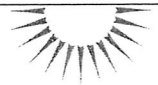
CHAPTER 3



Evaluating Moral Arguments

This much is clear: we cannot escape the ethical facts of life. We often must make moral judgments, assess moral principles or rules, contend with moral theories, and argue the pros and cons of moral issues. Typically we do all of these things believing that in one way or another they *really matter*.

Because we think that ethics (that is, moral *philosophy*) matters, it follows that moral *reasoning* matters, for we could make little headway in these difficult waters without the use of reasons and arguments. Along the way we may take into account our feelings, desires, beliefs, and other factors, but getting to our destination depends mostly on the quality of our moral reasoning. Through moral reasoning we assess what is right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous and vicious. We make and dismantle arguments for this view and for that. In our finest moments, we follow the lead of reason in the search for answers, trying to rise above subjectivism, prejudice, and confusion.

In this chapter you will discover (if you haven't already) that you are no stranger to moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is ordinary critical reasoning applied to ethics. Critical reasoning (or critical thinking) is the careful, systematic evaluation of statements or claims. We use critical reasoning every day to determine whether a statement is worthy of acceptance—that is, whether it is true. We harness critical reasoning to assess the truth of all sorts of claims in all kinds of contexts—personal, professional, academic, philosophical, scientific, political, and ethical. Moral reasoning, then, is not a type of reasoning that you have never seen before.

We therefore begin this chapter with the basics of critical reasoning. The focus is on the skills that are at the heart of this kind of thinking—the formulation and evaluation of logical arguments. The rest of the chapter is about applying critical reasoning to the claims and arguments of ethics.

CLAIMS AND ARGUMENTS

When you use critical reasoning, your ultimate aim is usually to figure out whether to accept, or believe, a statement—either someone else's statement or one of your own. A **statement,** or claim, is an assertion that something is or is not the case; it is either true or false. These are statements:

- The ship sailed on the wind-tossed sea.
- I feel tired and listless.
- Murder is wrong.
- 5 + 5 = 10.
- A circle is not a square.

These statements assert that something is or is not the case. Whether you accept them, reject them, or neither, they are still statements because they are assertions that can be either true or false.

The following, however, are not statements; they do not assert that something is or is not the case:

- Why is Anna laughing?
- Is abortion immoral?
- Hand me the screwdriver.
- Don't speak to me.

- Hello, Webster.
- For heaven's sake!

A fundamental principle of critical reasoning is that we should not accept a statement as true without good reasons. If a statement is supported by good reasons, we are entitled to believe it. The better the reasons supporting a statement, the more likely it is to be true. Our acceptance of a statement, then, can vary in strength. If a statement is supported by strong reasons, we are entitled to believe it strongly. If it is supported by weaker reasons, our belief should likewise be weaker. If the reasons are equivocal—if they do not help us decide one way or another—we should suspend judgment until the evidence is more definitive.

Reasons supporting a statement are themselves statements. To lend credence to another claim, these supporting statements may assert something about scientific evidence, expert opinion, relevant examples, or other considerations. In this way they provide reasons for believing that a statement is true, that what is asserted is actual. When this state of affairs exists—when at least one statement attempts to provide reasons for believing another statement—we have an **argument.** An argument is a group of statements, one of which is supposed to be supported by the rest. An argument in this sense, of course, has nothing to do with the common notion of arguments as shouting matches or vehement quarrels.

In an argument, the supporting statements are known as **premises;** the statement being supported is known as a **conclusion.** Consider these arguments:

Argument 1. Capital punishment is morally permissible because it helps to deter crime.

Argument 2. If John killed Bill in self-defense, he did not commit murder. He did act in self-defense. Therefore, he did not commit murder.

Argument 3. Telling a white lie is morally permissible. We should judge the rightness of an act by its impact on human well-being. If an act increases human well-being, then it is right. Without question, telling a white lie increases human well-being because it spares people's feelings; that's what white lies are for.

These arguments are fairly simple. In Argument 1, a single premise ("because it helps to deter crime") supports a straightforward conclusion—"Capital punishment is morally permissible." Argument 2 has two premises: "If John killed Bill in self-defense, he did not commit murder" and "He did act in self-defense." And the conclusion is "Therefore, he did not commit murder." Argument 3 has three premises: "We should judge the rightness of an act by its impact on human well-being," "If an act increases human well-being, then it is right," and "Without question, telling a white lie increases human well-being because it spares people's feelings." Its conclusion is "Telling a white lie is morally permissible."

As you can see, these three arguments have different structures. Argument 1, for example, has just one premise, but Arguments 2 and 3 have two and three premises. In Arguments 1 and 3, the conclusion is stated first; in Argument 2, last. Obviously, arguments can vary dramatically in their number of premises, in the placement of premises and conclusion, and in the wording of each of these parts. But all arguments share a common pattern: at least one premise is intended to support a conclusion. This pattern is what makes an argument an argument.

Despite the simplicity of this premise-conclusion arrangement, though, arguments are not always easy to identify. They can be embedded in long passages of nonargumentative prose, and nonargumentative prose can often look like arguments. Consider:

> The number of abortions performed in this state is increasing. More and more women say that they favor greater access to abortion. This is an outrage.

Do you see an argument in this passage? You shouldn't, because there is none. The first two sentences are meant to be assertions of fact, and the

last one is an expression of indignation. There is no premise providing reasons to accept a conclusion. But what if we altered the passage to make it an argument? Look:

> The number of abortions performed in this state is increasing, and more and more women say that they favor greater access to abortion. Therefore, in this state the trend among women is toward greater acceptance of abortion.

This is now an argument. There is a conclusion ("Therefore, in this state the trend among women is toward greater acceptance of abortion") supported by two premises ("The number of abortions performed in this state is increasing, and more and more women say that they favor greater access to abortion"). We are given reasons for accepting a claim.

Notice how easy it would be to elaborate on the nonargumentative version, adding other unsupported claims and more expressions of the writer's attitude toward the subject matter. We would end up with a much longer passage piled high with more assertions—but with no argument in sight. Often those who write such passages believe that because they have stated their opinion, they have presented an argument. But a bundle of unsupported claims—however clearly stated—does not an argument make. Only when reasons are given for believing one of these claims is an argument made.

Learning to distinguish arguments from nonargumentative material takes practice. The job gets easier, however, if you pay attention to **indicator words.** Indicator words are terms that often appear in arguments and signal that a premise or conclusion may be nearby. Notice that in the argument about abortion, the word *therefore* indicates that the conclusion follows, and in Argument 1 the word *because* signals the beginning of a premise. In addition to *therefore,* common conclusion indicators include *consequently, hence, it follows that, thus, so, it must be that,* and *as a result.* Besides *because,* some common premise indicators are *since, for, given that, due to the fact that, for the reason that, the reason being, assuming that,* and *as indicated by.*

Understand that indicator words are not foolproof evidence that a premise or conclusion is near. Sometimes words that often function as indicators appear when no argument at all is present. Indicator words are simply hints that an argument may be close by.

Probably the most reliable way to identify arguments is to *always look for the conclusion first.* When you know what claim is being supported, you can more easily see what statements are doing the supporting. A true argument always has something to prove. If there is no statement that the writer is trying to convince you to accept, no argument is present.

Finally, understand that *argumentation* (the presentation of an argument) is not the same thing as *persuasion.* To offer a good argument is to present reasons why a particular assertion is true. To persuade someone of something is to influence her opinion by any number of means, including emotional appeals, linguistic or rhetorical tricks, deception, threats, propaganda, and more. Reasoned argument does not necessarily play any part at all. You may be able to use some of these ploys to persuade people to believe a claim. But if you do, you will not have established that the claim is worth believing. On the other hand, if you articulate a good argument, then you prove something—and others just might be persuaded by your reasoning.

ARGUMENTS GOOD AND BAD

A good argument shows that its conclusion is worthy of belief or acceptance; a bad argument fails to show this. A good argument gives you good reasons to accept a claim; a bad argument proves nothing. So the crucial question is, How can you tell which is which? To start, you can learn more about different kinds of arguments and how they get to be good or bad.

There are two basic types of arguments: **deductive** and **inductive.** Deductive arguments are supposed to give logically conclusive support to their

CRITICAL THOUGHT: The Morality of Critical Thinking

You might be surprised to learn that some philosophers consider reasoning itself a moral issue. That is, they think that believing a claim without good reasons (an unsupported statement) is immoral. Probably the most famous exposition of this point comes from the philosopher and mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–79). He has this to say on the subject:

> It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind . . . and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.*

Do you agree with Clifford? Can you think of a counterexample to his argument—that is, instances in which believing without evidence would be morally permissible? Suppose the power of reason is a gift from God to be used to help you live a good life. If so, would believing without evidence (failing to use critical thinking) be immoral?

*W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Rationality of Belief in God,* ed. George I. Mavrodes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 159–60.

conclusions. Inductive arguments, on the other hand, are supposed to offer only probable support for their conclusions.

Consider this classic deductive argument:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

It is deductive because the support offered for the conclusion is meant to be absolutely unshakable. When a deductive argument actually achieves this kind of conclusive support, it is said to be **valid.** In a valid argument, if the premises are true, then the conclusion absolutely has to be true. In the Socrates argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion *must be true.* The conclusion follows inexorably from the premises. The argument is therefore valid. When a deductive argument does not offer conclusive support for the conclusion, it is said to be **invalid.** In an invalid argument, it is not the case that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true. Suppose the first premise of the Socrates argument was changed to "All ducks are mortal." Then the argument would be invalid because even if the premises were true, the conclusion would not necessarily be true. The conclusion would not follow inexorably from the premises.

Notice that the validity or invalidity of an argument is a matter of its *form,* not its content. The structure of a deductive argument renders it either valid or invalid, and validity is a separate matter from the truth of the argument's statements. Its statements (premises and conclusion) may be either true or false, but that has nothing to do with validity. Saying that an argument is valid means that it has a particular form that ensures that if the premises are true, the conclusion can be nothing but true. There is no way that the premises can be true and the conclusion false.

Recall that there are indicator words that point to the presence of premises and conclusions. There are also indicator words that suggest (but do not prove) that an argument is deductive. Some of the more common terms are *it necessarily follows that, it must be the case that, it logically follows that, conclusively,* and *necessarily.*

Now let us turn to inductive arguments. Examine this one:

Almost all the men at this college have high SAT scores.

Therefore, Julio (a male student at the college) probably has high SAT scores.

This argument is inductive because it is intended to provide probable, not decisive, support to the conclusion. That is, the argument is intended to show only that, at best, the conclusion is probably true. With any inductive argument, it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. An inductive argument that manages to actually give probable support to the conclusion is said to be **strong.** In a strong argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion is probably true (more likely to be true than not). The SAT argument is strong. An inductive argument that does not give probable support to the conclusion is said to be **weak.** In a weak argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion is not probable (not more likely to be true than not true). If we change the first premise in the SAT argument to "Twenty percent of the men at this college have high SAT scores," the argument would be weak.

Like deductive arguments, inductive ones are often accompanied by indicator words. These terms include *probably, likely, in all probability, it is reasonable to suppose that, odds are,* and *chances are.*

Good arguments provide you with good reasons for believing their conclusions. You now know that good arguments must be valid or strong. But they must also have true premises. Good arguments must both have the right form (be valid or strong) and have reliable content (have true premises). Any argument that fails in either of these respects is a bad argument. A valid argument with true premises is said to be **sound;** a strong argument with true premises is said to be **cogent.**

To evaluate an argument is to determine whether it is good or not, and establishing that requires you to check the argument's form and the truth of its premises. You can check the truth of premises in many different ways. Sometimes you can see immediately that a premise is true (or false). At other times you may need to examine a premise more closely or even do some research. Assessing an argument's form is also usually a very straightforward process. With inductive arguments, sometimes common sense is all that's required to see whether they are strong or weak (whether the conclusions follow from the premises). With deductive arguments, just thinking about how the premises are related to the conclusion is often sufficient. In all cases the key to correctly and efficiently determining the validity or strength of arguments is practice.

Fortunately, there are some techniques that can improve your ability to check the validity of deductive arguments. Some deductive forms are so common that just being familiar with them can give you a big advantage. Let's look at some of them.

To begin, understand that you can easily indicate an argument's form by using a kind of standard shorthand, with letters standing for statements. Consider, for example, this argument:

If Maria walks to work, then she will be late.

She is walking to work.

Therefore, she will be late.

Here's how we symbolize this argument's form:

If *p,* then *q.*

p.

Therefore, *q.*

We represent each statement with a letter, thereby laying bare the argument's skeletal form. The first premise is a compound statement, consisting of two constituent statements, *p* and *q.* This particular argument form is known as a *conditional.* A conditional argument has at least one conditional premise—a premise in an if-then pattern (If *p,* then *q*). The two parts of a conditional

premise are known as the *antecedent* (which begins with *if*) and the *consequent* (which follows *then*).

This argument form happens to be very common—so common that it has a name, *modus ponens,* or affirming the antecedent. The first premise is conditional ("If Maria walks to work, then she will be late"), and the second premise affirms the antecedent of that conditional ("She is walking to work"). This form is *always valid:* if the premises are true, the conclusion *has to be true.* Any argument that has this form will be valid regardless of the subject matter.

Another frequently occurring form is known as *modus tollens,* or denying the consequent:

If Maria walks to work, then she will be late.

She will not be late.

Therefore, she will not walk to work.

Symbolized, *modus tollens* looks like this:

If *p,* then *q.*

Not *q.*

Therefore, not *p.*

Modus tollens is always valid, no matter what statements you plug into the formula.

Here are two more common argument forms. These, however, are *always invalid.*

Denying the antecedent:

If Maria walks to work, then she will be late.

She will not walk to work.

Therefore, she will not be late.

If *p,* then *q.*

Not *p.*

Therefore, not *q.*

Affirming the consequent:

If Maria walks to work, then she will be late.

She will be late.

Therefore, she will walk to work.

If *p,* then *q.*

q.

Therefore, *p.*

Do you see the problem with these two? In the first one (denying the antecedent), even a false antecedent (if Maria will not walk to work) doesn't mean that she will not be late. Maybe she will sit at home and be late, or be late for some other reason. When the antecedent is denied, the premises can be true and the conclusion false—clearly an invalid argument. In the second argument (affirming the consequent), even a true consequent (if Maria will be late) doesn't mean that she will walk to work. Some other factor besides her walking could cause Maria to be late. Again, the premises can be true while the conclusion is false—definitely invalid.

Consider one last form, the hypothetical syllogism (*hypothetical* means *conditional;* a *syllogism* is a three-statement deductive argument):

If Maria walks to work, then she will be late.

If she is late, she will be fired.

Therefore, if Maria walks to work, she will be fired.

If *p,* then *q.*

If *q,* then *r.*

Therefore, if *p,* then *r.*

The hypothetical syllogism is a valid argument form. If the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

Obviously, if *modus ponens, modus tollens,* and the hypothetical syllogism are always valid, then any arguments you encounter that have the same form will also be valid. And if denying the antecedent and affirming the consequent are always invalid, any arguments you come across that have the same form will also be invalid. The best way to make use of these facts is to memorize each argument form so you can tell right away when an argument matches one of them—and thereby see immediately that it is valid (or invalid).

But what if you bump into a deductive argument that does not match one of these common forms? You can try the *counterexample method*. This approach is based on a fundamental fact that you already know: *it is impossible for a valid argument to have true premises and a false conclusion*. So to test the validity of an argument, you first invent a twin argument that has exactly the same form as the argument you are examining—but you try to give this new argument true premises and a false conclusion. If you can construct such an argument, you have proven that your original argument is invalid.

Suppose you want to test this argument for validity:

If capital punishment deters crime, then the number of death row inmates will decrease over time.

But capital punishment does not deter crime.

Therefore, the number of death row inmates will not decrease over time.

You can probably see right away that this argument is an example of denying the antecedent, an invalid form. But for the sake of example, let's use the counterexample method in this case. Suppose we come up with this twin argument:

If lizards are mammals, then they have legs.

But they are not mammals.

Therefore, they do not have legs.

We have invented a twin argument that has true premises and a false conclusion, so we know that the original argument is invalid.

QUICK REVIEW

statement—An assertion that something is or is not the case.

argument—A group of statements, one of which is supposed to be supported by the rest.

premise—A supporting statement in an argument.

conclusion—The statement supported in an argument.

indicator words—Terms that often appear in arguments to signal the presence of a premise or conclusion, or to indicate that an argument is deductive or inductive.

deductive argument—An argument that is supposed to give logically conclusive support to its conclusion.

inductive argument—An argument that is supposed to offer probable support to its conclusion.

valid argument—A deductive argument that does in fact provide logically conclusive support for its conclusion.

invalid argument—A deductive argument that does not offer logically conclusive support for the conclusion.

strong argument—An inductive argument that does in fact provide probable support for its conclusion.

weak argument—An inductive argument that does not give probable support to the conclusion.

sound argument—A valid argument with true premises.

cogent argument—A strong argument with true premises.

IMPLIED PREMISES

Most of the arguments that we encounter in everyday life are embedded in larger tracts of nonargumentative prose—in essays, reports, letters to the editor, editorials, and the like. The challenge is to pick out the premises and conclusions and evaluate the assembled arguments. In many cases, though, there is an additional obstacle: some premises may be implied instead of stated. Sometimes the premises are implicit because they are too obvious to

mention; readers mentally fill in the blanks. But in most cases, implicit premises should not be left unstated. It is often unclear what premises have been assumed; and unless these are spelled out, argument evaluation becomes difficult or impossible. More to the point, unstated premises are often the most dubious parts of an argument. This problem is especially common in moral arguments, where the implicit premises are frequently the most controversial and the most in need of close scrutiny.

Here is a typical argument with an unstated premise:

> The use of condoms is completely unnatural. They have been manufactured for the explicit purpose of interfering with the natural process of procreation. Therefore, the use of condoms should be banned.

In this argument, the first two sentences constitute a single premise, the gist of which is that using condoms is unnatural. The conclusion is that the use of condoms should be banned. This conclusion, however, does not follow from the stated premise. There is a logical gap between premise and conclusion. The argument will work only if the missing premise is supplied. Here's a good possibility: "Anything that interferes with a natural process should not be allowed." The argument then becomes:

> The use of condoms is completely unnatural. They have been manufactured for the explicit purpose of interfering with the natural process of procreation. Anything that interferes with a natural process should not be allowed. Therefore, the use of condoms should be banned.

By adding the implicit premise, we have filled out the argument, making it valid and a little less mysterious. But now that the missing premise has been brought out into the open, we can see that it is dubious or, at least, controversial. Should everything that interferes with a natural process be banned? If so, we would have to ban antibiotics, anticancer drugs, deodorants, and automobiles. (Later in this chapter, ways to judge the truth of moral premises are discussed.)

When you evaluate an argument, you should try to explicitly state any implied premise (or premises) when (1) there seems to be a logical gap between premises or between premises and the conclusion and (2) the missing material is not a commonsense assumption. In general, the supplied premise should make the argument valid (when the argument is supposed to be deductive) or strong (when the argument is supposed to be inductive). It should also be *plausible* (as close to the truth as possible) and *fitting* (coinciding with what you think is the author's intent). The point of these stipulations is that when you supply a missing premise, you should be fair and honest, expressing it in such a way that the argument is as solid as possible and in keeping with the author's purpose. Adding a premise that renders an argument ridiculous is easy, and so is distorting the author's intent—and with neither tack are you likely to learn anything or uncover the truth.

Be aware, though, that some arguments are irredeemably bad, and no supplied premise that is properly made can save them. They cannot be turned into good arguments without altering them beyond recognition or original intent. You need not take these arguments seriously, and the responsibility of recasting them lies with those who offer them.

DECONSTRUCTING ARGUMENTS

In the real world, arguments do not come neatly labeled, their parts identified and their relationships laid bare. So you have to do the labeling and connecting yourself, and that can be hard work. Where are the premises and the conclusion? Are there implied premises? What statements are irrelevant to the argument, just background or window dressing? How are all these pieces related? Fortunately there is a tool that can help you penetrate all the verbiage to uncover the essential argument (or arguments) within: *argument diagramming*.

So let's try to diagram the argument in this passage:

> In 2003 the United States attacked Iraq and thereby started a war. President Bush justified his decision to go to war by saying that the action was necessary to preempt Iraq from launching a military strike against the United States. But the obvious question about the war has hardly been addressed and rarely answered: Was the United States morally justified in going to war against Iraq? I think just war theory gives us an answer. The theory says a preemptive attack against a state is justified only if that state presents a substantial danger that is "immediate and imminent." That is, to meet this criterion, an attack by an aggressor nation must be in the final planning stages—an attack must not be merely feared, but about to happen. If invading Iraq were justified, there would have been clear indications of Iraq's final preparations to attack the United States. But there were no such indications. There was only a fantasy about Iraq's having weapons of mass destruction, and in the Bush administration, there was only the fear that the Iraqis were up to no good. In addition, because there was no serious attempt by the United States to try to find a peaceful solution, the war was premature and therefore unjust. Most news accounts at the time reveal that steps by the United States to head off war were halfhearted at best. Finally, the war was unjustified because it violated the moral standard that must be met by any war: The cause of the war must be just. Consequently we are forced to conclude that the war in Iraq was not morally justified.

The first step is to number all the statements for identification and underline any premise or conclusion indicator words. (Note: We count an if-then, or conditional, statement as one statement, and we count multiple statements in a compound sentence separately.) Next we search for the conclusion and draw a double line under it. Locating the conclusion can then help us find the premises, which we tag by underlining them. The marked-up passage then should look like this:

> (1) In 2003 the United States attacked Iraq and thereby started a war. (2) President Bush justified his decision to go to war by saying that the action was necessary to preempt Iraq from launching a military strike against the United States. (3) But the obvious question about the war has hardly been addressed and rarely answered: Was the United States morally justified in going to war against Iraq? (4) I think just war theory gives us an answer. (5) The theory says a preemptive attack against a state is justified only if that state presents a substantial danger that is "immediate and imminent." (6) That is, to meet this criterion, an attack by an aggressor nation must be in the final planning stages—an attack must not be merely feared, but about to happen. (7) If invading Iraq were justified, there would have been clear indications of Iraq's final preparations to attack the United States. (8) But there were no such indications. (9) There was only a fantasy about Iraq's having weapons of mass destruction, (10) and in the Bush administration, there was only the fear that the Iraqis were up to no good. (11) In addition, because there was no serious attempt by the United States to try to find a peaceful solution, the war was premature and therefore unjust. (12) Most news accounts at the time reveal that steps by the United States to head off war were halfhearted at best. (13) Finally, the war was unjustified because it violated the moral standard that must be met by any war: The cause of the war must be just. (14) Consequently we are forced to conclude that the war in Iraq was not morally justified.

A key reason for diagramming is to distinguish the premises and conclusions from everything else: background information, redundancies, asides, clarifications, illustrations, and any other material that is logically irrelevant to the argument (or arguments). So the next step is to cross out these irrelevancies, like this:

> (1) ~~In 2003 the United States attacked Iraq and thereby started a war that continues to this day.~~ (2) ~~President Bush justified his decision to go to war by saying that the action was necessary to preempt Iraq from launching a military strike against the United States.~~ (3) ~~But the obvious question about the war has hardly been addressed and rarely answered: Was the United States morally justified in going to war against Iraq?~~ (4) ~~I think just war theory gives us an answer.~~ (5) ~~The theory says a preemptive attack~~

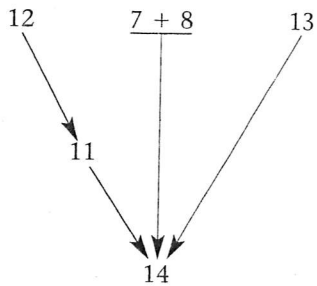
~~against a state is justified only if that state presents a substantial danger that is "immediate and imminent."~~ (6) ~~That is, to meet this criterion, an attack by an aggressor nation must be in the final planning stages—an attack must not be merely feared, but about to happen.~~ (7) If invading Iraq were justified, there would have been clear indications of Iraq's final preparations to attack the United States. (8) But there were no such indications. (9) ~~There was only a fantasy about Iraq's having weapons of mass destruction,~~ (10) ~~and in the Bush administration, there was only the fear that the Iraqis were up to no good.~~ (11) In addition, because there was no serious attempt by the United States to try to find a peaceful solution, the war was premature and therefore unjust. (12) Most news accounts at the time reveal that steps by the United States to head off war were halfhearted at best. (13) Finally, the war was unjustified because it violated the moral standard that must be met by any war: The cause of the war must be just. (14) Consequently we are forced to conclude that the war in Iraq was not morally justified.

We now can see that most of this passage is logically extraneous material. Statements 1 through 6 are background information and introductory remarks. Statement 3, for example, is an assertion of the issue to be addressed in the passage. Statements 9 and 10 are embellishments of Statement 8.

The premises and conclusion are asserted in Statements 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 14:

> (7) If invading Iraq were justified, there would have been clear indications of Iraq's final preparations to attack the United States.
> (8) But there were no such indications.
> (11) In addition, because there was no serious attempt by the United States to try to find a peaceful solution, the war was premature and therefore unjust.
> (12) Most news accounts at the time reveal that steps by the United States to head off war were halfhearted at best.
> (13) Finally, the war was unjustified because it violated the moral standard that must be met by any war: The cause of the war must be just.
> (14) Consequently we are forced to conclude that the war in Iraq was not morally justified.

But how are these statements related? To find out, we draw a diagram. Using the numbers to represent the premises and conclusion, we write down the number for the conclusion and place the numbers for the premises above it. Then to show how the premises support the conclusion, we draw arrows from the premises to the conclusion. Each arrow indicates the logical connection between premise and conclusion, representing such expressions as "Premise 11 supports the Conclusion (14)" or "the Conclusion (14) is supported by Premise 11." Here's the completed diagram:



In the simplest relationship depicted here, Premise 13 provides direct support to the conclusion. Premise 11 also supplies direct support to the Conclusion (14), and this premise in turn is backed up by Premise 12. (See how an arrow goes from 11 to 14, and then from 12 to 11.) Premises 7 and 8 are linked to the conclusion in a different way, reflecting the fact that some premises are *dependent* and some are *independent*. An independent premise (such as Premise 13) supports a conclusion without relying on any other premises; a dependent premise gives little or no support on its own and requires the assistance of at least one other premise. Premises 7 and 8 are dependent premises and are joined by a plus sign to represent this fact. Together, Premises 7 and 8 provide support to the conclusion; they give a reason for accepting it. But if either premise is deleted, the remaining premise can provide no substantial support.

As you work through the diagramming exercises at the end of this chapter, you will come to

understand why diagramming arguments can be so useful. You will learn a great deal about the structure of arguments—which is a prerequisite for being able to devise, deconstruct, and evaluate them.

MORAL STATEMENTS AND ARGUMENTS

When we deliberate about the rightness of our actions, make careful moral judgments about the character or behavior of others, or strive to resolve complex ethical issues, we are usually making or critiquing moral arguments—or trying to. And rightly so. To a remarkable degree, moral arguments are the vehicles that move ethical thinking and discourse along. The rest of this chapter should give you a demonstration of how far skill in devising and evaluating moral arguments can take you.

Recall that arguments are made up of statements (premises and conclusions), and thus moral arguments are too. What makes an argument a moral argument is that its conclusion is always a moral statement. A **moral statement** is a statement affirming that an action is right or wrong or that a person (or one's motive or character) is good or bad. These are moral statements:

- Capital punishment is wrong.
- Jena should not have lied.
- You ought to treat him as he treated you.
- Tania is a good person.
- Cruelty to animals is immoral.

Notice the use of the terms *wrong, should, ought, good,* and *immoral.* Such words are the mainstays of moral discourse, though some of them (for example, *good* and *wrong*) are also used in nonmoral senses.

Nonmoral statements are very different. They do not affirm that an action is right or wrong or that a person is good or bad. They assert that a state of affairs is actual (true or false) but do not assign a moral value to it. Most of the statements that we encounter every day are nonmoral. Of course, nonmoral statements may assert nonmoral normative judgments, such as "This is a good library" or "Jack ought to invest in stocks," but these are clearly not moral statements. They may also describe a state of affairs that touches on moral concerns—without *being* moral statements. For example:

- Many people think that capital punishment is wrong.
- Jena did not lie.
- You treated him as he treated you.
- Tania tries to be a good person.
- Animals are treated cruelly.

Now we can be more specific about the structure of moral arguments. A typical moral argument consists of premises and a conclusion, just as any other kind of argument does, with the conclusion being a moral statement, or judgment. The premises, however, are a combination of the moral and nonmoral. At least one premise must be a moral statement affirming a moral principle or rule (a general moral standard), and at least one premise must be a nonmoral statement about a state of affairs, usually a specific type of action. Beyond these simple requirements, the structure of moral arguments can vary in standard ways: there may be many premises or few; premises may be implicit not overt; and extraneous material may be present or absent. Take a look at this moral argument:

1. Committing a violent act to defend yourself against physical attack is morally permissible.
2. Assaulting someone who is attacking you is a violent act of self-defense.
3. Therefore, assaulting someone who is attacking you is morally permissible.

Premise 1 is a moral statement asserting a general moral principle about the rightness of a category of actions (violent acts in self-defense).

Premise 2 is a nonmoral statement about the characteristics of a specific kind of action (violent acts against someone who is attacking you). It asserts that a specific kind of action falls under the general moral principle expressed in Premise 1. Premise 3, the conclusion, is a moral judgment about the rightness of the specific kind of action in light of the general moral principle.

Why must we have at least one premise that is a moral statement? Without a moral premise, the argument would not get off the ground. We cannot infer a moral statement (conclusion) from a nonmoral statement (premise). That is, we cannot reason that a moral statement must be true because a nonmoral state of affairs is actual. Or as philosophers say, we cannot establish what *ought to be* or *should be* solely on the basis of on what *is*. What if our self-defense argument contained no moral premise? Look:

2. Assaulting a person who is attacking you is a violent act of self-defense.
3. Therefore, assaulting a person who is attacking you is morally permissible.

The conclusion no longer follows. It says something about the rightness of an action, but the premise asserts nothing about rightness—it just characterizes the nonmoral aspects of an action. Perhaps the action described is morally permissible, or perhaps it is not—Premise 2 does not say.

Another example:

1. Not using every medical means available to keep a seriously ill newborn infant alive is allowing the infant to die.
3. Therefore, not using every medical means available to keep a seriously ill newborn infant alive is wrong.

As it stands, this argument is seriously flawed. The conclusion (a moral statement) does not follow from the nonmoral premise. Even if we know that "not using every medical means" is equivalent to allowing a seriously ill newborn to die, we cannot then conclude that the action is wrong. We need a premise making that assertion:

2. Allowing terminally ill newborn infants to die is wrong.

Here's the complete argument:

1. Not using every medical means available to keep a seriously ill newborn infant alive is allowing the infant to die.
2. Allowing terminally ill newborn infants to die is wrong.
3. Therefore, not using every medical means available to keep a seriously ill newborn infant alive is wrong.

A nonmoral premise is also necessary in a moral argument. Why exactly? Recall that the conclusion of a typical moral argument is a moral judgment, or claim, about a particular kind of action. The moral premise is a general moral principle, or standard, concerning a wider category of actions. But we cannot infer a statement (conclusion) about a *particular kind of action* from a moral statement (premise) about a *broad category of actions*—unless we have a nonmoral premise to link the two. We saw, for example, that we cannot infer from the general principle that "committing a violent act to defend yourself . . . is morally permissible" the conclusion that "assaulting a person who is attacking you is morally permissible" unless a nonmoral premise tells us that assaulting a person who is attacking you is an instance of self-defense. (The nonmoral premise may seem obvious here, but not everyone would agree that violence against a person who is attacking you is an example of self-defense. Some might claim that such violence is an unnecessary act of retaliation or revenge.) The role of the nonmoral premise, then, is to affirm that the general moral principle does indeed apply to the particular case.

Unfortunately, both moral and nonmoral premises are often left unstated in moral arguments. As

we noted earlier, making implicit premises explicit is always a good idea, but in moral arguments it is critical. The unseen premises (an argument may have several) are the ones most likely to be dubious or unfounded, a problem that can arise whether an argument is yours or someone else's. Too many times, unstated premises are assumptions that you may be barely aware of; they might be the true, unacknowledged source of disagreement between you and others. No premise should be left unexamined. (More about assessing the truth of premises in the next section.)

The general guidelines discussed earlier about uncovering unstated premises apply to moral arguments—but we need to add a proviso. Remember, in a moral argument, as in any other kind of argument, you have good reason to look for implicit premises if there is a logical gap between premises, and the missing premise is not simply common sense. And any premise you supply should be both plausible and fitting. But note: The easiest way to identify implied premises in a moral argument is to treat it as *deductive*. Approaching moral arguments this way helps you not only find implied premises but also assess the worth of *all* the premises.

For example:

1. The use of capital punishment does not deter crime.
2. Therefore, the use of capital punishment is immoral.

This is an invalid argument. Even if the premise is true, the conclusion does not follow from it. The argument needs a premise that can bridge the gap between the current premise and the conclusion. So we should ask, "What premise can we add that will be plausible and fitting *and* make the argument valid?" This premise will do: "Administering a punishment to criminals that does not deter crime is immoral." The argument then becomes:

1. Administering a punishment to criminals that does not deter crime is immoral.
2. The use of capital punishment does not deter crime.
3. Therefore, the use of capital punishment is immoral.

Now the argument is valid, and trying to make it valid has helped us find at least one premise that might work. Moreover, if we know that the argument is valid, we can focus our inquiry on the truth of the premises. After all, if there is something wrong with a valid argument (that is, if the argument is not sound), we know that the trouble is in the premises—specifically, that at least one premise must be false. To put it another way, whether or not such an argument is a good argument depends entirely on the truth of the premises.

As it turns out, our added premise is a general moral principle. And like many implied premises, it is questionable. Deterrence is not necessarily the only reason for administering punishment. Some would say that justice is a better reason; others, that rehabilitation is. (The second premise is also dubious, but we won't worry about that now.)

In any case, if the supplied premise renders the argument valid, and the premise is plausible and fitting, we can then conclude that we have filled out the argument properly. We can then examine the resulting argument and either accept or reject it. And if we wish to explore the issue at greater depth, we can overhaul the argument altogether to see what we can learn. We can radically change or add premises until we have a sound argument or at least a valid one with plausible premises.

TESTING MORAL PREMISES

But how can we evaluate moral premises? After all, we cannot check them by consulting a scientific study or opinion poll as we might when examining nonmoral premises. Usually the best approach is to use counterexamples.

If we want to test a universal generalization such as "All dogs have tails," we can look for

counterexamples—instances that prove the generalization false. All we have to do to show that the statement "All dogs have tails" is false is to find one tailless dog. And a thorough search for tailless dogs is a way to check the generalization. Likewise, if we want to test a moral premise (a variety of universal generalization), we can look for counterexamples.

Examine this valid moral argument:

1. Causing a person's death is wrong.
2. Individuals in a deep, irreversible coma are incapacitated persons.
3. "Pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing a person to die.
4. Therefore, "pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is wrong.

Premise 1 is the moral premise, a general moral principle about killing. Premises 2 and 3 are nonmoral premises. (Premise 2 is entailed by Premise 3, but we separate the two to emphasize the importance to this argument of the concept of personhood.) Statement 4, of course, is the conclusion, the verdict that causing someone in a deep coma to die is immoral.

Is Premise 1 true? It is at least dubious, because counterexamples abound in which the principle seems false. Is it wrong to kill one person to save a hundred? Is it wrong to kill a person in self-defense? Is it wrong to kill a person in wartime? As it stands, Premise 1 seems implausible.

To salvage the argument, we can revise Premise 1 (as well as Premise 3) to try to make it impervious to counterexamples. We can change it like this:

1. Causing the death of a person who is incapacitated is wrong.
2. Individuals in a deep, irreversible coma are persons.
3. "Pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing an incapacitated person to die.
4. Therefore, "pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is wrong.

Premise 1 now seems a bit more reasonable. In its current form, it rules out the counterexamples involving self-defense and war. But it does not escape the killing-to-save-lives counterexample. In some circumstances it may be morally permissible to kill someone to save many others, even if the person is incapacitated. To get around this problem, we can amend Premise 1 so the counterexample is no longer a threat (and make a corresponding change in the conclusion). For example:

1. Causing the death of a person who is incapacitated is wrong, except to save lives.
2. Individuals in a deep, irreversible coma are persons.
3. "Pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing an incapacitated person to die.
4. Therefore, "pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is wrong, except to save lives.

Premise 1 now seems much closer to being correct than before. It may not be flawless, but it is much improved. By considering counterexamples, we have made the whole argument better.

Checking a moral premise against possible counterexamples is a way to consult our considered moral judgments, a topic we broached in Chapter 1 and take up again in Part 3 (Theories of Morality). If our considered moral judgments are at odds with a moral premise that is based on a cherished moral principle or moral theory, we may have a prima facie (at first sight) reason to doubt not only the premise but also the principle or theory from which it is derived. We may then need to reexamine the claims involved and how they are related. If we do, we may find that our judgments are on solid ground and the premise, principle, or theory needs to be adjusted—or vice versa. If our purpose is solely to evaluate a moral

premise in an argument, we need not carry our investigation this far. But we should understand that widening our investigation may sometimes be appropriate and that our moral beliefs are often more interconnected than we might realize. Our ultimate goal should be to ensure that all our moral beliefs are as logically consistent as we can make them.

ASSESSING NONMORAL PREMISES

Sometimes the sticking point in a moral argument is not a moral premise but a nonmoral one—a claim about a nonmoral state of affairs. Often people on both sides of a dispute may agree on a moral principle but differ dramatically on the nonmoral facts. Usually these facts concern the consequences of an action or the characteristics of the parties involved. Does pornography cause people to commit sex crimes? Does capital punishment deter crime? Is a depressed person competent to decide whether to commit suicide? When does a fetus become viable? Are African Americans underrepresented among executives in corporate America? Does gay marriage undermine the institution of heterosexual marriage? These and countless other questions arise—and must be answered—as we try to develop and analyze moral arguments.

The most important principle to remember is that nonmoral premises, like all premises, *must be supported by good reasons*. As we have already seen, simply believing or asserting a claim does not make it so. We should insist that our own nonmoral premises and those of others be backed by reliable scientific research, the opinions of trustworthy experts, pertinent examples and analogies, historical records, or our own background knowledge (claims that we have excellent reasons to believe).

Ensuring that nonmoral premises are supported by good reasons is sometimes difficult but always worth the effort. The process begins by simply asking, "Is this statement true?" and "What reasons do I have for believing this?"

QUICK REVIEW

- Look for an implicit premise when (1) there seems to be a logical gap between premises or between premises and the conclusion; and (2) the missing material is not a commonplace assumption.
- Any supplied unstated premise should be valid or strong, plausible, and fitting.
- A typical moral argument has at least one moral premise and at least one nonmoral premise.
- The easiest way to identify implied premises in a moral argument is to treat it as deductive.
- Test moral premises with counterexamples.

moral statement—A statement affirming that an action is right or wrong or that a person (or one's motive or character) is good or bad.

nonmoral statement—A statement that does not affirm that an action is right or wrong or that a person (or one's motive or character) is good or bad.

In your search for answers, keep the following in mind:

1. *Use reliable sources.* If you have reason to doubt the accuracy of a source, do not use it. Doubt it if it produces statements you know to be false, ignores reliable data (such as the latest scientific research), or has a track record of presenting inaccurate information or dubious arguments. Make sure that any experts you rely on are in fact experts in their chosen field. In general, true experts have the requisite education and training, the relevant experience in making reliable judgments, and a good reputation among peers.

Probably every major moral issue discussed in this book is associated with numerous advocacy groups, each one devoted to promoting its particular view of things. Too often the information

coming from many of these groups is unreliable. Do not automatically assume otherwise. Double-check any information you get from them with sources you know are reliable and see if it is supported by scientific studies, expert opinion, or other evidence.

2. *Beware when evidence conflicts.* You have good reason to doubt a statement if it conflicts with other statements you think are well supported. If your nonmoral premise is inconsistent with another claim you believe is true, you cannot simply choose the one you like best. To resolve the conflict, you must evaluate them both by weighing the evidence for each one.

3. *Let reason rule.* Deliberating on moral issues is serious business, often involving the questioning of cherished views and the stirring of strong feelings. Many times the temptation to dispense with reason and blindly embrace a favorite outlook is enormous. This common—and very human—predicament can lead us to veer far from the relevant evidence and true nonmoral premises. Specifically, we may reject or disregard evidence that conflicts with what we most want to believe. We may even try to pretend that the conflicting evidence actually supports our preconceptions. Yet resisting the relevant evidence is just one side of the coin. We may also look for and find only evidence that supports what we want to believe, going around the world to confirm our prejudices.

Our best chance to avert these tendencies is to try hard to be both critical and fair—to make a deliberate effort to examine *all* the relevant evidence, the information both for and against our preferred beliefs. After all, the point of assessing a moral argument is to discover the truth. We must be brave enough to let the evidence point where it will.

AVOIDING BAD ARGUMENTS

Recall that a good argument has true premises plus a conclusion that follows from those premises. A bad argument fails at least one of these conditions—it has a false premise or a conclusion that does not follow. This failure, however, can appear in many different argument forms, some of which are extremely common. These commonly bad arguments are known as *fallacies*. They are so distinctive and are used so often that they have been given names and are usually covered in courses on critical reasoning. Though flawed, fallacies are often persuasive and frequently employed to mislead the unwary—even in (or *especially* in) moral reasoning. The best way to avoid using fallacies—or being taken in by them—is to study them so you know how they work and can easily identify them. The following is a brief review of some fallacies that are most prevalent in moral argumentation.

Begging the Question

Begging the question is the fallacy of arguing in a circle—that is, trying to use a statement as both a premise in an argument and the conclusion of that argument. Such an argument says, in effect, *p* is true because *p* is true. That kind of reasoning, of course, proves nothing.

For example:

1. Women in Muslim countries, regardless of their social status and economic limitations, are entitled to certain rights, including but not necessarily limited to suffrage.
2. Therefore, all women in Muslim countries have the right to vote in political elections.

This argument is equivalent to saying "Women in Muslim countries have a right to vote because women in Muslim countries have a right to vote." The conclusion merely repeats the premise but in different words. The best protection against circular reasoning is a close reading of the argument.

Equivocation

The fallacy of **equivocation** assigns two different meanings to the same term in an argument. Here's an example that, in one form or another, is commonplace in the abortion debate:

1. A fetus is an individual that is indisputably human.
2. A human is endowed with rights that cannot be invalidated, including a right to life.
3. Therefore, a fetus has a right to life.

This argument equivocates on the word *human*. In Premise 1, the term means physiologically human, as in having human DNA. This claim, of course, is indeed indisputable. But in Premise 2, *human* is used in the sense of *person*—that is, an individual having full moral rights. Since the premises refer to two different things, the conclusion does not follow. If you are not paying close attention, though, you might not detect the equivocation and accept the argument as it is.

Appeal to Authority

This is the fallacy of relying on the opinion of someone thought to be an expert who is not. An expert, of course, can be a source of reliable information—but only if he really is an authority in the designated subject area. A true expert is someone who is both knowledgeable about the facts and able to make reliable judgments about them. Ultimately, experts are experts because they carefully base their opinions on the available evidence.

We make a fallacious **appeal to authority** when we (1) cite experts who are not experts in the field under discussion (though they may be experts in some other field) or (2) cite nonexperts as experts. Expertise in one field does not automatically carry over to another, and even nonexperts who are prestigious and famous are still just nonexperts. In general, on subjects outside an expert's area of expertise, her opinions are no more reliable than those of nonexperts.

Two rules of thumb should guide your use of expert opinion. First, if a claim conflicts with the consensus of opinion among experts, you have good reason to doubt the claim. Second, if experts disagree about a claim, you again have good reason to doubt it.

Slippery Slope

Slippery slope is the fallacy of using dubious premises to argue that doing a particular action will inevitably lead to other actions that will result in disaster, so you should not do that first action. This way of arguing is perfectly legitimate if the

Appeal to Emotion

Emotions have a role to play in the moral life. In moral arguments, however, the use of emotions alone as substitutes for premises is a fallacy. We commit this fallacy when we try to convince someone to accept a conclusion not by providing them with relevant reasons but by appealing only to fear, guilt, anger, hate, compassion, and the like. For example:

> The defendant is obviously guilty of murder in this case. Look at him in the courtroom—he's terrifying and menacing. And no one can ignore the way he stabbed that girl and mutilated her body. And her poor parents. . . .

The question here is whether the defendant committed the crime, and the feelings of fear and pity that he evokes are not relevant to it. But if the question were about the anguish or torment inflicted on the victim or her parents, then our feelings of empathy would indeed be relevant—and so would any pertinent moral principles or theories.

premises are solid—that is, if there are good reasons to believe that the first step really will lead to ruin. Consider:

1. Rampant proliferation of pornography on the Internet leads to obsession with pornographic materials.
2. Obsession with pornographic materials disrupts relationships, and that disruption leads to divorce.
3. Therefore, we should ban pornography on the Internet.

Perhaps the chain of events laid out here could actually occur, but we have been given no reason to believe that it would. (You can see that this argument is also missing a moral premise.) Scientific evidence showing that this sequence of cause and effect does occur as described would constitute good reason to accept Premises 1 and 2.

Faulty Analogy

The use of an analogy to argue for a conclusion is known, not surprisingly, as argument by analogy. It is a type of inductive argument that says because two things are alike in some ways, they must be alike in some additional way. For example:

1. Humans feel pain, care for their young, live in social groups, and understand nuclear physics.
2. Apes also feel pain, care for their young, and live in social groups.
3. Therefore, apes can understand nuclear physics.

In argument by analogy, the probability that the conclusion is true depends on the relevant similarities between the two things being compared. The greater the relevant similarities, the more likely the conclusion is true. Humans and apes are relevantly similar in several ways, but the question is, Are they relevantly similar enough to render the conclusion probable? In this case, though humans and apes are similar in some ways, they are not relevantly similar enough to adequately support the conclusion. Humans and apes have many differences—the most relevant of which for this argument is probably in the physiology of their brains and in their capacity for advanced learning.

Arguments by analogy are common in moral reasoning. For example:

1. When a neighbor needs your help (as when he needs to borrow your garden hose to put out a fire in his house), it is morally permissible to lend the neighbor what he needs.
2. Britain is a neighbor of the United States, and it is in dire need of help to win the war against Germany.
3. Therefore, it is morally permissible for the United States to lend Britain the material and equipment it needs to defeat Germany.

This is roughly the moral argument that President Franklin Roosevelt made during World War II to convince Americans to aid Britain in its struggle. The strength of the argument depends on the degree of similarity between the two situations described. At the time, many Americans thought the argument strong.

The fallacy of **faulty analogy** is arguing by an analogy that is weak. In strong arguments by analogy, not only must the degree of similarity be great but also the similarities must be relevant. This means that the similarities must relate specifically to the conclusion. Irrelevant similarities cannot strengthen an argument.

Appeal to Ignorance

This fallacy consists of arguing that the *absence of evidence* entitles us to believe a claim. Consider these two arguments:

- No one has proven that the fetus is not a person, so it is in fact a person.
- It is obviously false that a fetus is a person, because science has not proven that it is a person.

Both these arguments are **appeals to ignorance.** The first one says that because a statement has not been proven false, it must be true. The second one has things the other way around: because a statement has not been proven true, it must be false. The problem in both these is that a *lack* of evidence cannot be evidence for anything. A dearth of evidence simply indicates that we are ignorant of the facts. If having no evidence could prove something, we could prove all sorts of outrageous claims. We could argue that because no one has proven that there are no space aliens controlling all our moral decisions, there are in fact space aliens controlling all our moral decisions.

Straw Man

Unfortunately, this fallacy is rampant in debates about moral issues. It amounts to misrepresenting someone's claim or argument so it can be more easily refuted. For example, suppose you are trying to argue that a code of ethics for your professional group should be secular so that it can be appreciated and used by as many people as possible, regardless of their religious views. Suppose further that your opponent argues against your claim in this fashion:

> X obviously wants to strip religious faith away from every member of our profession and to banish religion from the realm of ethics. We should not let this happen. We should not let X have his way. Vote against the secular code of ethics.

This argument misrepresents your view, distorting it so that it seems outrageous and unacceptable. Your opponent argues against the distorted version and then concludes that your (original) position should be rejected.

The **straw man** fallacy is not just a bad argument—it flies in the face of the spirit of moral reasoning, which is about seeking understanding through critical thinking and honest and fair exploration of issues. If you agree with this approach, then you should not use the straw man fallacy—and you should beware of its use by others.

Appeal to the Person

Appeal to the person (also known as *ad hominem*) is arguing that a claim should be rejected solely because of the characteristics of the person who makes it. Look at these:

- We should reject Alice's assertion that cheating on your taxes is wrong. She's a political libertarian.
- Jerome argues that we should all give a portion of our income to feed the hungry people of the world. But that's just what you'd expect a rich guy like him to say. Ignore him.
- Maria says that animals have rights and that we shouldn't use animal products on moral grounds. Don't believe a word of it. She owns a fur coat—she's a big hypocrite.

In each of these arguments, a claim is rejected on the grounds that the person making it has a particular character, political affiliation, or motive. Such personal characteristics, however, are irrelevant to the truth of a claim. A claim must stand or fall on its own merits. Whether a statement is true or false, it must be judged according to the quality of the reasoning and evidence behind it. Bad people can construct good arguments; good people can construct bad arguments.

Hasty Generalization

Hasty generalization is a fallacy of inductive reasoning. It is the mistake of drawing a conclusion about an entire group of people or things based on an undersized sample of the group.

- In this town three pro-life demonstrators have been arrested for trespassing or assault. I'm telling you, pro-lifers are lawbreakers.
- In the past thirty years, at least two people on death row in this state have been executed and later found to be innocent by DNA evidence. Why is the state constantly executing innocent people?

QUICK REVIEW

begging the question—The fallacy of arguing in a circle—that is, trying to use a statement as both a premise in an argument and the conclusion of that argument. Such an argument says, in effect, *p* is true because *p* is true.

equivocation—The fallacy of assigning two different meanings to the same term in an argument.

appeal to authority—The fallacy of relying on the opinion of someone thought to be an expert who is not.

slippery slope—The fallacy of using dubious premises to argue that doing a particular action will inevitably lead to other actions that will result in disaster, so you should not do that first action.

faulty analogy—The use of a flawed analogy to argue for a conclusion.

appeal to ignorance—The fallacy of arguing that the absence of evidence entitles us to believe a claim.

straw man—The fallacy of misrepresenting someone's claim or argument so it can be more easily refuted.

appeal to the person—The fallacy (also known as *ad hominem*) of arguing that a claim should be rejected solely because of the characteristics of the person who makes it.

hasty generalization—The fallacy of drawing a conclusion about an entire group of people or things based on an undersized sample of the group.

In the first argument, a conclusion is drawn about all people with pro-life views from a sample of just three people. When it is spelled out plainly, the leap in logic is clearly preposterous. Yet such preposterous leaps are extremely common. In the second argument, the conclusion is that wrongful executions in the state happen frequently. This conclusion, though, is not justified by the tiny sample of cases.

WRITING AND SPEAKING ABOUT MORAL ISSUES

A common view about ethics is that arguing about morality is unproductive, unenlightening, frustrating, unsatisfying—and therefore pointless. A typical moral disagreement can go like this:

"The university should ban alcohol everywhere on campus," says X. "Drinking is immoral, whether on campus or off."

"You sound like the administration hacks. They're all idiots!" says Y.

X: "They're not *all* idiots. Some are nice."

Y: "Wrong. They're idiots, and they drink plenty of alcohol every day. Alcohol helps them forget they're idiots."

X: "What about Professor Jones? She doesn't drink."

Y: "Yeah, but she's boring. And for a college professor, being boring is the worst moral failing imaginable."

This exchange really *is* pointless; it's going nowhere. It's the kind of conversation that gives moral discourse a bad name. As we've seen, proper discussions about moral issues—whether in written or oral form—are not at all pointless. They are often productive, thought-provoking, even enlightening. You may not always like where the conversation ends up (what conclusions are arrived at), but you will likely think the trip is worthwhile.

Good moral essays or conversations have several essential elements, without which no progress could be made in resolving the issue at hand.

1. *A claim to be proved.* Almost always, the point of writing or speaking about a moral issue is to

resolve it—that is, to determine whether the central moral claim or statement (a judgment, principle, or theory) is true. Is it the case that same-sex marriage is wrong (or right)? Is it true that Maria's action is morally permissible (or impermissible)? Should actions always be judged right or wrong according to the consequences they produce? To answer such questions is to resolve the issue at hand, and resolving the issue at hand is the point of the written or spoken discourse. Without a clear idea of the claim in question, the essay or conversation will meander, as it does in the previous example.

In an essay, the claim should be spelled out (or sometimes implied) in the first one or two paragraphs. In a conversation, it is most often mentioned (or understood) at the beginning. In either case, it is by grasping the claim that we come to understand the point of it all and to follow the thread of the discussion.

In the most productive moral essays or conversations, something else is made apparent early on: the reason the claim is worth discussing in the first place. This means making sure the meaning of the claim is clear and its implications are apparent. Sometimes this step requires only a sentence or two, but usually much more explaining is necessary. Just as essential is ensuring that readers or listeners understand why anyone would *want* to address the issue—why the issue is deemed important enough to warrant an essay or serious conversation. Often all that's required is a brief explanation of how the issue directly affects people's lives. How, for example, might attitudes and lives change if everyone agreed that same-sex marriage was morally permissible? Or how differently might we view the world if all moral judgments were based on the consequences of actions?

Many times the best reason for dealing with a particular moral issue is that others have addressed it, and we want to disagree or agree with their response. So we might say, "Juan argues that using illicit drugs is morally right, but I think he's wrong on several counts." Or, "In the debates over abortion, many commentators have asserted that a human fetus is a person with moral standing. But there are at least three reasons for rejecting this view." Or, "Does science prove that persons do not have free will? Some philosophers think so. But I, along with many astute commentators, beg to differ."

2. *An argument for or against the claim.* By now, you know that the essence of moral reasoning, the means for resolving (or trying to resolve) a moral issue, and the overall shape of an essay or conversation about a moral claim is the moral argument. The common pattern in an essay is to follow the introduction (where the moral claim is stated) with a moral argument. Likewise, in a truly rewarding conversation on a moral issue, the main event is the presentation of a moral argument and the ensuing discussion about the quality of that argument (whether the premises are true and the conclusion logically follows from them).

Setting forth the argument involves explaining and amplifying each premise and supporting them with evidence (expert opinion, studies, statistics), examples, or analogies. The aim is to demonstrate clearly and carefully that the conclusion follows from the premises and that the premises are true.

In a worthwhile oral debate, the elements are much the same. Enough time and attention must be allowed for giving and explaining an argument and for thoughtful responses to that argument.

3. *Consideration of Alternative Views.* In any good essay or conversation about moral issues, presenting an argument is not enough. There must be space or time to consider alternative views on the subject. Specifically, there should be an honest and thorough assessment of objections to your argument and its conclusion. Students are often reluctant to take this step because they think it will weaken their case. But the opposite is true. When you carefully consider contrary opinions, you gain credibility because you show that you are

fair-minded and careful. You demonstrate to readers or listeners that you are aware of possible objections and that you have good replies to them. Would you trust the assertions of someone who dogmatically pushes his own view and ignores or dismisses out of hand anyone who disagrees? Remember that a logical argument is not a quarrel or spat and that a truly productive debate is not a competition or shouting match. In ethics, written and oral approaches to moral issues are honest searches for truth and sincere exchanges of ideas.

In an essay, an assessment of objections can come early or late but usually appears after the presentation of the argument. In conversation, objections may be taken up throughout and be addressed as interlocutors raise them. Mutual respect and fairness is a necessity in oral debate. Speakers must be given a chance to have their say—to present arguments, raise objections, or respond to objections.

Handling objections properly involves both summarizing and examining them. We of course always should avoid the fallacies mentioned earlier, but in considering alternative views, we need to be especially alert to the *straw man*. Because the essence of the straw man fallacy is the misrepresenting of someone's claim or argument so it can be more easily refuted, inserting the fallacy into discussions is both dishonest and counterproductive. And by using it you miss an opportunity to spot weaknesses in your case, which means you also miss a chance to strengthen it.

SUMMARY

An argument is a group of statements, one of which is supposed to be supported by the rest. To be more precise, an argument consists of one or more premises and a conclusion. In a good argument, the conclusion must follow from the premises, and the premises must be true.

Arguments come in two basic types: deductive and inductive. Deductive arguments are meant to give logically conclusive support for their conclusions. A deductive argument that actually provides this kind of support is said to be valid. If it also has true premises, it is said to be sound. An inductive argument is meant to provide probable support for its conclusion. An inductive argument that actually provides this kind of support is said to be strong. If it also has true premises, it is said to be cogent.

Deductive arguments come in different forms. Some of these forms are known to be valid; some, invalid. Knowing these patterns helps you determine the validity of deductive arguments. Using the counterexample method can also aid your analysis.

The typical moral argument consists of at least one moral premise and at least one nonmoral premise. The best approach to evaluating moral arguments is to treat them as deductive. This tack enables you to uncover implicit premises. Implicit premises are often moral premises, which may be controversial or dubious. They can be tested through the use of counterexamples.

In moral reasoning, you frequently encounter fallacies—bad arguments that arise repeatedly. Some of those you are most likely to come across are begging the question, equivocation, appeal to authority, slippery slope, faulty analogy, appeal to ignorance, straw man, appeal to the person, and hasty generalization.

EXERCISES

Review Questions

1. Are all persuasive arguments valid? Recount a situation in which you tried to persuade someone of a view by using an argument. (p. 44)
2. Can a valid deductive argument ever have false premises? Why or why not? (p. 44)
3. Are the premises of a cogent argument always true? Is the conclusion always true? Explain. (p. 45)
4. What is the term designating a valid argument with true premises? a strong argument with true premises? (p. 45)

5. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? Why or why not? (p. 45)
   If *p*, then *q*.
   p.
   Therefore, *q*.
6. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? Why or why not? (p. 46)
   If *p*, then *q*.
   If *q*, then *r*.
   Therefore, if *p*, then *r*.
7. What is the counterexample method? (p. 47)
8. What kind of premises must a moral argument have? (p. 51)
9. What is the best method for evaluating moral premises? (pp. 53–55)
10. Explain the method for locating implied premises. (pp. 47–48)

Discussion Questions

1. Is it immoral to believe a claim without evidence? Why or why not?
2. If moral reasoning is largely about providing good reasons for moral claims, where do feelings enter the picture? Is it possible to present a good argument that you feel strongly about? If so, provide an example of such an argument.
3. Which of the following passages are arguments (in the sense of displaying critical reasoning)? Explain your answers.
   - If you harm someone, they will harm you.
   - Racial profiling is wrong. It discriminates against racial groups, and discrimination is wrong.
   - If you say something that offends me, I have the right to prevent you from saying it again. After all, words are weapons, and I have a right to prevent the use of weapons against me.
4. What is the difference between persuading someone to believe a claim and giving them reasons to accept it? Can a good argument be persuasive? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think people are tempted to use the straw man fallacy in disagreements on moral issues? How do you feel when someone uses this fallacy against you?

Argument Exercises

Diagram the following arguments. Exercises marked with an asterisk (*) have answers in Answers to Argument Exercises at the end of the text.

*1. If John works out at the gym daily, he will be healthier. He is working out at the gym daily. So he will be healthier.
2. If when you are in a coma you are no longer a person, then giving you a drug to kill you would not be murder. In a coma, you are in fact not a person. Therefore, giving you the drug is not murder.
*3. Ghosts do not exist. There is no reliable evidence showing that any disembodied persons exist anywhere.
4. If you smoke, your heart will be damaged. If your heart is damaged, your risk of dying due to heart problems will increase. Therefore, smoking can increase your risk of dying due to heart problems.
*5. The mayor is soft on crime. He cut back on misdemeanor enforcement and told the police department to be more lenient with traffic violators.
6. Grow accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us, since every good and evil lie in sensation. However, death is the deprivation of sensation. Therefore, death is nothing to us.
*7. The president is either dishonest or incompetent. He's not incompetent, though, because he's an expert at getting self-serving legislation through Congress. I guess he's just dishonest.
8. Most Republicans are conservatives, and Kurt is a Republican. Therefore, Kurt is probably a conservative. Therefore Kurt is probably