. The alternative is worse. You'll worry yourself sicker, when you might have done something useful. If you don't succeed in worrying yourself sicker, even with all that ethical theory weighing on your stomach, that just goes to show that these toy arguments are nothing even you yourself take too seriously. You might as well have worked the crossword puzzle, if you like word games so much.'





14

We can generalize this point and thereby respond to the second criticism as well. The way the admiral commands his ships is the way you should command **your** ship — that is to say, your soul. Carnegie opens **Stop Worrying** by quoting Sir William Osler (founder, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine; Regius Professor at Oxford; knighted by the King of England; subject of a 1466 page biography.) What words did Osler live by? “Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.” That’s Thomas Carlyle. Carnegie proceeds to quote Osler himself from a speech delivered before a crowd of young male aristocrats who would one day be prominent public men and leaders of the **polis** — that is, Yale undergraduates. Osler tells them what they need to know to be as successful as he has been. He begins by confessing, cheerfully, that he has brains of “no special quality,” of “only the most mediocre character.” Scratch **that** bright idea about how to get ahead!

What is Osler’s secret? He calls upon his experience crossing the Atlantic in a magnificent ocean liner. The captain has a control panel with buttons that seal sections of the ship off from others, in case of flood. Osler turns this into what we might call (in a Platonic mood) The Myth of Ship and Soul:

Now each one of you is a much more marvelous organization than the great liner, and bound on a longer voyage. What I urge is that you so learn to control the machinery as to live in ‘day-tight compartments’ as the most certain way to ensure safety on the voyage. Get on the bridge, and see that at least the great bulkheads are in working order. Touch a button and hear, at every level of your life, the iron doors shutting out the Past — the dead yesterdays. Touch another and shut off, with a metal curtain, the Future — the unborn tomorrows. Then you are safe — safe for today! ... Shut off the past! Let the dead past bury its dead ... Shut out the yesterdays which have lighted fools the way to dusty death ... The load of tomorrow, added to that of yesterday, carried today, makes the strongest falter. Shut off the future as tightly as the past ... The future is today ... There is no tomorrow. The day of man’s salvation is now. Waste of energy, mental distress, nervous worries dog the steps of a man who is anxious about the future ... Shut closed, then, the great fore and aft bulkheads, and prepare to cultivate the habit of a life of ‘day-tight compartments’. (4)



This is a mixed metaphor, but richly mixed. The ship is your life and your person and your world. You have to avoid looking too far outside yourself — forward or back in time, presumably not too far around you in space either. No more than necessary. But you also have to avoid prodding too deeply **inside**.

Where Socrates teaches that the unexamined life is not worth living, Osler teaches that the examined life is practically unlivable. Where Plato proposes that philosophy means broad analysis of the whole **polis** — the whole political, social order — complemented by rational examination of all parts of the soul, the better to manage and harmonize self and society, Osler teaches that this sort of examination is probably unmanageable therefore positively hazardous. You are better off **not** knowing what is sloshing around in the bilge of your soul. You probably couldn't do much about it.

So the only switch you should worry about in the trolley case is the one that keeps you from feeling bad about whichever switch you throw?

That's it?

Is Osler selling a glib, shallow, know-nothing philosophy?



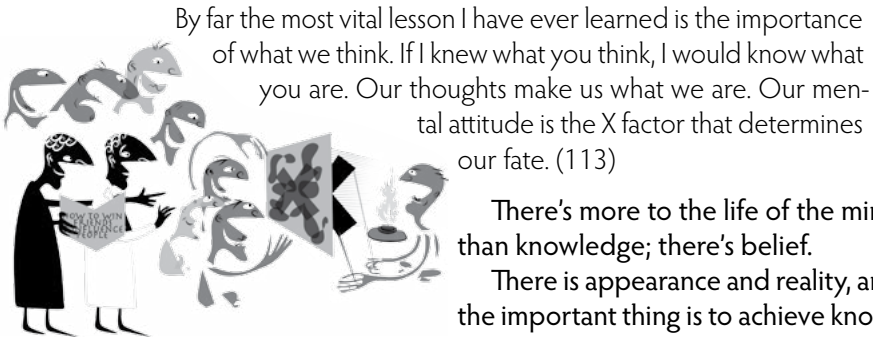
In case it isn't obvious, I don't think it is so **obviously** bad. Osler, like many an eminent medical man before him, going back to the ancient Greeks, is a skeptic. That means he thinks the deepest wisdom consists in realizing that our knowledge is limited, and appreciating those limits, respecting and living within them. Really **knowing** you don't know is important information (lack-of-news you can use!) This **is** a Socratic view in its way. **Know yourself**, advises Socrates. Plato wants us to achieve that by escaping from the Cave. Osler and Carnegie want us to achieve that by getting us to embrace our natures as natural-born troglodytes — day-tight compartment dwellers.

Doing so has at least two advantages. First, if it really is impossible for us to leave the Cave, because that would mean becoming different than we essentially are, knowledge-wise, then trying is a waste of energy. Second, the cave-dweller who sees he is in the Cave has the advantage over his fellows. Here again, this sounds like living a life of fooling our fellow cave-dwellers. And it may be. But it needn't be. At any rate, it isn't **just** about that.

We've turned Carnegie around a few times already. Here we go, one last go-round.

## 15

I quoted this earlier: "You and I don't need to be told anything new . . . Our trouble is not ignorance, but inaction." That makes it sound as though that is a philosophy of action, as opposed to thinking. But in a sense the opposite is the case. When asked "what is the biggest lesson you have ever learned," Carnegie's answer is as follows:



By far the most vital lesson I have ever learned is the importance of what we think. If I knew what you think, I would know what you are. Our thoughts make us what we are. Our mental attitude is the X factor that determines our fate. (113)

There's more to the life of the mind than knowledge; there's belief.

There is appearance and reality, and the important thing is to achieve knowledge — of appearance.

Notice how, in an odd way, we are reintroducing that strange division we met with in Plato's Cave. Somehow the objects of belief and the objects of knowledge aren't even the same objects. You can't study the way things are, but you can study how they seem. You can gauge what effect the show is having on the audience. Carnegie titles this chapter of his book "eight words that can transform your life." He quotes them from the Roman stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius: "Our life is what our thoughts make it." If we think happy thoughts, we will be happy. If we think failure, we will fail. He quotes Norman Vincent Peale: "You are not what you think you are; but what you **think**, you are." He then anticipates the objection that this is absurdly optimistic, as if wishing makes it so. He replies that he knows this doesn't make life easy. Still, a positive attitude is the single most valuable character trait you can cultivate. He goes so far as to quote, approvingly, Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science: "I gained the scientific certainty that all causation was Mind, and every effect a mental phenomenon."

## 16

At this point we have left common sense a good distance behind us (but somehow that always happens when you try to say what common sense comes to.) In the process of trying to move as far away as we can from the Platonic idea that we need to solve for X



in some realm of Mind, we seem to have arrived back at the view that we are stuck in an X-factor realm of Mind. Let's be ancient Greek about it. Let X = Xenophanes, a 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE poet and thinker, best known as a critic of popular religion. He remarks that, for some strange reason, the Greeks think the gods look and dress like Greeks, whereas Ethiopians think they look like Ethiopians. The Thracians imagine them looking and talking rather like Thracians.



Xenophanes concludes: if horses and oxen had hands and could draw, they would represent the gods as looking like horses and oxen. As the sophist Protagoras puts it: "Man is the measure of all things."

If so, people skills are the **practical** measure of all things. Things that matter to us, anyway.

If, on the other hand, you were to take mathematics for the measure of all things — of ethics, say, or religion — you would only succeed in depriving yourself of self-knowledge (the very thing you were most concerned to acquire!) You won't see your own face in the mirror of your every thought. But only because you have blinded yourself! In seeking to abstract away, purely, from the human element, you only make ethics a pure game. Verbal coins are not genuine currency unless stamped with a human face.

So what are human faces like?

Each is different, and they have many moods and expressions. Plato often strikes readers as insensitive to the anthropocentric, relative, situational, case-by-case character of ethical problems. Philosophy is about Life! Life is a grey business. There is a reason Aristophanes titles his play about Socrates **The Clouds**. In the play, the Clouds are a chorus of goddesses, but **you** know what clouds are like: everyone sees something different. (That one looks like a cow, no, a fish, no, a man in profile!) Nothing stands still. But if this is the foundation of our philosophy, something else follows. To be Xenophanic about ethics is to be a Heraclitean. Since "man is the measure of all things," and men are always at odds, changeable, changing their minds, "opposites are always combining." In terms of Carnegie's formulation: if the thing you know about is **belief**, then the objects of your knowledge will be contradictory. They don't make sense, and they aren't really going to. So logic and argument are not much use.



But why think Plato misses this? Isn't the challenge posed by this view a big part of what the dialogues are about? Aren't they attempts to portray the dynamic fluidity of the drama of human thinking? Plato nods to the



Protagoras point in Book 5 of **Republic**: beautiful objects are ugly — from different perspectives, to different viewers. Holy things are also unholy. Just things also unjust — under different circumstances, from different points of view. Euthyphro says it is holy to prosecute his own father. But, by the terms of his definition, it is holy **and** unholy to do so. Cephalus (you'll meet him in **Republic**) says it is just to speak truth and pay your debts. But, Socrates points out, if it is a case of a friend who has gone mad, it wouldn't be just to give back the weapons he left with you. You should lie; say you don't have them any more, for his own good. So telling the truth is both just and unjust. Judgments of ethics are relational, relative, situational, perspectival — human.

Nothing appears to us as good at all unless it is part of this great but changeable river of human life. Might as well go with the flow. Plato doesn't buy it, but he gets why this would seem like an attractive, plausible view.

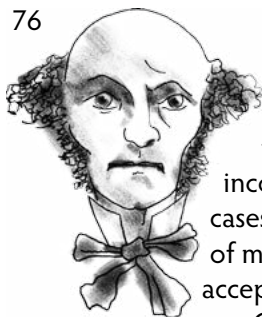


17

But is 'go with the flow' satisfactory? Take the admiral again: it is certainly implausible that some One True Solution can preserve him from ever doing the wrong thing. Still, it would be going too far the other way to deny he faces hard ethical dilemmas. The following argument is surely no good. P1: If there's no real solution, it can't be a problem. P2: There's no real solution. C: This admiral's got no problems! (He just needs to stop worrying!)

No, the admiral surely has to wrestle, painfully, with consequentialism vs. deontology, not necessarily under those seminar room headings, but in **some** way. He has to achieve good consequences; he probably thinks there are other things he must and can't do. Waging war itself needs to be justifiable or every individual decision about how to wage it might go down with the whole ship. There is no way wielding the power of life and death can fail to be ethically problematic. How can a Carnegiesque style of thinking admit this, while holding out against the Platonic view that real problems need real, rational (if not seminar-style) solutions? Let's try a different angle.





Confronted with any moderately complex ethical scenario, forced to justify a course of action in the most general terms, I can probably be convicted of inconsistency. I have my reasons, my rules. But in tough cases, and even in apparently easy ones, these principles of mine have a habit of implying things I am unwilling to accept — at which point I usually start sweeping under the rug. Consider a remark by John Stuart Mill, from Chapter 1 of his book, **On Liberty**:

The peculiarity of the evidence of mathematical truths is, that all the argument is on one side. There are no objections, and no answers to objections. But on every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons.

What sorts of other subjects would these be? Mill says: "Morals, religion, politics, social relations and the business of life." In **Euthyphro**, Socrates asks the title character what sorts of things even the gods fight about, and suggests a similar answer: "justice and injustice, beauty and ugliness, good and bad" (7d). Probably I should be ready to fight with even myself about this sort of stuff.

But now let us muster a bit of Platonic skepticism. "Balance of conflicting reasons" is just a polite way of saying **contradiction**. Combinations of opposites are contradictions; contradictions can't be true. So it **can't** be the case that the truth depends on a balance of conflicting reasons. What can't be true can't be real. This "business of life", at least as we live it, must be a kind of illusion. Not that there is no such thing as right, justice or religion! But what these really are is going to be different — different in **kind** — from what Mill takes them to be. Because something that necessarily **doesn't** make sense is different in kind from something that necessarily **does** make sense. Beneath the Heraclitean flux of Millian "conflicting reasons" there **must** be something solid. The fact that men like Carnegie and the admiral have an evident psychological need to build day-tight compartments shows they **feel** it.

'Merrily, merrily, life is but a dream' lasts until something **real** has punched through your hull below the waterline. Carnegie-style advice is good not because Plato is wrong but in case he's right. The unexamined course is not worth sailing. Not if you value your life.



In the last chapter I presented a metaphysically maximalist Platonism that involves strange commitments: Platonic forms. But perhaps there is a minimalist Platonism that is more negative — more Socratic? Plato just says: things have to make sense. If they don't, that means we're out of touch with reality, hence in danger of reality getting in touch with us, painfully. Applying this to ethics: either there is a **rational** method for resolving conflicting 'reasons' or there isn't. If there **is**, there can be no conflict, ultimately. If there **isn't**, then what is the point of reasoning about ethics or the business of life at all? There is no point even to 'balancing reasons' if the notion of balance isn't, at bottom, reasonable. This is just code for: say what you want.

To be sure, sometimes you are splitting the difference just to get the other side to come to the table. Negotiation isn't about absolute right or wrong, it's about what people will say 'yes' to. Carnegie is the King of Yes, so we can understand Mill's point in a Carnegiesque spirit. On the other hand, if you think it **ever** makes sense to argue about right and wrong, not as haggling, but because you want or need to figure out what the right thing to do **is**, then reflexively splitting the difference and muddling through can't be automatically right.

Can it? Reasoning about what I should think or do is not just a matter of haggling with **myself** about what I'm actually willing to think or do. Is it?

In thinking through ethical problems, we think through the implications of our beliefs. If we see an implication that doesn't make sense, we should take that as a sign that there is some submerged error in the sea of our mind. But if, in the end, not making sense is not an objection — it just comes down to 'balancing' — then in what sense can I reason about what I should do at all? What am I even **doing** when I reason about what to do, if I am allowed to contradict myself?



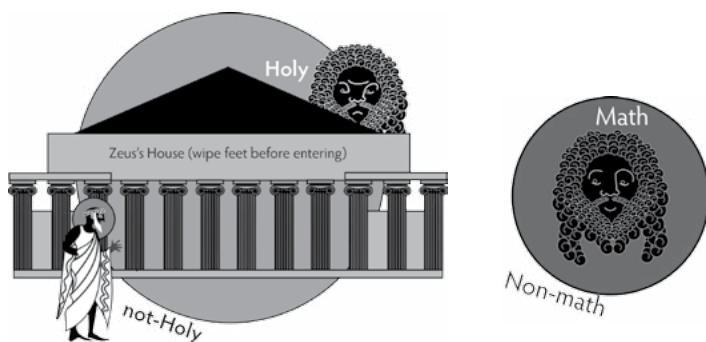
This chapter is supposed to be about how to read Plato. I said at the start of Chapter 1 that these dialogues are like a cross between a play and a problem set with no answer key. I think I have said enough about puppet theater by this point. In what sense could these dialogues be like problem sets?

We shouldn't neglect the obvious possibility: they are intended to be worked through by students. Speaking of Plato's Academy, what was it like? To a surprising extent, we have no idea. The author of rather a good book on the subject makes this basic point and remarks that, in the absence of reliable information, the mind plays its usual tricks.<sup>3</sup>

The English have figured out Plato's academy must have been like a proper English school. The French know it must have been rather French in spirit, and the Germans that it must have been impressively Germanic. And if oxen and horses had homework to do, they would no doubt have figured out that Plato's Academy was the original Cow College.

We have a few stories about Plato's Academy, passed down the centuries. So they say, at the door was an inscription, 'no non-geometers allowed'. A math prerequisite for higher education admissions is not so strange. Maybe this was just a way of saying: no non-arguers allowed. If you enter, you will be required to show your work, the steps leading to your conclusions.

That said, Plato **does** seem to over-value mathematics as a model. In our readings this is particularly clear in **Meno**, in which Socrates seems simply to assume in passing (85d) that **all** learning will be like the geometry lesson he conducts. There are also — though our ears don't hear them today — religious echoes in this formula. At the threshold of a sacred site, in Plato's day, you might read, 'let no unclean/unjust/uninitiated person enter.'



3 Cherniss, Harold F., *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (New York, Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 61-2.

We'll hear more about this when we get to **Euthyphro**. (The title character is worried dad has dirty hands.) But this only makes the 'no non-geometers' exclusion peculiar in a different way, by putting geometry on the same footing as religion and ethics, as if abstract proofs could be the source of the sorts of values and guidance people think religion and righteousness should provide.

Who thinks the purity of geometry could be **personally** purifying?

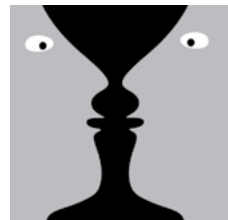
Let's combine this concern with another the reader may have been nurturing for some time. In section 10, I suggested, off-handedly, that maybe we need to upgrade from Golden Rule 1.0, which may be buggy and crash-prone, to the more stable platform of Golden Rule 2.0. But this sounds more like mockery than a sketch of a plausible program. How could 'do unto others as you would have them do to you' be buggy? It's so simple and obvious. Bugs hide in software that is maybe millions of lines of code long. There they have a place to hide.

But even one line can have thousands or millions of implications. Who knows what odd behaviors lurk in that undiscovered country? Also, there is a non-trivial question as to which is preferable, the Golden or instead the so-called Silver Rule: 'do **not** do unto others as you would **not** have them do to you.' Do you see how that might have quite different implications?

I could also point out that the Golden Rule is ambiguous. It articulates an impersonal value (perhaps expressible as an abstract right of all people to equal moral consideration.) It is also a compressed piece of self-interested practical advice: it's unwise to punch people in the nose because they are likely to react the way **you** would react if **you** were punched in the nose. That is wisdom even an immoralist — someone who doesn't care about right and wrong — can fully appreciate (assuming only that he dislikes being punched back.) So does the Golden Rule appeal to my self-interest or to my sense of impersonal duty? Both! (That's what makes it so golden. But gold isn't clear.) Does self-interest **always** track ethical duty, and vice versa? This issue will be explored in Plato's **Republic**, in particular.

Let me offer some final pictures that may serve to express the difference between Carnegie's and Plato's general approaches.

Do you see that negative space between the facing figures? Let's hope this effect produced by two people facing off (exchanging, arguing, persuading) is harmonious and balanced, because — to the extent that we are like these figures — that negative space comes to quite a lot: society, culture, politics, economics, war and peace. The world, in short.

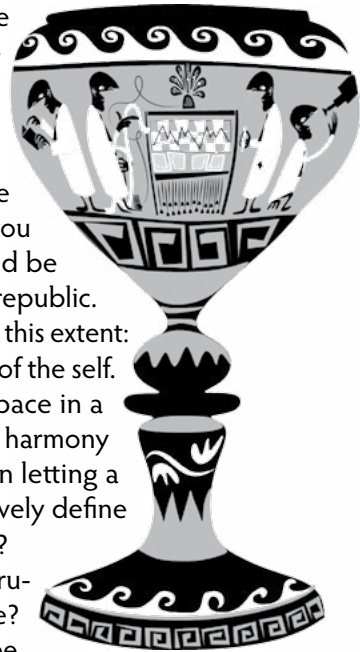


Carnegie more or less leaves all that to take care of itself, apart from incidental expressions of optimism that prudence and ethics go together. His advice doesn't extend into that space between. He tells you what the other guy is probably like (he's pretty much like you) hence what you should do to get what you want. He doesn't theorize what society should be like, much less tell you how to build an ideal republic. Maybe Carnegie is a bit like Socrates at least to this extent: his negative method is preoccupied with care of the self. But Plato is more inclined to theorize that space in a positive way. Can we represent what an ideal harmony between people would look like, rather than letting a practical sense of what people are like negatively define our sense of the shape of what goes between?

What is the best — as opposed to most prudent, given how things actually are — way to live? What would an ideal politics, culture, society be like? This is getting pretty Big Picture.

What does it have to do with what Plato's Academy might or might not have been like? In section 3 I remarked that we don't really have a term for the activity of 'practicing brightness'; that is, going around constantly working out what's what, clarifying, thinking through. We have 'being argumentative', which means being disagreeable. But we actually do have a more positive term. We have 'doing science'. Some scholars think Plato's academy was, in effect, the first scientific institute, with specialists working on problems and projects in mathematics and astronomy, perhaps other subjects. Whether this was so (we truly do not know), let a (cartoonish) image of science as the impersonal, potentially collaborative quest for truth — for knowledge of things that will make everyone's lives better — be a first sketch of a positive thing to fill that negative space.

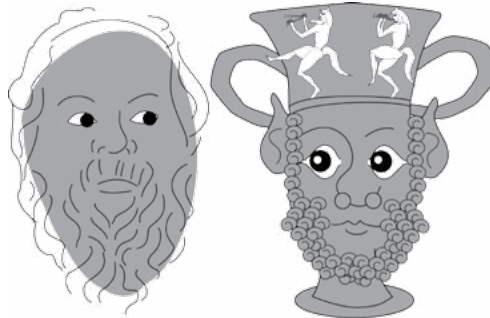
Carnegie speaks well of scientists and has no doubt that science is real and valuable. But his ethics generates a blind-spot for it — for the possibility of it. Which gets us back to Golden Rule 2.0. We may not imagine philosophers as scientists in white coats, solving ethical equations to three significant digits. But could there be a better, more Platonic way for even Carnegie to get what he wants: better picture of harmony and the good life? Is it possible to sketch what ideal human social order would be like, without



baiting-and-switching that question for different ones, i.e. how best to aim at what I want, given that everyone is elbowing each other in my vicinity? If **how should I live?** is a real question, admitting of sensible answers, then **how should everyone live?** should have an answer, too. A rational answer. That is to say, an answer that makes sense.

## 19

Having talked down Plato's Theory of Forms at the end of Chapter 3, let me conclude Chapter 4 by talking up the good of these dialogues, on the grounds of their self-contradictory qualities. Many readers — I would include myself in this group — prefer the earlier, more Socratic dialogues, in large part because we are more drawn to Plato's questions than his answers. Alcibiades' parable of the Silenus statue can get turned inside out. We like to give the radiant, Golden God of Western Philosophy, Plato, a good crack, to get at that satyr-faced plaster saint of critical thinking he hides inside.



But there is more. 'All of Western philosophy is just footnotes to Plato.' The danger in a line like that is that it sounds like one of those things people say to be friendly, before they get started, get serious. You stand before the monument politely. In such a mood, we may not consider that it might be **true**.

A. N. Whitehead (author of the 'footnotes' quip) adds that one of the secrets of Plato's success is he makes a point of 'writing out all the heresies in advance.' That's very true! Plato writes about everything: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, art, science, religion, economics, culture, education, technology, mathematics, logic, psychology. More: he considers all these topics from a variety of angles. He gives us Socrates on trial, declaring the unexamined life is not worth living. He gives us two blueprints for Utopia, both authoritarian. Plato is the first spokesman of free speech **and** censorship. He writes movingly of the value of truth. He is a dutiful servant of **logos**. Then he tells myths and advocates 'noble lies'. He is a rationalist yet a

mystic. He strikes readers as crude. His arguments seem like toys. His characters are not quite life-like. Then he turns around and displays astonishing shrewdness and delicate verbal artistry. His feet are on the ground. He's just lighter on them than he looks. He's serious, yet a comedian. Perhaps one of his most impressive achievements of breadth is to be a complete generalist and also one of world's first narrow-minded academic specialists. (Think of the skill it takes to pull **that** contradiction off.) I don't think there is any point denying that many of Plato's arguments are plain bad. As his pupil Aristotle says: Plato is dear, but truth is dearer. (They fought, those two.) But some of Plato's arguments really are as subtle and sophisticated as his interpreters obviously want them to be (hence keep finding them to be.)

If, like Mill, you think the truth about 'the business of life' will always be a balance of conflicting reasons, not some pure, simple, final thing, be aware that Plato is keenly aware of your reasons. But he thinks the opposite. (Don't you think the opposite, too? Sometimes?)

