

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize 2011-12 Topic: Persuade Me

Winners: Kathy Bradley (staff), Joe Homer, Alex Setzepfandt (staff), and Sara Thoi

Joe Homer

Silent Persuasion

Although memories of our first arguments escape me, my father and I have long and heatedly debated politics, economics, religion and life. It happened on long car rides. In the home. And just about anywhere. Thinking back, I see what little capacity I had for patience, intentional listening and the understanding that comes from it. Informed argument and persuasion were not my aims; being right was.

I grew up in a small town with what I saw as small, misguided ideas. Since a young age, I'd always been critical, and I strove to live out these ideas. No wonder I became a vegan with obscure interests in philosophy. On Sunday mornings, I would take long walks to think through the inconsistencies and contradictions of arguments and actions, working myself into a frenzy. I never stopped questioning, and as I did, I became bolder about expressing my own views.

Every conversation I had on terrorism or the environmental impacts of eating meat became an opportunity for me to establish the veracity of my beliefs, the rigor of my reasoning and my moral superiority. My argumentativeness came with me to class, to school clubs, and to friendships. As the conversation temperature inevitably rose, I began to feel the social drawbacks of being outspoken, and the futility of aggressively propounding my own views.

Late in junior college, I noticed that this wasn't the best – or even a good way – to constructively discuss our shared world. Instead of telling, I began to practice the art of listening and of silence. In disagreements with my father, I focused on paying attention to what he said in order to grasp his individual story, the choices and ideas that composed it, and the background from which he came. Doing so also gave me perspective on my own beliefs, how they were shaped by my personal history and transformed through my experiences and the decisions I'd made.

Recognizing this, I saw my vocabulary change; statements like “you’re wrong” and “but you missed this” disappeared. My conversations welled with question marks and interrogatives and drained of anxious exclamations and argumentative anger.

Looking at the world outside my immediate surroundings through newspapers and people I knew, it became clear that the practice of stubborn argumentation was incompatible with a larger moral imperative. Hegel, in deploying the term ‘dialectic,’ hints at - perhaps unconsciously - the primacy of collective deliberation over the narrowness of individual perspectives. Each of us knows a piece of the world better than the others, and ignoring this voice is akin to suppressing a unique vantage point and voice. My life bears out the same truth. Only through attentive listening did I discover the significance of understanding individual nuances in vocabulary and perspective, crucial to both our individual and collective well-being.

My aim is no longer to convince; now, I strive to inform, giving others the opportunity to reach decisions on their own. Debate, on this view, becomes a shared space where I can learn from others, and where they can learn from me.

Alex Setzepfandt

It’s not always hard to persuade others. If you want people to try your cologne, let them smell it. If you want them to eat your dish, let them taste it. If you want to convince them that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, give a proof. You could fully convince people in a matter of minutes. It’s not that people are easy to persuade, either. It’s just that some things are clear cut.

Unfortunately, other things are not so obvious. If you’re homeless and need spare cash, it may be hard to persuade others to help. It’s not that people don’t care about you, homeless guy. It’s also not that they’re unsympathetic. It’s just that they’re unsure.

With smell, taste and math, it’s so simple. People either like it or they don’t. The math is either right or it’s wrong. But with helping you, we get into the murky realm of morality. In this area, the answer is simply unclear. Unless you’re a moral philosopher. Maybe.

After all, even moral philosophers have a hard time giving concrete answers about our obligations. They are, of course, good at suggesting what to do in obvious cases. If someone is drowning in a pond, philosophers agree that we should save him. If someone is in moderate need of frozen yogurt, they agree that there’s no obligation to intervene. But what about the person on the street? What should we do about someone who is not in immediate need, but in need nonetheless?

Sadly for you, homeless guy, this question is hard to resolve. Though you’re going through hardship, are we obligated to help? It might be honorable to aid you, but is it morally *required*? Or is it what philosophers call “supererogatory”? That is, does it go *above and beyond* our ethical duties?

Moral philosophers have not reached agreement. Some philosophers, such as Peter Singer, think we should donate much of our money to charity. Others, like Robert Nozick, believe we owe nothing to others. There's also a middle ground: Many think we should help others, but also believe we're allowed to give extra concern to our own interests. They're probably right. The problem is that they don't know *how much* extra concern we are allowed to give ourselves. And so they cannot say whether we are required to assist you, homeless guy.

Since there's no moral consensus, perhaps you should try out some new strategies. A change in style could be useful. As some of your friends figured out, humor might be the best course of action. Make a sign saying that Obama ain't the only one who wants change. That you need gas money for your Hummer. That ninjas kidnapped your family and you need kung fu lessons. Or that you slept with Lindsay Lohan and are in need of immediate assistance.

Morality is confusing. Humor isn't. If you want to persuade people, stick to the clearcut. It won't work every time, but it's your best bet.

Sara Thoi

Persuade me?

Persuade me that gravity exists, that planets revolve around a central star, that two plus two equals four, and you convinced me. I am persuaded by your common sense, your reason, and your logic.

Persuade me that we are all created equal, that we all have the right to vote, to sit wherever we please on a bus, and you understood me. I am persuaded by your sense of justice and morality.

Persuade me the wrongs of tyranny and the evils of violence against the people the Arab governments are meant to protect, and you encouraged me. I am persuaded by your actions to right a wrong.

But persuade me that climate change is not occurring, that scientology is real, that the end of the world is here, and I am alarmed. Persuade me that not everyone has the right to marry, that love is allowed only for some, and I am confused. Persuade me that widespread economic disparity is fair, that the rich should not be taxed, that budget cuts to education are necessary, and I am not impressed.

The art of persuasion carries the weight of logic, reason, and common sense. It bears the responsibility of justice and morality. But most of all, it inspires action and change. Persuade me with conviction and prudence, and I will act with you. Persuade me with propaganda and misinformation, and I will walk away. Persuade me, or I will persuade you.