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What Advice Would You Give for Debating an Atheist?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about advice for debating an atheist.

* If I were to debate an atheist one day, what advice would you give?

Transcript

I'm Amy Hall, and you're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag, S-T-R-R-Ask podcast with Greg Koukl. That is I. I am he. We are them.

This is us. Alright, Greg, here is a question from Levi. If I were to debate an atheist one day, what advice would you give to me? Well, it's not clear to me that Levi is asking a question about a formal debate or an informal discussion, okay? If it was an informal discussion, that would, I'd ask a lot of questions, and find out what kind of atheist he is, and whether, for example, is he a materialist or does he believe in objective morality? Or how does he account for our moral, I'm going to find out as much as I can about where he's at.

And my big main arguments that I think are really powerful are the three standard ones. And that is a cosmological argument, which is an argument for God's existence based on the existence of the cosmos, okay? And one version of most popular depends, not just on that, the cosmos exists, but that it had a beginning. And that's called the Kalam cosmological argument.

Many people know it from William Lang Craig, who has kind of resurrected that argument. I also offer a design argument, also called a teleological argument, because I think the things that look design, which Richard Dawkins actually acknowledges in the first line of his book, the Blind Watchmaker, the biological realm is a complex realm in which it appears that things have been defined, designed for a purpose. And I said, well, maybe the appearances are deceiving as he then goes on to argue.

Maybe it looks design because it is design. That's the second argument. And the third argument is the moral argument.

And that is, we know there's right or wrong, because we know when people do wrong and complain about it, we complain about it and call it the problem of evil. All right. And so those are the three main arguments that I use.

Now I don't kind of advance them in a philosophic way. I advance them in a much more conversational, personal way. And the details on each of those arguments can be found on how I do that in a personal way using a lot of questions can be found in street smarts.

I have two chapters in atheism. Then I have a chapter on morality, which is actually also about atheism because it's titled evil atheism's fatal flaw. And then the next chapter is actually about can we be good without God? So all those four first four chapters of the application portion of that book street smarts are devoted to dealing with atheists and so you'll see my strategy played out there.

But basically I'm going to ask a lot of questions and I'm going to move forward each element of these three arguments, which I think are compelling and I think decisive. I wouldn't call them proofs. We don't need to do that.

We could just say, what's that given these particular areas? What is the best explanation for the way things are? We just need to say, what's the best explanation for the way things are? That the universe came from nothing for no reason with no cause. That's one explanation. That's the atheist explanation.

That the universe was caused by an intelligent agent. That's the theists explanation. Well, certainly the second is a lot more intuitively sound and consistent with virtually everything we know about reality.

Then the first explanation, which is worse than magic. So this is the way I'm going to play these issues. I'm going to argue regarding the origin of the universe regarding the apparent design of the universe.

Who would dismiss even a shoe print in the sand on the beach as the result of the forces of nature of some sort, wind, wave, seagulls. Nobody would do that or silly, just a small two dimensional thing, but you come to the simplest cell and this is dismissed as a function of chance over time. It's not going to happen.

It's not the best explanation. So this is the way I'm going to support myself. That would be the case not only in a discussion that I was just having back and forth with someone and the details of how I do that are outlined in street smarts.

But if I were having a more formal debate, which I've had with atheists, I'm going to do the same thing. And most of my debates have been on the issue of the moral argument as I'm arguing against moral relativism, which by the way is the only option for the atheist. If there is no God, there is no absolute or objective standard outside of us, form a reality.

Therefore, the only standard that's left is inside of us, which by the way entails the Darwinian explanation. It's Darwinism, evolution over time, that has caused us to believe in right and wrong, good and bad, moral and immoral, because it helps us get our genes into the next generation. Dawkins' characterization of it.

And that's all it is. There is no grounding for this. Michael Russe makes it really clear, morality is an illusion, the atheistic philosopher Michael Russe.

It's just an illusion, but we believe the illusion because we've been tricked by evolution. Okay, that's a relativistic characterization of morality. Biology can't make right wrong.

We just believe it's wrong because of the evolutionary impact and passing this down. There are all kinds of problems with that that I discuss in street smarts in the chapter, and can we be good with our God? But nevertheless, that's the approach that I'm going to take. And not only informal conversations, but also in a debate proper.

And I've done a lot of debates just on the relativism issue, making the case that relativism is false, partly because of the ubiquitous awareness of the problem of evil. And our awareness is that things are not just happening that we don't like, that's relativism, but things are happening that are actually wicked. They are actually evil.

Well, that requires a grounding, a rule that's broken, and a rulemaker to make the rule that gets broken for the problem of evil. I think that personally is the most compelling argument for the existence of God, the moral argument, because the problem of evil is so obvious to everyone, that moral argument goes like this. If there is no God, there is no objective morality.

But there is objective morality, the problem of evil is evidence of that, therefore there is a God. Now that's a modus-tolerance form of the argument, it's formally correct. And if the premises are true, the conclusion follows.

Clearly the second premise is true, everybody knows that, problem of evil, a morality is objective. The duty of the atheist given that argument is to show how you can have objective morality with moral obligations with no God. And that's the one that I don't think can be overcome.

And if it can be theoretically, the real question is, is that the odds on favorite? Or is the theistic answer a better one all things considered? Yeah, I'm glad you brought up the obligation. I just written it down, because you had talked about the need for a lawmaker to make the laws. But it's the obligation to follow the laws that really get down to the point where you have to say there is someone that I'm obligated to, because you aren't obligated to material objects.

That doesn't even make sense. Or even immaterial objects. Like love.

I'm not obligated to the principle of love, the abstract principle. There's no obligation there. It's just a love.

You could say, here's what love is, but what is the obligation? The obligations are held between persons. This is a common sense reflection on the nature of morality, is that obligation is part of it. If there is right and wrong, I am required or obliged to do the good.

And not the bad. Okay, to whom or what am I required obliged? Or to what am I required? It's got to be a whom, not a what? Or I'm not obliged to my pen. I'm only applied to this pen, or I have an obligation regarding this pen.

If you own it, and then my obligation is to you to return it to you when I'm finished borrowing it from you. And this is why even if you were to say moral platonism is true, and there's some sort of objective morality outside of us that's not dependent on who we are, that still doesn't explain the obligation. Think about something like, if you were to say, okay, morality is just, we do better that way.

Well, think about other examples of that. Yes, I would do better if I exercised rather than sat on the couch. But if I sit on the couch, I'm not morally guilty.

It's a different category of things. That's right. Yeah, so I think when you take your common sense intuitions about the nature of morality, and then ask the grounding question, what best makes sense of this feature of the world that we're all aware of, there's only one solution that's going to make sense of it.

And even if you come up with possible alternatives, are these plausible or are these as plausible as the theistic alternative? Now, people don't want to go that direction because they'd rather go to mother nature than to father God, right? And as an explanation, for example, for design, oh, it's mother nature. Well, that's just forces, right? They just anthropomorphize it because it does look like somebody's messing with things. But by the way, if obligations are only held between persons, we have no obligation to planet Earth of any kind.

We don't have obligation to the environment. Now, that doesn't mean we can wreak havoc because we have other obligations that relate to how we treat the planet, but it isn't an obligation to the planet. And this is the way it's commonly talked about now, that we have obligations or they have environmental justice.

Well, that's why they anthropomorphize creation. So now you've got mother nature. They'll create this idea of a personality in the creation, listen to the way they talk, and that's how they talk.

Yeah, yeah. We may, we have an obligation to each other to be kind in the way we leave things for each other. You know, that's why you tell your kids that you mess up the

kitchen, clean up the kitchen because everybody else lives here.

All right, so you ought to clean it up at your mess in virtue of other people. Now, if you're living by yourself and no one else ever comes by, what moral obligation could you possibly have to keep your house clean? Seems to be none. It becomes an obligation when other people are a factor or affected.

And the same thing with planet Earth. We have obligations to humanity regarding how we use Mother Earth Earth. Sorry about that.

We have no obligations to Mother because there is no mother. Right. It is a thing.

It is not a person. So Greg, I'm going to add a few things now. These are actually your thoughts, but I wrote them down because you wrote an article with advice for.

And I, this is actually more of an informal kind of debate, but it could apply to formal debates too. You wrote an article called try this simple three step maneuver when you're hit with a barrage of objections. Right.

And I, nice, tidy, short to the point. So I think one of the most, the biggest difficulties, and it's not just with atheists. It's with anyone you're discussing things with, is keeping the conversation on track because you can go off into all sorts of different questions before you can answer one.

They're off to another one. So this, this is one of the most basic necessary skills to have. And you just, you divided it up so well here.

So here are the three steps you said. Number one, slow things down. Number two, isolate the specific concerns.

And number three, assess the challenges one by one. So do you have anything to add to that before we go on? I think that's pretty clear, but you might have more. It's brilliant.

I don't know what else I could say to approve it. Now, this is the way I comport myself when I deal with conflict situation. Incidentally, it's not always easy to do this.

Now, especially slowing things down when you're in conversations that can be quite intense. And by the way, this is just apologetics. This is interpersonal things as well and relationships.

Okay. And I do revisit these three in the last chapter of street smarts. So I go over this again.

I think something like it occurs in tactics. And then I revisit the concept in street smarts. But we have this standalone piece that I've written that has them in as well.

One of the hardest things when you get in these spirited debates is that they're so spirited. There's all this intensity associated with it. And there, the person you're talking with is speaking quickly and aggressively and in your face oftentimes.

And the temptation is to respond to kind, but, but, but, but bang, bang, bang, bang. And no, no, you're running slow down. Take a breath.

One of the most powerful features of Peterson Jordan Peterson's ability to engage in difficult conversations challenging ones. And there's a lot of them on the air where he's interviewed is that when he's offered a challenge, there's always a beat before his response. There's always a beat.

There's he has developed the ability to pause and reflect. And even if he knows what he's going to say, just the pausing slows things down. And it, and it, it, it communicates, it telegraphs to the listeners, both the challenger and those on the outside listening in that, that he has reflective and considerate and considering of the issue.

You pause and think. And then he responds. So that slowing down has, is smart.

And it's also rhetorically effective, I guess is the point of making here. You're just slowing things down. Okay.

Now, the second part is not very easy either, sometimes, because when you isolate the specific concerns, you have to weed out the rhetorical noise. And lots of times there's lots of noise. There's exaggeration.

There's loaded words. There's demagoguery. There's, there's, there's assertions disguised as arguments.

There's assertions. Excellent. And there's a straw man, you know, misrepresentation.

All of these things in there. And this just is going to take practice. What is it when you get rid of all of the noise? What is the charge that's being made? I can't believe in such a cruel God who would make it, who would send people to hell just because they didn't believe in him.

That is so ridiculous. Okay. Well, that's actually a charge that famous football player made.

I always can't remember his name. Rogers Rogers. Yeah, I just remember as the former quarterback of the Green Bay Packers.

I don't know where he's at now, but not even. And he made this. And I have this citation in the last chapter of street smarts.

And the thing is, okay, what is he claiming? He's claiming the simple claim is people go

to hell because they don't believe in God. Well, that's not true. That's not our view.

People don't go to hell because they don't believe in God. People go to hell because they're guilty of crimes against God. So there's a straw man in that kind of rhetorical, rhetorical, rhetorically laden challenge.

All right. So you slow down, you isolate it, figure what's really he getting at. There it is.

Oh, well, now I can answer it. That's the idea. And that would be the third step.

So you could do this when you're listening to a speech by somebody or a TikTok or this is Tim Barnett is excellent at this, Mr. B and what he does with red pad logic. He's doing basically the same thing. He's isolating them.

He's slowing things down for you, isolating the main points, getting rid of the noise, the rhetorical noise, and then he's answering each particular thing. And this is something that it's a skill that can be developed. It's not hard to develop it if you have a little plan on how to do it.

And that's with this three step plan accomplishes. Well, this is why tactics and street smarts are so valuable. I mean, with tactics, you are teaching people how to think and how to ask questions so that you can draw out what the points are and keep people on track and help them to see what's true.

So if you haven't read tactics and street smarts, I would definitely do that. What about reading like a critical thinking book or something like that? Would that be helpful too? Yes, if you people want to go into that depth, but I don't think that kind of depth is necessary. There's some books for kids, you know, and it's the fallacy detective, you know, for homeschoolers.

That thing is really good. There's like a Pluto dog on the cover or whatever with a cap on, a deer stalker cap on like Sherlock Holmes. And then there's another book by the same author and something like that would be good.

You don't really need, you know, unless you're totally into this, you don't need anything else to be honest with you. But I did get alerted to a couple of particular things that are really critical in these discussions. I learned to recognize the most frequently used examples of informal fallacies.

Now, a formal fallacy is when the form of your argument is not accurate. You know, the classic one, all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. That's a certain form that I think people can see just reflectively is a valid form.

One, the conclusion follows from the premises and that's the right form. Some things are not in the right form. And so those are those are formal flaws, but informal fallacies are

the ones that are most common.

I mentioned the straw man fallacy a moment ago when people misrepresent the view and then attack the straw man that they've erected as the view. It's easy to knock over a scarecrow. It's a lot harder to deal with the real thing, a real individual.

And so you want to correct. Oh, you misunderstand. That's not our view.

You've refuted a view we don't hold. Here's our view deal with this view. Okay, that's a straw man.

You also have genetic fallacy. Okay, that means faulting something based on its origin. All right.

Why are you talking about whether abortion's right or not? You're a man. You can't get pregnant. Well, it's irrelevant to the moral question.

Okay. Atheists will say, well, if you were, you're a Christian because you're an American. In other words, being an American is where your Christian convictions come from.

If you were born in Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't be a Christian. You'd be a Muslim. Okay.

All that does is tell you something about geography. It doesn't tell you about whether Christianity is true over Islam or vice versa. And my rejoinder at that point is, well, that may be true talking about environments, but if you were born in Saudi Arabia, you would be an atheist.

So that gets you nothing. That gets me nothing. It gets you nothing.

Okay. We're both barking up the wrong tree here. Okay.

So those are two common fallacies. The next common fallacy and these are the three you need. This is it is called a ad hominem.

In other words, you attack the person. So you find out, oh, you're intolerant. Oh, you're never minded.

You're racist. You're bigoted. No matter what you say about an issue is disqualified because of some character flaw you apparently have.

Well, that's totally unrelated to the issue. It could be. Can bigoted racist intolerant people be right on some issues? Sure.

I mean, it's as bad as calling somebody ugly. Oh, you're ugly. Even if it's true, it doesn't affect the quality of the point.

You could concede it. You could say, okay, let's say you're right about me. Now what? I

actually did that on a TV show once where I was interviewed, Test of Faith, famously where this attack happened.

And I said, okay, maybe I'm bad. Okay, I'm bad. Why don't I disagree with all those things? Now we all agree that I'm bad guy.

Can we just get back to the topic again? But, you know, they didn't matter to them because they didn't care about dealing with the topic and its merits. All they wanted to do was attack the person who disagreed with them. And if you know those three fallacies, informal fallacies, I mean, that's going to take you a long way to critical thinking.

I mean, the rest of it is just, you know, making sure that whatever conclusion that you have follows properly from the information that you're basing it on, and that's more of a formal thing. But that's not hard to learn with just some introspection and some feedback from other people who know how to think, and this is what we're doing on standard reason. We're helping people see how this works.

So it rubs off on them like it rubbed off on us. Yes. I'm going to throw one more thing out there as you're talking to atheists, and that is don't forget why you're talking to atheists.

It's because they need Jesus. Okay. It's going to be easy to get upset.

It's going to be easy to get angry. All those things are easy to do. But the truth is you're looking at somebody who needs what you have.

And he's blinded by a whole bunch of things. And so have some compassion, have some grace. And remember that the way you talk to him, you're representing Christ.

So do it in a way that represents his suffering for people who hated him. So he absorbed that the evil from people in order to be gracious to them so that he could save them. And that's what we're doing.

So don't forget that that is part of your apologetic, showing Christ who he is by your actions and the way you treat these atheists who are in desperate need of Jesus. With gentleness and reverence Peter says the first Peter. Right.

So don't lose track of that. Also, it's a good idea to present God as someone who you actually love and respect and admire who is good. Don't forget that you're talking about God.

You're not just making arguments. And even as fun as that is to do to look at things and analyze them and show the truth. I mean, I love that.

I'm sure there are a lot of people out there that love that. But don't forget who you're talking about and why you're doing it. So in a certain sense, you might say, we are not

talking about G-O-D.

We are talking about Yahweh. We are talking about the personal God of all creation who's revealed himself in scripture, the good God, the wonderful God, the God who came down on our behalf in the person of Jesus. You cannot separate these things from who he is and his character because it matters.

In fact, it's his kindness that leads us to repentance, right? So reveal God's kindness to them and see where that gets you also. All right. Well, thank you.

Levi. Great question. It took the whole show.

So good for you for coming up with such a great question. If you'd like to send us your question, just go to X and use the hashtag STR. Ask or you can go to our website at str.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.