

# Meta-discussion: an explanation

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## What is meta-discussion?

You eagerly start reading a discussion supposedly about a subject of great interest to you, only to find that instead of being about the named subject, the discussion is full of posts arguing about *how to discuss*, *what posts should be allowed on the forum*, *the attributes of a particular poster*, *complaints about others' posts* and *complaints about the discussion*. Your heart sinks. You search in vain for any on-topic posts, then give up and never bother returning to that forum or discussion again. That is meta-discussion, and it ruins many a good discussion. For that reason, more and more discussion forum owners are asking posters to avoid meta-discussion. Let me explain why:

Meta-discussion is second-order discussion: *discussion about the discussion* – for instance, about its style, its participants, the forum in which it takes place, and so on – instead of about *on-topic* matters.

Imagine a discussion forum whose subject is the book *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand. Here are the possible kinds of discussion:

### 1. On topic, not meta-discussion

This is discussion about relevant, on-topic issues. For example: there might be a discussion about one of the characters in the book, say, John Galt. Or there might be a discussion about one of the themes in the book, such as the morality of capitalism. These are not meta-discussion but *first-order discussions* or *object level* discussions.

### 2. Off-topic, not meta-discussion

These are discussions that are not meta-discussion but are off-topic. On a forum about Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, a comment, post or discussion about the latest discoveries in biochemistry would be irrelevant and off-topic but not meta-discussion. So would a discussion about the artistic merits of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

Either of these two subjects might conceivably arise in the course of discussing *Atlas Shrugged* but to remain on-topic the focus of the comment, post or discussion should be on *Atlas Shrugged*, not on these other subjects.

These discussions, whether on-topic or off-topic, would be first-order or object level discussions rather than meta-discussion (second-order discussion).

### 3. Meta-discussion

Then there is meta-discussion: second-order discussion, discussion about the discussion or the participants or the forum instead of discussion about an on-topic issue.

Suppose that on our hypothetical forum about Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, there has been an off-topic object level discussion about the state of biochemistry, and someone complains that that discussion is off-topic and demands that the discussion return to on-topic issues. That complaint is meta-discussion. Instead of being about the issue, it is a comment on a different level – a comment on the issue of *what should or should not be posted on the forum*. That issue has nothing to do with the state of biochemistry, let alone the book and related issues that the forum is supposed to be about.

Such a comment might be understandable. It might be true. But it would be meta-discussion.

It might be better to use light moderation to keep the discussion at least vaguely on-topic most of the time, so that such complaints don't happen in the first place. How vaguely would depend on the precise nature of the forum. But what will virtually always be true is that people have come to the forum to discuss the on-topic subjects (in this case, *Atlas Shrugged*), and anyone who is bored or upset or irritated at *that* discussion does not belong on that forum.

Now suppose instead that there has been an *on*-topic discussion about the main female character Dagny Taggart. What sort of comments would be meta-discussion in that case?

**1. Comments about the attributes of the particular discussion**, instead of the on-topic issue of the attributes of Dagny Taggart, would be meta-discussion. For example, comments like the following would be meta-discussion:

“The quality of discussion on this thread has gone right downhill. You're all bickering about nothing. When is someone going to say something interesting or true? I'm waiting.”

“I am very offended by this discussion. There have been clear attempts to intimidate more sensitive posters by using Objectivist jargon and scathing tones. If things don't change, I am going to delete everything with ‘Dagny Taggart’ in the subject line from now on.”

**2. Comments about the attributes of a particular poster** instead of the on-topic issue being discussed. For example, a comment like the following would be meta-discussion:

“You have exposed yourself and your true feelings about women. Any man who could say that is a misogynist.” This is not about the character of Dagny Taggart or any other on-topic issue, it is about the poster to whom this poster is replying, so it is meta-discussion. More examples:

“Tell it to the psychiatrist, Hank, you're hallucinating.”

“Do you feel that everyone is out to put you down? You are always defensive in your responses.”

“You seem mighty threatened by this discussion. Methinks thou doth protest too much.”

"I'm sick of your negative attitude." In this one, the poster is speaking about him- or herself, a participant in the discussion, and so this too is meta-discussion. "Only a relativist would write such a load of tosh."

"Why are you so bitter, John? Have you thought of getting help? "

"I have never been a relativist, a feminist or any of the other things that sad loser is accusing me of, and the only reason he's saying all this is sour grapes."

"I think everyone can see that you have a big problem with your attitude. You been taking too many tablets?"

**3. Comments about writing style** instead of the on-topic issue being discussed. For example, a comment like the following would be meta-discussion:

"It was really boring to read that garbage. Why don't you do us all a favour and get some English lessons before you post again? Learn to write in a less scholastic way, for all our sakes."

"Are you aware that your writing style is very off-putting because it is so obscure?"

"Look, you may well have some good ideas but you won't convince anyone if you take that tone. You can attract more flies with honey than vinegar, you know."

"I personally prefer to read posts whose style takes into account the readers' sensibilities. Stomping in here and blasting everyone won't win you any friends here."

"I really dislike the snippy, unfriendly style of comments I'm seeing from you."

**4. Comments about the web site or other forum on which the discussion appears** instead of the on-topic issue being discussed. For example, a comment like the following would be meta-discussion:

"I used to enjoy coming to the Atlas Shrugged forum in the old days, before it was taken over by a bunch of obscurantist bully boys. It's really been ruined. I hope the owner of the forum will deal with this problem."

"Let it be known that the moderator CENSORED my reply to that idiot, Victor."

"This is a perfect example of the sort of nonsense that arises all too frequently on this forum."

"I disagree with the policy of allowing these kinds of articles on the Atlas Shrugged forum."

"If Ayn Rand is a rational writer, where is the evidence of rationality in the posts on this forum? Why are so many of her acolytes so anti-rational?"

This last one has some object-level content, but it also has meta-discussion, so it counts as meta-discussion.

### **More examples of meta comments**

"I'll admit to being disbelieving as to the limits on posting in the Atlas Shrugged forum. My impression has been that it is not meta-discussion, as described in the FAQ, that is off limits, but also any criticism of Ayn Rand's writing."

"You always know it's Saturday when Jackass George starts spewing garbage onto the list."

"To the moderator: forgive me if this is off-topic."

"This whole discussion has become so bitter I am unsubscribing."

"To the moderator: I dare you to approve this."

"I quite frankly don't see the point of a lot of garbage that goes on on this forum, such as taking offense and calling people stupid and what not. I would like to see us all live a little more peacefully together and always try to be polite and assume that others will do the same."

"Why is it that my posts get rejected for being off-topic while posts by others are not?"

“Why is it that my posts get rejected for being meta-discussion while posts by others are not?”

“This response seems a little hostile to me. So you disagree, do you feel so unsure of yourself you need to go the offensive? Lighten up, please, all of you.”

“Whoa, this is not a nice comment at all!”

“How can I get help understanding the book if all my comments are censored?!”

“This post really hurt my feelings. You are so aggressive.”

“You are being rude. I am tired of overlooking it, so I (and the rest of us too) do not need you to tell me whether my posts are ‘relevant (as well as true).’”

“The people who are long time members of this list seem to have no tolerance for newcomers who ask innocent questions as a way of understanding and learning.”

The problem with complaints and other meta-discussion is that such comments tend to make others feel compelled to chime in with their own views on the subject of the complaint rather than any on-topic matter:

**Dick:** You evidently sat on the lavatory for a week while you came up with that excuse for a justification for your pathetic views. It's about time the owner of this forum banned you.

**Michael:** You're projecting again, Dick.

**Janet:** Dick, I think you owe Michael an apology.

**Benny:** Dick, I think YOU should be banned.

**Susan:** Hear, hear, Dick.

**Bev:** Responses that just express agreement are a waste of bandwidth. Think before you post!

**Peter:** Although I entirely agree with Bev's observation that responses the entire content of which is "I agree" are a waste of bandwidth, I have to say that I thoroughly agree with this message.

**Kara:** Children, children, quit bickering.

**Ian:** This little fight is really getting old fast. Dick, if you have something to say on Michael's post, say it, otherwise I'm sure we'd all be a lot happier if you'd shut up.

**Susan:** You're just trying to stifle the discussion, Ian. Why don't YOU shut up?

**Daniel:** I have just joined this group and am taken aback to find that there's only been one post on Atlas Shrugged in the whole time I've been a member. Get me off this list.

**Olive:** Look, everyone, can we just cool it for now? You can see this discussion's putting off new members.

**Lillian:** Not only NEW ones.

**Roger:** OK, what needs to happen about this tendency we have to go off into interminable meta-discussion instead of addressing on-topic issues?

**Denise:** FTR, I agree that this forum was much better before Dick joined it. It's clear he's got issues that we're unqualified to deal with here.

**Wendy:** You're such a bitch, Denise. I like Dick's posts and I laughed when I read the toilet comment.

Then there are meta-discussion-replies to those replies, and further meta-discussion follows on what sort of posts should be allowed on the forum, the idea of banning posters or deleting discussions from the website if the forum is web-based. This leads in to the subject of censorship and the merits of moderation in general and whether meta-discussion should be allowed in particular. Technically we have now reached the stage of meta-meta-discussion, but unlike in pure mathematics, making that distinction serves no purpose here so I'll just call everything that isn't object-level discussion, meta-discussion.

Now the discussions get more and more hostile in tone, and before long the spiteful psychologising and the character assassinations reach fever pitch, with attempts to bring group pressure to bear on one faction or another. This unpleasantness then causes swathes of readers to unsubscribe in disgust, either because they were in favour of moderation or opposed to it, and before you know it, the forum is dead.

Do you see any discussion relevant to *Atlas Shrugged* above? No! It is all meta-discussion. Such discussions are completely off-topic, and boring for every reader not caught up in the emotion of the discussion.

For this reason, many forum owners are now introducing forum rules against posting meta-discussion. With that in mind, here are some answers to common queries about banning or minimising meta-discussion:

### **Meta-discussion as you describe it sounds like *argumentum ad hominem*. Is that what meta-discussion is?**

*Ad hominem* arguments are a type of meta-discussion, yes, but not all meta-discussion takes that form. Some meta-discussion doesn't consist of argument ("I'm unsubscribing!") and some is not about the other participants ("This is all too boring!"). Also, a comment can be *ad hominem* but not meta-discussion, if it refers to someone who is far removed from the forum. For instance, "Churchill's warnings about Germany were unjustified because he was an alcoholic" is an *ad hominem* argument and therefore bad, but it is not meta-discussion and not even off-topic on something like a WW2 history forum.

### **What is the best way to avoid adding fuel to the meta fire?**

Simple: DO NOT ENGAGE with it. Resist your compulsion to reply to meta comments. Do not rise to the bait. Stick to discussing the on- topic issue and delete all meta comments from your post before you hit 'send'. One benefit of doing this is that you won't later be embarrassed when you re-read what you have written after tempers have cooled. To the outsider, those posting meta-discussion typically look very silly, lacking self-control, and mean-spirited. Being able to remain calm and measured and friendly even when disagreeing strongly is impressive. Other readers will notice. Your reasonableness will speak for itself. Don't be drawn. Don't be provoked. Rise above it.

### **Is all meta discussion harmful?**

No. Positive meta-discussion with no agenda can be harmless and even beneficial (unless there is simply too much of it). An example might be a post of agendaless thanks for the website or forum.

Not all apparently positive meta-discussion is harmless though. A post ostensibly thanking someone for posting could in some cases actually have a negative agenda, as in the following example:

"Well said! Thank you for this brilliant post! Nicely put... unlike the usual confusing philosophical analysis one finds on this forum. This is precisely the type of post that teaches me more about Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and gives me room to think. Let's have more such clear, compassionate and non-pompous posts like this please!"

This ostensibly positive comment is actually a thinly-disguised complaint, implicitly inviting discussion about what kinds of comments should and should not be posted on the forum. It is an attempt to shame those whose posts are not to this writer's taste into changing how they write or what they say, or to keep quiet. Attempts to silence other posters by impugning their motives, their character, or their writing style are one of the most common forms of meta-discussion on the internet. Such discussions rapidly degenerate into very hostile flame wars, and often destroy what might have been a fascinating discussion forum.

Meta-discussion is severely impairing the internet's stupendous potential to provide debating forums. I hope this explanation will be useful.

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