

Answering Tough Theological/Philosophical Questions

Kirk Durston

Introduction:

When a person poses a difficult theological or philosophical question, your first impulse may be to attempt to answer the question. There may be, however, some things to consider first.

A. Your attitude

1. The purpose of your response is to serve your audience (be sure you know who the audience is ... is it the person, or those listening in?).
2. Rest in the truth. If what you believe is true, then relax. If you are wrong, then finding that out will be good, too. Either way, relax.
3. Do not present yourself as if you are the fount of all knowledge. If you do not know the answer to their question, do not hesitate to admit it, then suggest a possible approach you might take in finding an answer to the question.

B. Listen

1. After listening to their question, try to summarize the question in your own words and then ask them if you've understood the question correctly.
2. Is the question they asked the real question?
 - a) They may not even be asking a question at all, but trying to make a statement
 - b) Is the question they asked the question you need to answer, or is their an underlying question or issue that you need to raise?

C. Clarify the question/argument

1. If you do not understand the question, or are unsure how to answer, ask them to expand or clarify their question.

2. If they simply make an assertion (a statement), ask them why they believe what they have just said. The objective here is to put the onus on them to come up with a supporting argument for their assertion.
3. Try to condense their argument into 3 statements that include two propositions and the resulting conclusion. This will enable both of you to focus more precisely on the argument.

D. Stay away from violations of logic

You do not have to always use only logical arguments, but you should never permit logic to be violated. Below is one principle of logic and three examples of logical fallacies.

1. A principle of logic: If proposition A is true and proposition B is true, then conclusion C must logically follow. A large portion of arguments can be condensed into this type of 3-proposition syllogism.
2. False dichotomy: suggesting only two extreme options when, in reality, there may be some options in the middle ground.
3. Straw man: misrepresenting the other person's argument with a flawed version, then attacking the flawed version rather than the real argument.
4. Appeal to selected evidence: using only the evidence that supports ones argument, but ignoring the evidence that does not.
5. Poisoning the well: arguing that the person who has advanced the argument is biased, therefore, the argument fails. In reality, it does not logically follow that because a person is biased or has a motive for advancing the argument that, therefore the argument is flawed. It is the argument itself that must be addressed, not the person's bias.
6. Donkey's laugh: laughing at the argument. It does not follow that because one laughs at an argument that, therefore, it is false. The argument, itself, must be addressed.

E. Ask the right questions

1. Rather than answer the question, is it more effective to ask a question that will help the person either recognize their faulty argument, or answer their own question or objection.
2. Discern if the person is in a projective mode (not listening, not receptive, on the attack) or a receptive mode (has asked an honest question and wants to hear what you have to say).
3. If the person is in a projective mode, ask the right questions. Is there a problem with their argument that an appropriate question will expose? Is there a problem with one of their assumptions that the right question will reveal? Is there something they have overlooked, or not thought of, that the right question will bring to light?

Final comments:

Answering tough questions that are posed to you, is not a contest or a game. The point of such an engagement is to serve the audience. This requires that you listen, discern, engage them in dialogue, and help them discover the answer in a way that they will understand.