

Arguments with Losers

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An old friend from graduate school, who may have had unrealistic expectations about legal practice, used to claim that law was an ever-present vocational temptation for philosophers. As he put it, “Why argue with smart people for peanuts when you could make a fortune arguing with losers?” (He’s now a dean, so you can see where this sort of thinking leads.)

I should clarify my title. I don’t intend a megalomaniacal memoir of my disputational triumphs—although that would at least have the merit of brevity. On the contrary, I want to say something about the sort of arguments that it is possible to lose, and whether losing arguments can be done well. I shall focus on losing philosophical arguments, and I will be talking about arguments in the sense of *acts of arguing*. This is the sort of act that one can perform on one’s own or with one other person in private. But in either of these cases it is difficult to win—or to lose.¹ So I shall concentrate on arguments with audiences. We may think of winning or losing such arguments in terms of whether the audience is convinced. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with who is in the right. (I am going to assume that there is a right to be in, that is that philosophical debates are *factive*.) That means that there are two sorts of loser: *real* losers, who lose the argument deservedly, because they are in the wrong, and *mere* losers, who lose the argument undeservedly, because they are in the right.² Hence there must also be two sorts of winner: *real* winners, who win the argument deservedly, because they are in the right, and *mere* winners, who win the argument undeservedly, because they are in the wrong.³ An optimal outcome for arguments with losers would be if all the losers are real losers. In other words, our goal is to minimise the number of mere losers.

Before I go any further I should address the possibility that there are no losers at all in philosophical arguments. If that’s true, it follows that you can’t lose any of your philosophical arguments, which is reassuring. Sadly, it also follows that no one you argue with can lose either. This seems less satisfactory. But why might we deny the existence of losers in philosophical arguments? Especially when there seems to be such *abundant* evidence for their existence. There are three broad classes of objection to the existence of losers in philosophical arguments. We shall see that we can learn something from each of these objections, even if we are unconvinced by any of them. That this is possible also tells us something about the positive contribution losers make to philosophical argument.

The Pessimistic Objection

I shall call the first objection The Pessimistic Objection. This states that *There are no losers in philosophical arguments because there are no winners. That is, all philosophical arguments are interminable and irresolvable. Because they never end, their outcome is never decided.*

The principal problem with this objection is that it is empirically false. Of course there are many philosophical disputes of interminable duration, but that is not true of all of them. We do an injustice to intellectual history in forgetting the disputes that have been settled, or underestimating how hard fought they were. It's not that the losers never were, it's that they've been airbrushed out of the story. They deserve better than that.

Nor should a lone holdout be sufficient to deny that a dispute is settled.⁴ Tim Williamson rightly observes that "As in natural science, something can be collectively known in a community even if it is occasionally denied by eccentric members of that community."⁵ Such (near) consensus is strong evidence that the holdouts are real losers.

Losers may readily be found in both the purest and the most applied areas of philosophy. I heartily endorse Williamson's maxim that "we can often produce mathematical models of fragments of philosophy and, when we can, we should."⁶ A faithful mathematical model can show us that some positions are non-starters.⁷ Hence this process has decisively defeated many hitherto plausible positions and made losers out of their advocates. Philosophers may also be found on the wrong side of many past social disputes. There were philosophers who argued *for* prohibition or *against* female suffrage, for example. Surely those guys were real losers.

A weaker, but perhaps more interesting version of this objection is suggested by Daniel Dennett: "I have learned that arguments, no matter how watertight, often fall on deaf ears. I am myself the author of arguments that I consider rigorous and unanswerable but that are often not so much rebutted or even dismissed as simply ignored."⁸ Dennett's complaint seems to be that he has been robbed of his victory by the simple expedient of ignoring him. If only it were that easy! But if his arguments really are unanswerable, then his dialectical opponents are real losers, whether they acknowledge it or not.⁹ And if they're not unanswerable, then someone should hurry up and answer him (perhaps proving Dennett to be the real loser). Either way, this seems like a failure of dialectical obligation rather than a lack of losers. This leads us to an important insight: unwillingness to engage in argument can itself be a losing proposition.

The Optimistic Objection

I call the second objection to the existence of losers in philosophical arguments The Optimistic

Objection. This states that *There are no losers in philosophical arguments because everyone's a winner!*

This sort of claim is most frequently made in praise of the virtues of specific philosophers, rather than of philosophy as a whole. For example, consider these lines from an obituary: "To lose an argument to Peter Lipton nearly always gave pleasure, never a sense of loss or wounding; seemingly effortlessly, he made all philosophical discussion become a collaboration in which the only winners were reason and truth. *There were no losers*" (emphasis added).¹⁰ This is high praise for a justly celebrated philosopher. But, as an argument for the non-existence of losers, even in this narrow context, it is unsuccessful: even if the cost of losing a philosophical argument were always outweighed by other cognitive gains, the losers would still be losers argumentatively, despite being net winners over all.

Perhaps there could be win-win, non-zero sum philosophical arguments in which all parties were in some sense argumentative winners. I am not sure I quite understand what such an argument would be like, but I am sure that it is not typical of philosophical arguments. Hence this version of the Optimistic Objection also seems to fail.¹¹

The Optimistic Objection resembles the aphorism attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, that true victory is such that the defeated does not hate the victor. It is a valuable insight, despite its paradoxical expression. There is something important in the observation that the cost of losing an argument can be outweighed by other cognitive gains. Crucially, acrimony and disrespect seem certain to diminish the likelihood of realising such gains.

The Misrepresentation Objection

The last and perhaps the most interesting objection I call The Misrepresentation Objection. This states that *There are no losers in philosophical arguments because 'winning' and 'losing' misrepresent philosophical argumentation.*

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson long ago observed how conceptual metaphors can work to structure our thought.¹² They also noted that *argument-is-war* is one such metaphor. Empirical research has shown that war metaphors can be counterproductive in other fields. For example, "enemy metaphors in cancer information reduce some prevention intentions without increasing others, making their use potentially harmful for public health."¹³ Perhaps such metaphors are equally pernicious in philosophy. Indeed, several authors have criticized the argument-is-war metaphor at length. Daniel Cohen offers a whole range of alternative metaphors for argument: "reciprocal reading," "diplomatic negotiation," "growth or adaptation," "metamorphosis," "cross-pollination," "leading to hybridization," "brainstorming," and "barnraising."¹⁴ Many of these alternative metaphors are thought-provoking, and offer tempting vistas of philosophical inquiry, but their

existence does not really further the Misrepresentation Objection. At best, they show that “winning” and “losing” are not (always) the only way to conceptualise philosophy, not that it can’t be so conceptualised.

There is an ongoing argument whether philosophical argumentation is intrinsically adversarial. Robert Nozick asks “Why are philosophers intent on forcing others to believe things? Is that a nice way to behave toward someone?”¹⁵ He continues by advocating an explanatory model: “the original motivation for studying or entering philosophy ... is puzzlement, curiosity, a desire to understand, not a desire to produce uniformity of belief. Most people do not want to become thought-police. The philosophical goal of explanation rather than proof not only is morally better, it is more in accord with one’s philosophical motivation.”¹⁶ Likewise Dennett proposes a narrative alternative to argument “I have to use more artful methods. I have to tell a story. You don’t want to be swayed by a story? Well, I *know* you won’t be swayed by a formal argument; you won’t even *listen* to a formal argument for my conclusion, so I start where I have to start.”¹⁷ Other philosophers have advocated other alternatives to argument, such as close reading.¹⁸ Ironically enough, the critics of adversariality have made a strong case. (This is ironic, but not inconsistent: they are arguing that philosophy *should not* be conducted through arguments, not that it *cannot* be. This is, as it were, the argument to end all arguments: if they win, there will be no more arguing.) But no one disputes that philosophy *has* been conducted adversarially, whether or not it might (sometimes or always) be better conducted some other way. And with adversariality come losers.

Vicious Adversariality

So it seems that we are stuck with the losers. What can we do to make the best of them? That is, how do we avoid creating mere losers and how do we make life no more uncomfortable than necessary for real losers? These two questions are closely related—if the cost of being a real loser is too great, we incentivise people to try to win at all costs, even when they are in the wrong. And if they somehow succeed in winning when they should have lost, theirs is the hollow victory of the mere winner, which makes the other party mere losers.

To see how adversariality can be done well, it may help to look at an example of it being done badly. Perhaps the best known example of vicious adversariality in philosophy comes from Norman Swartz’s celebrated essay “Philosophy as a Blood Sport.” He recounts an audience member at a paper at a 1965 APA meeting responding to the speaker as follows: “You have got it all wrong. I am going to tell you what you should have said. Then, when I have said that, I will leave this room because I do not care how you will reply.”¹⁹ There’s no excuse for this sort of bad behaviour, but it is notable that Swartz’s blowhard is at his most obnoxious not when he is at his most adversarial,

but when he is at his *least* adversarial: when he refuses to listen to a reply and leaves the room. This is an extreme refusal to discharge his dialectical responsibility: what one may call the Eric Cartman move—“Screw you guys, I’m going home.” (Of course, the audience were presumably glad to see the back of him—but only because his ghastly personality outweighed his ghastly arguing.) It is also what we earlier saw, in a more benign mode, from Dennett. Indeed, a reviewer of the book in which the quoted passage occurs refers to it as “an uncharacteristic paroxysm of Nixonian churlishness.”²⁰ “From time to time,” the reviewer continues, “Dennett seems to give up on the possibility of rational discourse with his readership. Sometimes, he preaches to the converted. ... Elsewhere, he shouts at the unconvertible.”²¹ This suggests that non-adversariality is itself vicious, as a refusal to meet dialectical obligations. Adversariality is not always appropriate, but at least there seem to be cases of vicious non-adversariality just as there are cases of vicious adversariality.

I wish to focus on a specific argument against adversariality, from which I believe we can draw a useful message (although perhaps not that intended by its author). Daniel Cohen proposes the following analogy to suggest that the best approach to argument is non-adversarial:

The Noble Chess Player: It is the final match of a chess tournament between two intensely competitive grandmasters. One is an older, distinguished player who has devoted his whole life to the game of chess and the pursuit of the championship. He has risen to the highest ranks in the world, but he has fallen just shy of the top on several previous occasions. This may be his last chance. His opponent is much younger, but the defending champion. She is brilliant, even audacious, but sometimes erratic ... Now, at a crucial juncture in play, the young champion is about to make a daring but in fact very flawed move. The older player sees, leans forward, and whispers, “Don’t do it.” He pauses, then whispers again, this time through tears in his eyes because he realizes what he is doing “Don’t do it. You have a much stronger move over there. It will be a better game, a more interesting game, a worthy game.”²²

The Noble Chess Player may be a fine human being, but he’s a terrible chess player: he’s just thrown the game! However, his philosophical counterpart, who makes a similar suggestion to a dialectical opponent, is not a terrible arguer. This disanalogy suggests for Cohen that competitive sport is a poor model for argument. But there are important differences between the two contexts, not least that there is no truth of the matter in a chess game. Hence all losers at chess are real losers and all winners real winners. The Noble Chess Player risks forfeiting the game by suggesting the better move; his philosophical counterpart would only risk forfeiting the chance of becoming a mere winner, a hollow sort of victory.²³ Worse, in the philosophical case, mere winning rules out the

possibility of real winning. So if the philosopher wants to compete for the true prize, pointing out the opponent's error is tactically astute.

Dual to the Noble Chess Player, we may consider the equally implausible Ignoble Engineer who seeks to win engineering arguments at any cost, regardless of the truth of the case. Swartz reports on the conspicuous absence of Ignoble Engineers from the visiting speaker series at the General Electric Research Laboratory he witnessed as a student intern: "the discussions were invariably, and wholly, given over to trying to enhance, and make use of, one another's work, to a cooperativeness, and selflessness that was natural, easy, and uninhibited. No one tried to "score any points" off anybody else; no one tried to attack any other person's work."²⁴ That's not to say that the contrast Swartz observes between the APA and General Electric is attributable solely to the superior virtue of engineers as compared to philosophers. Perhaps engineers, at least at their own seminars, are seldom sufficiently provoked. Imagine that by some farcical mischance an invitation to the seminar went astray and the engineers were treated to a discussion of how electrical charge is socially constructed or a presentation on the perpetual motion machine the speaker had constructed in his garage. Indeed, what makes the Ignoble Engineer implausible is the high likelihood of being found out: such a character would be exposed as a real loser pretty quickly.

So how do we accelerate the nonsense-exposing process in philosophy? Certainly not by reducing adversariality—but not by needless acrimony either.

Virtuous Adversariality

The positive part of this programme is where there is most to say, but also where I shall say least. In part this is because I think I have gone on long enough. More relevantly, this has been a talk about losers, so it would be out of place to say too much about the winners. Nonetheless, although there is a great deal of work that remains to be done, some substantial progress has already been made, and I wish to close by pointing towards it.

Ian James Kidd, who has written extensively on virtuous adversariality, summarises the problem as that of how to avoid what we may call the Three Bs: "bullying, bias, and bastards."²⁵ But how is that to be done? It might be tempting to lay down a set of detailed rules for the conduct of philosophical discourse. Some people have attempted as much. But I think that Nozick is at least right in saying that "Most people do not [go into philosophy] to become thought-police."²⁶ Any project of this sort risks blocking innovation in philosophical argument and imposing a heavy burden on the well-intentioned, while being essentially unenforceable against the ill-intentioned. Instead of such onerous and impractical schemes, I contend that we need to inculcate dispositions towards good thinking, that is intellectual virtues. A full catalogue of such virtues would be a

substantial undertaking, but we have already seen some of them at work: such as willingness to engage in argument and respect for other arguers.²⁷

Conclusion

Without losers there wouldn't be any winning. Without determined losers, losers who make as strong a case as they can for their losing positions, there wouldn't be any winning worthy of the name. It is seldom the case that losers are wrong about everything. Nonetheless, arguments for losing propositions often receive scant attention once it is clear that they have lost. It can be worth revisiting the losing side of arguments to retrieve these insights, as I hope to have demonstrated in a small way this evening. Lastly, unless we lead exceedingly unadventurous or improbably successful philosophical careers, we are bound to be losers ourselves often enough. Sheer self-interest should lead us to require that they be treated well!

So, in closing, let's hear it for the losers!²⁸

Endnotes

¹ Why? Because it can be hard to say whether or not an arguer has met a criterion for winning an argument if there are only one or two people present. (And, of course, if I were to lose an argument to myself, I would also be the winner!)

² I am using desert in a narrow sense, in which an arguer only deserves to lose if objectively wrong. By contrast, one might say that an arguer deserves to lose if the current evidence does not favour their position, even if in fact they're right. Perhaps in this sense Aristarchus deserved to lose to Ptolemy, since the former had little evidence for heliocentrism. But in the relevant sense, Aristarchus was still a (mere) loser, albeit an uncommonly prescient one.

³ We may also identify Gettier losers, who are in the wrong but lose only because they argue badly (or because the audience is incompetent), and Gettier winners, who are in the right but win only because their opponents argue badly (or because the audience is incompetent). Gettier winning is real winning, since the winner is in the right, but it does not represent evidence that the winner is in the right, as real winning otherwise would.

⁴ My point here is only that holdouts have no veto on consensus, not that they have no other virtues. As John Stuart Mill remarked, "the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service." J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume 18, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 269.

⁵ Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 280.

⁶ Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 291.

⁷ Williamson cites the philosophy of possibility and necessity and the philosophy of truth as areas where technical developments in recent decades have rendered some otherwise attractive positions untenable (Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 280).

⁸ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 12.

⁹ That is, the opponents would be real losers if the audience scores the argument for Dennett, as it would seem that they should if the situation is as Dennett describes. If the opponents refuse to accept the audience's verdict, perhaps we might best describe them as *sore* losers. (However, Dennett's opponents would be mere winners if their silence unaccountably convinced the audience.)

¹⁰ John Forrester, "Professor Peter Lipton: Razor-sharp Cambridge University Philosopher of Science," *The Independent* (January 8, 2008). Available online at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/____professor-peter-lipton-razor-sharp-cambridge-university-philosopher-of-science-769140.html.

¹¹ One way of developing this objection might be to distinguish two senses of winning (and losing). Winning a contest and winning a trophy are different sorts of winning (even if the trophy goes to the winner of the contest). Thus Erik Krabbe maintains that, although “only one of the parties can win in the victory sense of ‘winning’ . . . both parties may win in the benefit sense” (Erik C. W. Krabbe, “Winning and Losing for Arguers,” *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09* [2009]: 11). My focus has been exclusively confined to the victory sense of winning (or of losing). I agree with Geoff Goddu that this is the sense relevant to adversarial argumentation (Geoff C. Goddu, Commentary on Erik C. W. Krabbe’s “Winning and Losing for Arguers,” *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09* [2009]: 3), which I address directly in the next two sections.

¹² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹³ David J. Hauser and Norbert Schwarz, “The War on Prevention: Bellicose Cancer Metaphors Hurt (Some) Prevention Intentions,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41.1 (2015): 66.

¹⁴ Daniel H. Cohen, “Argument Is War . . . and War Is Hell: Philosophy, Education, and Metaphors for Argumentation,” *Informal Logic* 17.2 (1995): 182 ff.

¹⁵ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 5.

¹⁶ Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 13.

¹⁷ Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 12.

¹⁸ See Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (London: Routledge, 1990). For discussion, see Trudy Govier, *The Philosophy of Argument* (Newport News, VA: Vale Press, 1999), 59. See also Phyllis Rooney, “When Philosophical Argumentation Impedes Social and Political Progress,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 43.3 (2012): 317-333; Catherine Hundley, “Aggression, Politeness, and Abstract Adversaries,” *Informal Logic*, 33.3 (2013): 238-262.

¹⁹ Norman Swartz, “Philosophy as a Blood Sport,” Simon Fraser University (April 9, 1994). Available online at: http://www.sfu.ca/~swartz/blood_sport.htm.

²⁰ Nicholas S. Thompson, “Has Dennett Given Up on Argument? A Review of Daniel C. Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*,” *Behavior and Philosophy* 24.2 (1996): 171.

²¹ Thompson, “Has Dennet Given Up on Argument?” 171.

²² Daniel H. Cohen, “Missed Opportunities in Argument Evaluation.” *Proceedings of ISSA 2014: Eighth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* (2015): 258.

²³ Or, if the philosopher was in the right, a Gettier winner. But, although a Gettier win is a real win, it does not provide the prima facie evidence that one is in the right that (non-Gettier) real winning does. So it would still be a hollow victory.

²⁴ Swartz, “Philosophy as a Blood Sport.”

²⁵ Ian James Kidd, “Epistemic Humility: Virtue, Argumentation, Status, and Bias,” presented to EIDOS, Durham University, 2015; see also Ian James Kidd, “Intellectual Humility, Confidence, and Argumentation,” *Topoi* 35.2 (2016): 395-402.

²⁶ Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 13.

²⁷ I have discussed some virtues of argument at greater length elsewhere (Andrew Aberdein, “Virtue in Argument,” *Argumentation* 24.2 (2010): 165-179).

²⁸ I am grateful to many people—none of them losers!—for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, including Lilian Bermejo-Luque, Iovan Drehe, José Gascón, James Franklin, Nicholas Joll, Ian James Kidd, Moti Mizrahi, Steven Patterson, Alan Rosiene, and Rafal Urbaniak.

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