

What is Elephant Hurling?

No, it's not an Olympic event, although we've had some unusual ones in the past (tug-of-war, club swinging, live pigeon shooting, croquet and underwater swimming to name a few).

This phrase refers to a debate tactic in which the critic uses summary arguments from various areas to give the impression that voluminous supporting data exists, when little or none is actually given.

It can be a very effective intimidation factor. Here's an example of how it has been used in conversations regarding the creation vs. evolution controversy...



“Evolution is a fact! It's been confirmed by evidence from every field of science (biology, geology, chemistry, astronomy, etc.), and all scientists believe in it!”

I would actually say making this statement is perfectly acceptable, if at some point it is followed-up with specific examples. (Not that I believe this claim is true, but as an initial assertion preceding supportive evidence, it's fine.) However, this is very often not the case (i.e. the specifics are generally absent from the remainder of the dialog).

When someone I am speaking with makes a similar statement while discussing evolution, I simply ask for specific examples. The following is fairly representative of most of these conversations:

Skeptic: “Evolution is a fact! It's been confirmed by evidence from every field of science, and all scientists believe in it!”

Myself: “Could you give me some examples?”

Skeptic: “Well, there's tons of evidence!”

Myself: “Great, could you share some with me?”

Skeptic: “Well, there are entire books on the subject and college courses!”

Myself: “Again, could you tell me what some of those actual evidences are?”

Skeptic: “Go to the library and get a book or look on Amazon!”

Myself: “So you believe evolution is a fact, because some people (whom you've probably never met) wrote some books on the subject, in which they convey evidence, but you don't know what any of those evidences are. That's fine, but then you should really admit you are exercising faith, which is what you are accusing me of doing. In addition, you are not only exercising faith, but it's actually a blind faith because you aren't familiar with the alleged supportive evidence.”

In keeping with my usual practice, I want to emphasize that you always need to communicate in a respectful manner and consciously fight any urge to be sarcastic or condescending. Your goal should

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be to better understand where they are coming from and share some things they may not have thought of before, getting them to further refine their critical thinking skills, all-the-while, being a Christ-like example.

Here's another argument that is often used by those employing the "elephant hurling" tactic. It involves two forms of false logic, which in Latin are referred to as "*argumentum ad populum*" and "*argumentum ad verecundiam*". Did I just throw those terms in to impress you? Maybe. Actually, I just think they sound really cool! What do they essentially mean? The first one, "*argumentum ad populum*", simply means an appeal to popular belief. "Most people believe something, so therefore it must be true." The second example, "*argumentum ad verecundiam*", means appealing to authority. "A certain authority (or authoritative body) believes something, so therefore it is true."

The setting for the following example I want to share was one of speaking to an audience consisting largely of students and a few faculty members from a Christian university. Immediately following my presentation, we did a segment of Q&A, during which one of the professors very passionately expressed his disagreement with my views, in particular, the idea that the Genesis creation account was meant to be taken literally. He personally believed that evolution was a fact and the creation account was just poetry and we need to view it as such. Afterwards, he approached me directly, continuing to argue his case, during which time he angrily asked, "How can all the scientists be wrong?" This was an appeal to the popular view ("all scientists") and also "from authority", because scientists are often viewed as "knowledge experts", and their conclusions are sound and unbiased.

There are numerous responses I could have offered to his question, but I chose (with the limited time we had) to go a unique route. When he asked, "How can all the scientists be wrong?", I asked him if he thought most scientists believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, to which he replied, "No." I then asked (trying not to grin), "How could all the scientists be wrong?"

What's my point here? Apart from the use of false logic, he was also being inconsistent with his argument. He wanted me to believe that evolution must be a fact, because (in his mind) "all the scientists believe it", and they couldn't all be wrong. On the other hand, he was quite willing to believe that "all the scientists could be wrong" about the Bible being the inspired Word of God.

This also employs another erroneous concept known as "consensus science", which is the general belief that we determine truth by consensus. In other words, if the majority believe something, it is determined to be true. Even though this is practiced way too often, no credible scientist (whether Christian or atheist) would ever agree to this principal. They know that's not how science really works. In fact, many of our currently held beliefs were rejected by the majority of scientists for years, before being accepted as being undeniably true. One example is that of plate tectonics. Antonio Snider (a creationist) was the first to publish the idea that the plates of the earth have moved apart! This was back in 1859. However, his ideas were scoffed at for years and years by the vast majority of scientists. It wasn't until the 1960s that the idea of continental drift was taken seriously and adopted by... the vast majority of scientists! If we simply go by "majority rule" or consensus, then I guess it was a fact that the plates did not move, but now it's a fact that they did move... and moved

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quite a distance! (Now, I don't believe in slow "drift" over millions and millions of years, but rather, catastrophic movements during the Genesis flood... Another topic for another time.) The whole point is that facts of science are not determined by consensus!

Hopefully, this article will help you better recognize when someone uses fallacious arguments and will also help you refine and mature your response.

It's ideal when you have something in common with the person with whom you wish to share your faith. However, it's not always easy to find common ground. You might want to strike up a conversation in general just to get any kind of dialogue going. You could ask, "Do you like baseball?" but what if they respond with, "No, I hate sports!" Their answer caught you off-guard, and you respond by saying, "OK, have a good day" and walk away. How do you find common ground, without trying one thing after another after another, etc.? That's where "starting points" come into play.

As I've mentioned in previous articles, everyone has to start somewhere with their beliefs. It simply can't be avoided. Therefore, you know the person with whom you're speaking has one, whether they realize it or not (most haven't ever really given it much thought).

You could take a very simple, fairly direct approach and jump right in by saying something like, "You know, I was thinking the other day, there are so many different beliefs out there.... Everyone seems to have their own opinion on life. Then it hit me that everyone has to start somewhere with their beliefs, kind of a 'starting point'. Everything else after that will be built upon whatever they've chosen for a starting point. I thought about that for myself and realized that my own starting point is that God exists and the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I then use these two initial beliefs to address any other issues someone might bring up for discussion. Have you ever thought about what your own starting point is, why you've chosen it, and whether or not you are confident it will successfully help you accurately define everything else?"

Now, that truly is a very direct approach, and you might not feel bold enough to "cut-to-the-chase" like that. However, you can also back into a conversation in many different ways. The following is just one example from a personal experience I had just 2 days ago. I was flying from Milwaukee to Tampa and felt compelled to witness to the person sitting next to me. I started by asking if he lived in the Tampa area and was returning home or if he was just visiting. That got the ball rolling. He eventually asked me why I was going to Tampa and I told him I was speaking in the area. I didn't tell him any details regarding what kind of talks I give, but a few minutes later he asked which naturally led into a discussion regarding spiritual issues. Since the topic of God was already broached, I shared the following logical scenario with him.

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Considering the existence of God, we have three options:

1. He created everything, including us, but doesn't care at all about anything. We can be kind to each other or kill each other... He just doesn't care. This option doesn't seem to make sense to anyone. Why would he create all of this and not care whatsoever?
2. He created everything, including us, and does have standards of right and wrong... He just never bothered to tell us what they are! So when we die and are standing before Him, He will say something like, "Yeah, I would have let you into heaven, but what you had to do while on Earth was hop around on your left foot holding a Slinky in your right hand chewing pink bubblegum for 8 ½ minutes... then I would have let you in!" You would say, "I didn't know that!" to which He replies, "Yeah, I know, but that's my standard, too bad!" This option doesn't make sense to people either.
3. He created everything, including us, He does have standards and He told us what they are. That's exactly what the Bible claims to be... the Word of God who created everything, who chose to tell us many things we couldn't possibly know on our own.

Furthermore, it logically follows that if the Bible is truly the inspired Word of God, then everything it says is true and it is the ultimate authority for mankind (and subsequently, the only reliable "starting point"). I went on to share exactly what the Bible says about what God's standards are and how placing your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins is the only way to heaven.

This seemed to make sense to the guy on the plane and led to deeper conversations about his own personal beliefs and even his relationship with his wife and daughter. It's not my intention to record our entire conversation in this article, but simply to show one way of bringing the idea of "starting points" into conversations when you are sharing your faith.

But what if they ask, "But how do you know the Bible is the Word of God?" Or if they say, "Yeah, but I don't believe the Bible." We've addressed these situations in previous articles, but I will also continue to discuss these topics in future articles and in our resources and live broadcasts.

In the meantime, if you have any questions about this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to [contact us!](#)