

Sophistry in the Public Square



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The Greeks were properly suspicious of Sophists in the public square, as our society clearly is not. Sophistry is the art of pure persuasion so it is as effective for marketing, propaganda and fraud as it is for education, constructive debate and personal counseling. The more persuasive the speaker and the greater the weight of her authority, the greater the risk of being misled. The burden of constructive skepticism and judgment is always on the listener. Skeptics love truth and fear error.

Responsible persuasion should always be accompanied by some warning equivalent to the Zen saying *"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."* You must kill the Buddha because he is so charismatic, persuasive and authoritative that you cannot trust yourself to judge the validity of what he says; no matter how wise, benevolent or true. I have always tried to encourage independent critical thinking in my sons and yet still persuade them to do things my way. The fruit of my parental efforts came back to me a few years ago from my youngest son, who told me as he was launching his graduate career in Internet poker that *"I have taken your excellent lifelong advice, dear father, always attending carefully to your advice but thoughtfully declining to take it in this case!"* I was ambivalent about this parental victory at the time, but Jeff has shown himself to be a disciplined and profitable poker player over several years in a difficult economy. He is currently building a new career in alternative energy and he is persuasive about his innovative approach to that project, which he encourages me to challenge as continually as he aspires to challenge it himself. *Yes!!!*

Persuasion of various sorts is an important aspect of personal counseling and I will certainly try to persuade you of something or other as a part of our work together. The effects of such persuasion may be direct, indirect or nonexistent but you must be the judge of everything and the results are your responsibility, not mine. If you meet the Buddha on the road, listen to him carefully and *then* kill him. Trust me. Call me.

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