

## How Philosophers Address Objections to their Positions

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Philosophers advance and defend positions, claims, theories, etc. — and spend a fair amount of time dealing with objections to those positions. Their usual responses to these objections tend to fall into a handful of patterns. Students of philosophy thus benefit from knowing these patterns so that they can recognize them as they attempt to understand philosophical texts and debates.

Let's call the philosopher's position P. Let's call the proposition expressing an objection to that position Q. So an objection can be understood as asserting the following conditional claim:

If Q, then P is false, weak, should be rejected, etc.

How do philosophers go about addressing objections? Their responses usually fall into one of five patterns:

Response/strategy	Explanation and elaboration: Proponent of P	
Deny Q	...allows that Q would weaken P if true but <u>argues that Q isn't true</u> (or at least we lack sufficient evidence to believe Q is true)	
Deflect Q	... may well concede Q but <u>denies that Q is relevant to P</u> — in effect denying the truth of the conditional above, <i>If Q, then P is false, weak, should be rejected, etc.</i> Proponent may argue that the objection rests on an misunderstanding of P, draws an invalid inference from P, etc.	
Absorb Q	... concedes that Q is true and relevant but argues that, all things considered, <u>Q is not as strong an objection as it appears</u> . Proponent may add that our reasons for accepting P are still stronger than the reasons that Q provides for doubting P. Q is therefore relevant but weak. (approximately synonymous with 'biting the bullet' or 'digging in your heels')	
Modify P	... concedes that Q is true and is a strong objection to P. However, <u>P can be modified to take account of Q</u> without losing what is plausible or attractive about P. The modified position, P*, is stronger than P thanks to <u>having been modified to take account of Q</u> .	
Reject P	... concedes that Q is true and is a strong objection to P – strong enough to warrant our rejecting P. (aka, "throwing in the towel")	
		<p><b>Most combative</b> (concede the least, keep position intact)</p> <p><b>Most conciliatory</b> (concede the most, revise position more extensively)</p>

A critical thing to notice here is that which of these responses or strategies the proponent of P ought to opt for depends on three factors:

1. How likely Q is to be true
2. How relevant Q is to P
3. How strong an objection Q is to P.

The more that 1-3 hold, the greater the argumentative pressure on P and the more conciliatory, etc. proponents of P should be in response to Q. The less that 1-3 hold, the lesser the argumentative pressure on P and the more dismissive, etc. P's proponents should be in response to Q. This suggests a kind of flow chart to use when engaging with objections to our own philosophical stances.

