

## Chapter 14: Inquiry Blockers

### “Don’t Even Ask!”

*In every philosophy there comes the point where the philosopher’s “conviction” enters the scene -- or, in the words of the ancient mystery,  
adventavit asinus / pulcher et fortissimos  
(Enter now the ass, Beautiful and most strong.)*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Inquiry blockers are terms used to put an end to questioning. They often seem to be plausible answers in and of themselves.. In this chapter we examine a variety of them.

Questioning stops naturally in two circumstances. The first is when mutually recognized authority is cited. “Why is that? Because so-and-so (whom we defer to) indicates that it is so.” Why should we take the house plants indoors? Because the weatherman says there will be a frost tonight. End of question. Go on to something else.

The second occasion when questioning stops naturally is when something must be done. We then proceed, often with misgivings and unanswered questions, to take action on the basis of what are only tentative conclusions. For example, we might find a child choking, and, because it is an emergency, administer the Heimlich maneuver even though we are not quite sure what exactly is wrong.

In many disputes, however, questioning is blocked by pseudo-answers. These appear to inform, but in fact cloud reasoning.

### Simple Inquiry-blockers

Consider the following questions and answers:

Question	Inquiry-blocker
1. Why are so many people aggressive?	1. It’s just human nature.
2. Will we ever understand the universe?	2. No. That will always remain a mystery
3. Why do you say he’s dishonest?	3. I just <b>know</b> it, that’s all.
4. How do you know that is right?	4. It’s a matter of intuition.
5. How do you know that?	5. It’s obvious to anyone who: a. isn’t an idiot, pervert or criminal! b. has any common sense.
6. How do you know that?	6. It’s a matter of Faith!
7. Why do you think he’s dangerous?	7. I feel he’s going to hurt somebody.

The problem with these answers is :

1. they contain terms that are in and of themselves vague, even obscure, e.g. *human nature, mystery, conviction, intuition*;
2. Those who offer them as answers will defend them by insisting there is nothing further to explain or that can be explained.
3. It is far from clear how the respondents have come to know what they claim to know. How does any one know *that* something *can't* be explained?
4. They sometimes offer insult in response to a question.
5. Neither faith nor feeling is a guarantee of fact.

Does anyone know what “human nature” is? Is it supposed to be something common to all humans that is basically unchangeable? Most of us have met a minutely small fraction of the five or so billion people on this planet. Even mass studies of populations seldom collect but sparse information on more than a few million. So have can we reasonably speculate about what “human nature” is?

If people call something a “mystery” they might merely mean that they personally don’t know -- or know anybody who knows -- that answer. We have the right to ask, “How do you know it’s a mystery?” “Are you saying that no one can ever know?” “How would you know?”. If they insist on this “mystery, ” it may indicate that they feel their argument is vulnerable: our questioning is “drilling close to the nerve.”

These considerations lead us to some simple steps in dealing with potential inquiry-blockers.

### **Step 1) Identify an inquiry-blocker using these criteria:**

1. they contain terms that are more obscure than those in the original question, e.g. human nature, mystery, conviction, intuition, ;
2. Those who give them as answers will insist there is nothing further that can be explained.

Note that deep conviction or personal testimonials do not guarantee fact. “It is my deepest conviction he is dishonest” is not the same as “He is dishonest.” Nor does “My intuition tells me he is dishonest” establish that he is dishonest.

### **Step 2) To ward off an inquiry-blocker, ask “How do you know that?”**

You may get a perplexed response at this point; maybe an insistent “It’s just obvious!” But, if your respondents go on to offer further explanation, you have succeeded in averting the blockage. If they start to break off conversation, you have a choice to make. Do you want to maintain dialogue? If so, try the following:

**Step 3) Use the same inquiry-blocker to justify a contrary statement. Is there any reason to choose one over the other?**

For example, if a person claims that “It’s human nature to take risks” offer “Perhaps it is human nature to avoid risks” and see if you can pursue discussion on what would count as evidence in favor of one claim or the other.

If your faith is opposed to experience, to human learning and investigation, it is not worth the breath used in giving it expression.

—Edgar Watson Howe

That something is a point of faith does not establish it as a fact. If you ask Christians whether their One God is Three Persons, most will say yes and that they know this as a point of faith in the teachings of their church. If you then consider that according to the Koran, God is One, and that this is a point of faith among millions and millions of Muslims, it seems that the issue is far from settled between Christians and Muslims. Whatever the facts are, that these contradictory beliefs are *points of faith* is not sufficient to resolve the issue. Maybe they don’t have to resolve the issue, so long as they are tolerant of different points of faith.

**Chapter Highlights**

Inquiry blockers are used to end investigation prematurely. Inquiry ends naturally by finding a commonly recognized authority or by adopting a tentative conclusion for the sake of action.

Inquiry blockers contain terms that are in and of themselves obscure, e.g. human nature, mystery, conviction, intuition. Those who offer them as answers will defend them by insisting there is nothing further to explain or that can be explained.

Inquiry blocking can be countered by insisting that the blockers explain how they know that explanation is at an end. If written arguments containing inquiry-blockers offer no justification for the blocking, it indicates a major weakness in the argument.

**Other Related Chapters in This Text**

- |                     |                         |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 4, Definitions      | 8, Presuppositions      |
| 5, Pseudo-solutions | 11, Facts and Feelings  |
| 7, Assumptions      | 18, Continuing Disputes |

**Keywords for Further Data Base Search**

answers	perception	evidence
sense-data	faith	clear and distinct idea
reasons	burden of proof	qualia

## Test Yourself

Reformulate the inquiry-blocking statements given below as question that pursue further inquiry, e.g.

“It is clear he doesn’t know what he is talking about” into

“Does he know what he is talking about?”

1. It’s natural for him to expect more than he deserves.
2. Not you, nor I, nor anyone knows why oats, peas, beans or barley grows.
3. I’m convinced he’s a murderer!
4. A little bird told me she’s in love with him.
5. He feels he should be given a raise.