How to Address Objections[1]

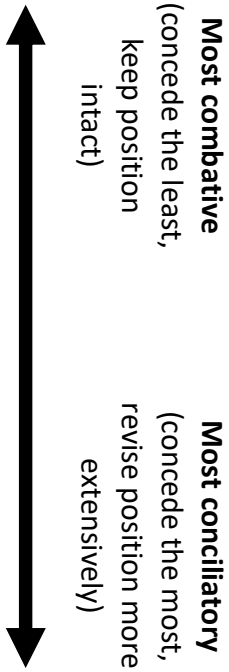
Replies to objections tend to follow a handful of patterns. Students benefit from knowing these patterns so that they can use them in the context of a debate.

Let's call your thesis T. Let's call O an objection to your thesis. Typically O will be attended by the following conditional claim:

If O, then T is false, weak, should be rejected, etc.

How can you reply to your objector? Replies often fall into one of five patterns:

Response/strategy	**Explanation and elaboration:** The proponent of T…
Resist O	...allows that O would weaken T if true but argues that O isn't true or at least we lack sufficient evidence to believe O is true.
Deflate O	... may well concede O but not concede that O is relevant to T — in effect resisting the claim *If O, then T is false, weak, should be rejected, etc.* Perhaps O rests on a misunderstanding of T, or draws an invalid inference from T. Or, perhaps O is a problem for every competitor thesis to T — meaning O does not give us a reason to reject T in favor of some alternative thesis.
Absorb O	... concedes that O is true and relevant but argues that, all things considered, O is not as strong an objection as it appears. Perhaps our reasons for accepting T are still stronger than the doubts provided by O. Then, O is relevant but weak (cf. 'biting the bullet' or 'digging in your heels')
Modify T	... concedes that O is true and is a strong objection to T. However, T can be modified to take account of O without losing what is plausible or attractive about T. The modified position, T*, is more solid than T thanks to having been modified to take account of O.
Reject T	... concedes that O is true and is a strong objection to T – strong enough to warrant our rejecting T. (aka, "throwing in the towel")



Which strategy to opt for depends on three factors:

1. How likely O is to be true
2. How relevant O is to T
3. How strong an objection O is to T.

The more that 1-3 hold, the greater the argumentative pressure on T and the more conciliatory, etc. proponents of T should be in response to O. The less that 1-3 hold, the lesser the argumentative pressure on T and the more dismissive, etc. T's proponents should be in response to O. This suggests a kind of flow chart to use when engaging with objections to our own philosophical stances. (See next page).

[1] A version of this handout was originally written by Michael Chobani. Some revisions were prompted by comments on Chobani's handout at https://dailynous.com/2021/11/11/how-philosophers-respond-to-objections/.

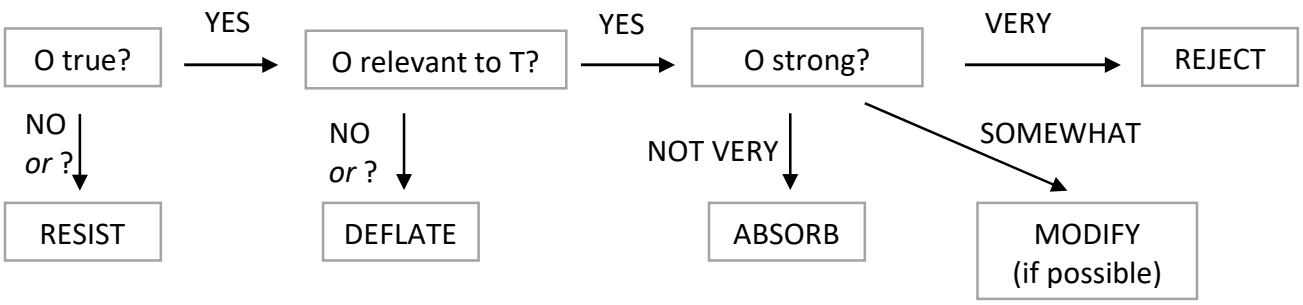


Figure 1: Flowchart for deciding how to reply to an objection.

Example:

Thesis: Superman would beat any superhero in a fight.

Objection: Batman could beat Superman as long as Batman had some kryptonite.

RESIST: Batman is a mere mortal. Since Superman is a superior sort of creature from a different planet, he could still beat Batman even if Batman had some kryptonite.

DEFLATE: Possibly Batman would win if Batman had kryptonite—but without "cheating" in this way, Batman is clearly no match for Superman.

ABSORB: It may well be that Superman would lose if there's kryptonite involved. On the other hand, a win for Superman remains possible. Indeed, Bruce Wayne doesn't seem very muscular compared to Superman. So all things considered, I still think Superman could beat Batman even with kryptonite involved.

MODIFY: Ok, suppose I grant that Batman would win if Batman had some kryptonite. Regardless, we can still agree that *if there's no kryptonite involved*, then Superman would beat any superhero in a fight.

REJECT: You're right: It's not cheating if Batman is simply taking advantage of his opponent's weakness, and Batman would kick Superman's butt if he had some kryptonite.