his book presents one of the classic statements of popular psychology oriented around positive self-image, self reliance, and cooperative relationships with others. It is one of the most popular and influential books of its type ever and provided the foundations for contemporary self-help celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey, as well as much of current motivational and organizational psychology that one finds in current business school curricula.What to make of it? I tend to side with the critics, who are numerous. It is difficult to argue with the basic points of the book, taken at a surface level. Most people enjoy being respected, agreed with, and successful. Confidence and self-reliance are no doubt important personal characteristics in personal success. Many people do not enjoy conflict or being disagreed with and would prefer instead cooperative relations with others. OK, but so what?  
  
The problem comes once it is realized that Carnegie is highlighting an ambivalence that is inherent in many of our social relationships. On the one hand, we can interact with people on their own terms and without expectations of obligations, duties, or norms of reciprocity. We can deal with and respect people as they are. On the other hand, however, much of what we do in social life involves either trying to accomplish something through other people or having other people trying to use us to accomplish something of importance to them. In trying to balance these two aspects of social relations, most of us become aware of the need to end. It is conceptually difficult to see how someone can be both taken authentically and respected as a person while at the same time being viewed as an agent for someone else. Family members and loved ones do not like to be used. Commercial partners do not appreciate being treated as friends when more immediate personal goals were the basis for interactions.  
Many adults learn to balance these differing perspectives towards others. Sometimes we treat others at arms length while at other times friendships can develop. Carnegie's classic work calls on the reader to both treat people on their own terms and also to attempt to influence them to get their cooperation in attaining one's objectives. Without more specification of how and where to balance, however, the book becomes a more cynical effort to redefine the problem of positive social relations in the form of a solution -- in order to influence people and get your way, treat them authentically. The rub, of course, is how to go about doing this. It is akin to arguing that the solution to poverty is easy -- just get some money!  
  
The faux sincerity and false positivity in the service of influencing others come across as phony and manipulative after a while. This recalls another old maxim - if something seems to good to be true, it probably is too good to be true. The oversimplified examples and testimonials also get old in a hurry. The reduction of large business enterprises and their managers to a series of positive work interactions with employees is simplistic at well. The details matter, individual skills matter, industry structures matter, history matters. It is nice to imagine that a positive attitude can conquer all and bring one riches. That lets a lot of other factors off the hook for explaining success or failure. But wishing it is so does not make it so. The more I read it, the more it sounds like a text on manipulation and less like an industrial manual.