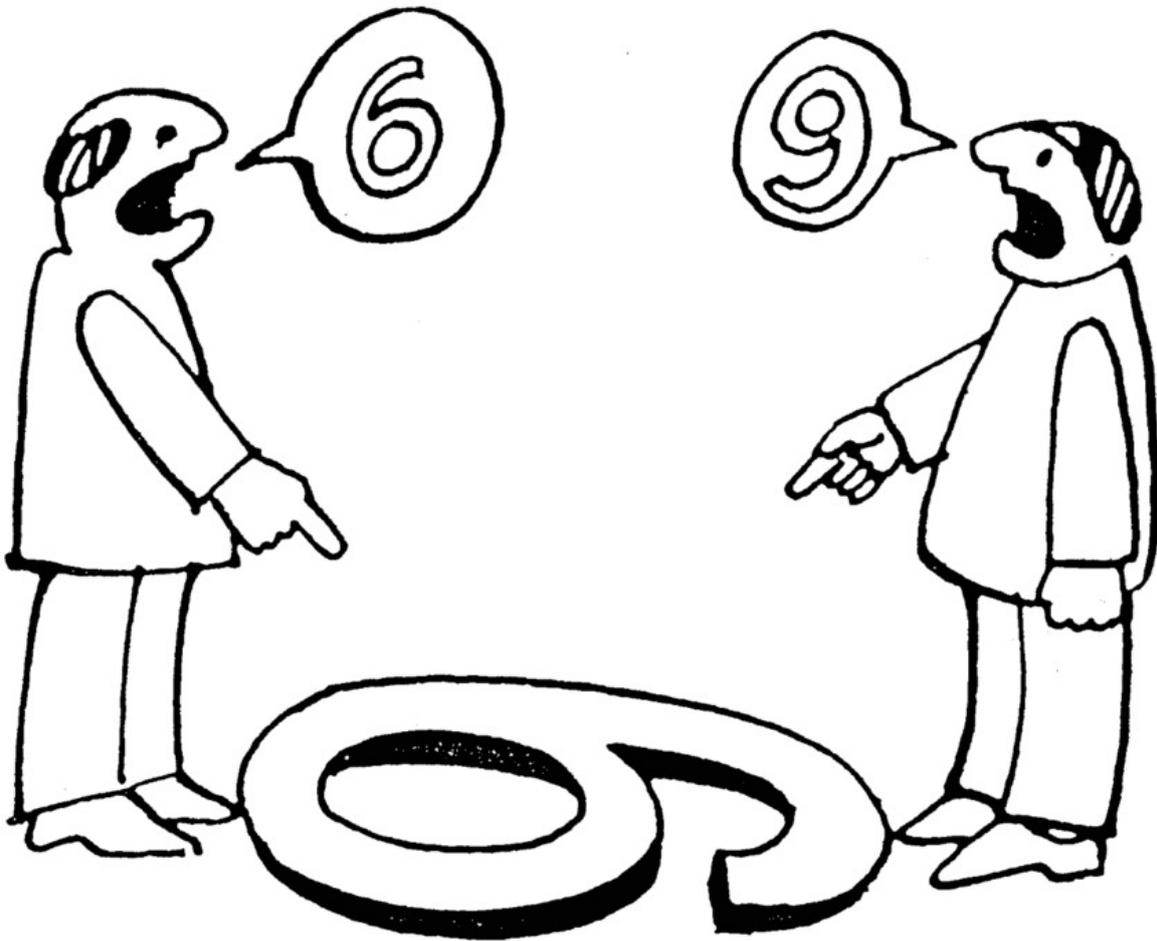


## “Yes, but on the other hand...” (the value of dialectic thinking)



In my high school debate class we were taught to develop a sound argument for and against each proposition. Prior to a debate we didn't know which side of the proposition we would be asked to defend so we had to be prepared to support either side. It taught us good debating technique and a good life skill.

There are always two sides (or three, or four...) to every situation. We are usually predisposed to one particular view so it takes concerted effort to think of other perspectives. We usually don't make that effort; it's easier to embrace our default position and avoid the intellectual rigor that dialectic thinking requires.

A friend of mine whom I'll call Chris (because that's his name) told me that his favorite teacher in high school had a wonderful technique for developing dialectic thinking in his students. If a student made a declaratory statement the teacher would respond with the phrase, "Yes, but on the other hand..." But—here's the nice twist—the teacher wouldn't fill in the blank, he required the student to do so.

So, a discussion might sound like this:

Student: "I think it's wrong for governments to control whether or not chlorine is added to our drinking water."

Teacher: "Yes, but on the other hand, tell me why it's a good idea for governments to control that issue."

One of the keys to thinking well is not so much *what* you think but *how* you think, and an important aspect of how you think is to discipline yourself to pursue the multiple perspectives that surround all issues.

At a recent weekly family dinner (my favorite, reoccurring experience) we explored dialectic thinking by staging a debate. I proposed this proposition: We should only bathe once a week. [I had recently read a report in which a group of dermatologist recommended this practice.] Lauren and Jonathan were teamed together against Mary and me. We randomly assigned which team was for the proposition and which team was against it. Then the debate began. It produced a fun and intellectually stimulating exercise that also forced us to consider the issue from multiple perspectives.

I didn't bathe for three days.