Let “Theorist” be the name of a proponent of a normative ethical theory, such as Direct Utilitarianism (DU). Let “Objector” be the name of a critic of that theory. Here is a snippet of dialogue between the two:

**Theorist:** An act is right iff it maximizes net utility.

**Objector:** Your theory implies _____, which is unacceptable; since anything that has an unacceptable implication is unacceptable, your theory is unacceptable.

**One possible reply by Theorist:** You're wrong; my theory does not have that implication. Either you misunderstand my theory (in which case, let me explain it to you) or you understand my theory but are misapplying it (on purpose?) to the facts of your case.

**Another possible reply by Theorist:** You're right; my theory has that implication, but, unlike you, I don't find it unacceptable. Though it pains me to accept the implication, I'm willing to accept it because (a) I'm convinced (on other grounds) that my theory is correct and (b) my theory gives the right results in the vast majority of cases, even if not in all cases.

Each of these replies by Theorist has a colorful name, which I expect you to remember. The first reply is known as “grasping [grabbing, taking] the bull by the horn.” The second reply is known as “biting

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1 The English word “proponent,” which derives from the Latin word *proponere* (meaning place in front of), means “a person advocating a motion, theory, or proposal.” *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide* (1999). The corresponding verb is “propound,” which means “offer for consideration; propose” (definition 1). A Direct Utilitarian, therefore, in *propounding* DU, offers it for consideration by others, in the hope that these others will come to accept it, endorse it, adhere to it, or subscribe to it.

2 Other ways to put this are: (a) According to your theory, _____, which is unacceptable; (b) Your theory has the following unacceptable consequence: _____; and (c) If your theory is true, then _____, which is unacceptable.

3 According to dictionary.com, “take the bull by the horns” means “to attack a difficult or risky problem fearlessly.” In propositional logic, it means denying one or both of the conditionals of a constructive dilemma.
In case you’re wondering, a person cannot consistently reply in both ways. (I will spare you the explanation, since this is not a logic course.)

In summary, if someone objects to your theory by claiming that it has an unacceptable implication, you must (logically) do one of the following three things:

1. Grasp the bull by the horn, i.e., deny that your theory has the stated implication.
2. Bite the bullet, i.e., accept the implication, however painful this may be.
3. Abandon the theory.

Please note that, although I ended the dialogue with Theorist’s reply to Objector’s criticism, it could continue indefinitely. For example, Objector might offer a rejoinder to Theorist’s reply; Theorist might respond to Objector’s rejoinder; and so on.

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4 Biting the bullet is “[w]hat philosophers are said to do when they choose to accept the unlikely counterintuitive . . . consequences of their position, rather than taking them as counterexamples. The phrase comes from old movies, in which wounded cowboys bit down on a bullet to help them stand the pain of surgery without anaesthetic.” Robert M. Martin, The Philosopher’s Dictionary, 3d ed. (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2002), 44.