Evaluating Moral Arguments

As we have seen, 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 these things believing that in one way or another they *really matter*. And because we think they matter, 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, delusion, 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? shouldn't, because there is none. The first two tences are meant to be assertions of fact, and last one is an expression of indignation. The no premise providing reasons to accept a con sion. But what if we altered the passage to n it an argument? Look:

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

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

Notice how easy it would be to elaborate the nonargumentative version, adding o unsupported claims and more expressions of writer's attitude toward the subject matter. would end up with a much longer passage p high with more assertions—but with no argum in sight. Often those who write such pass believe that because they have stated their o ion, they have presented an argument. Bu bundle of unsupported claims—however cle: stated—does not an argument make. Only wl reasons are given for believing one of these cla is an argument made.

Learning to distinguish arguments from nor gumentative material takes practice. The job ş easier, however, if you pay attention to **indi tor words.** Indicator words are terms that of appear in arguments and signal that a premise conclusion may be nearby. Notice that in the ar ment about abortion, the word *therefore* indica that the conclusion follows, and in Argumen the word *because* signals the beginning of a pre

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 and you need not look further.

Finally, understand that an argument (as we have used the term here) 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 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 unshak- able. 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 fol-

lows inexorably from the premises. The argument is therefore valid. When a deductive argument does not offer conclusive support for the conclu- sion, it is said to be **invalid.** In an invalid argu- ment, 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 state- ments. 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 conclu- sion 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 p to the presence of premises and conclusions. Th are also indicator words that suggest (but do prove) that an argument is deductive. Some of more common terms are *it necessarily follows t, it must be the case that, it logically follows that, clusively*, and *necessarily*.

Now let us turn to inductive arguments. Ex: ine this one:

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

Therefore, Julio (a student at the college) pro bly has high SAT scores.

This argument is inductive because it intended to provide probable, not decisive, s port to the conclusion. That is, the argumen intended to show only that, at best, the conc sion is probably true. With any inductive ar ment, it is possible for the premises to be true a the conclusion false. An inductive argument tl manages to actually give probable support to t conclusion is said to be **strong.** In a strong arg ment, if the premises are true, the conclusion probably true (more likely to be true than no The SAT argument is strong. An inductive arg ment that does not give probable support to tl conclusion is said to be **weak.** In a weak arg ment, if the premises are true, the conclusion not probable (not more likely to be true than n true). If we change the first premise in the S/ argument to "Twenty percent of the men at th college have high SAT scores," the argumei would be weak.

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

Good arguments provide you with good re: sons for believing their conclusions. You no know that good arguments must be valid c strong. But they must also have true premise: Good arguments must both have the right forn

ows 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 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,* an the hypothetical syllogism are always valid, the any arguments you encounter that have the sam form will also be valid. And if denying th antecedent and affirming the consequent ar always invalid, any arguments you come acros that have the same form will also be invalid. Th best way to make use of these facts is to memc rize each argument form so you can tell right awa when an argument matches one of them—an thereby see immediately that it is valid (or invalid)

But what if you bump into a deductive argu ment that does not match one of these commor forms? You can try the *counterexample method*. Thi approach is based on a fundamental fact that you already know: *it is impossible for a valid argumen to have true premises and a false conclusion*. So tc 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.

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.

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 in 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 in 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 in the natural process of procreation. Anything that interferes in 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 in a natural process be banned? If so, we would have to ban antibiotics, cancer 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. Yo not take these arguments seriously, ar responsibility of recasting them lies with who offer them.

MORAL STATEMENTS AND ARGUMENTS

When we deliberate about the rightness actions, make careful moral judgments abc character or behavior of others, or strive to complex ethical issues, we are usually mal critiquing moral arguments—or trying tc rightly so. To a remarkable degree, mora ments are the vehicles that move ethical th and discourse along. The rest of this c should give you a demonstration of how f in devising and evaluating moral argumen take you.

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

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

Notice the use of the terms *wrong, should, good,* and *immoral.* Such words are the mai of moral discourse, though some of then example, *good* and *wrong*) are also used in moral senses.

Nonmoral statements are very diff They do not affirm that an action is right or v or that a person is good or bad. They asser a state of affairs is actual (true or false) but d

.atural process should not be allowed." The argu-
1ent then becomes:

he use of condoms is completely unnatural. They
ave been manufactured for the explicit purpose of
1terfering in the natural process of procreation. Any-
1ing that interferes in a natural process should not
e allowed. Therefore, the use of condoms should be
anned.

By adding the implicit premise, we have filled
ut the argument, making it valid and a little less
1ysterious. But now that the missing premise has
:en brought out into the open, we can see that
is dubious or, at least, controversial. Should
/erything that interferes in a natural process be
1nned? If so, we would have to ban antibiotics,
1ncer drugs, deodorants, and automobiles. (Later
. this chapter, ways to judge the truth of moral
·emises are discussed.)

When you evaluate an argument, you should
y to explicitly state any implied premise (or
·emises) when (1) there seems to be a logical gap
·tween premises or between premises and the
·nclusion and (2) the missing material is not a
·mmonsense assumption. In general, the sup-
ied premise should make the argument valid
·hen the argument is supposed to be deductive)
strong (when the argument is supposed to be
ductive). It should also be *plausible* (as close to
e truth as possible) and *fitting* (coinciding with
1at you think is the author's intent). The point
these stipulations is that when you supply a
issing premise, you should be fair and honest,
pressing it in such a way that the argument is
solid as possible and in keeping with the
thor's purpose. Adding a premise that renders
argument ridiculous is easy, and so is distort-
g the author's intent—and with neither tack are
u likely to learn anything or uncover the truth.
Be aware, though, that some arguments are
edeemably bad, and no supplied premise that is
operly made can save them. They cannot be
rned 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.

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 argu-
ments 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 state-
ments (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 state-
ment 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 non-
moral 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 struc-
ture 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 prem-
ises, 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 pres-
ent 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 a mugger who is attacking you is a
   violent act of self-defense.
3. Therefore, assaulting a mugger who is attacking
   you is morally permissible.

Premise 1 is a moral statement asserting a gen-
eral moral principle about the rightness of a cate-

gory 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 a mugger). 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* based solely on what *is*. What if our self-defense argument contained no moral premise? Look:

2. Assaulting a mugger who is attacking you is a violent act of self-defense.

3. Therefore, assaulting a mugger 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 equiva-

lent 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 mugger who is attacking you is morally permissible" unless a nonmoral premise tells us that assaulting a mugger is an instance of self-defense. (The nonmoral premise may seem obvious here, but not everyone would agree that violence against a mugger 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 argu-

ments. As we noted in the previous section, ing implicit premises explicit is always a good but in moral arguments it is critical. The ur premises (an argument may have several) ar ones most likely to be dubious or unfound problem that can arise whether an argume yours or someone else's. Too many times, uns premises are assumptions that you may be k aware of; they might be the true, unacknowle source of disagreement between you and o No premise should be left unexamined. (about assessing the truth of premises in the section.)

The general guidelines discussed earlier ; uncovering unstated premises apply to 1 arguments—but we need to add a proviso. Rei ber, in a moral argument, as in any other ki argument, you have good reason to lool implicit premises if there is a logical gap bet premises, and the missing premise is not si common sense. And any premise you si should be both plausible and fitting. But note easiest way to identify implied premises in a 1 argument is to treat it as *deductive*. Approac moral arguments this way helps you not onl implied premises but also assess the worth the premises.

For example:

1. The use of capital punishment does not crime.

2. Therefore, the use of capital punishme immoral.

This is an invalid argument. Even if the p ise is true, the conclusion does not follow frc The argument needs a premise that can bridg gap between the current premise and the co sion. So we should ask, "What premise can w that will be plausible and fitting *and* make argument valid?" This premise will do: "Adn tering a punishment to criminals that doe: deter crime is immoral." The argument becomes:

lent 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 can't infer from the general principle that "committing a violent act to defend yourself . . . is morally permissible" the conclusion that "assaulting a mugger who is attacking you is morally permissible" unless a nonmoral premise tells us that assaulting a mugger is an instance of self-defense. The nonmoral premise may seem obvious here, but not everyone would agree that violence against a mugger is an example of self-defense. One might claim that such violence is an unnecessary act of retaliation or revenge.) The role of a 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 in the previous section, 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 reason to doubt not only the premise but also the principle or theory from which it is derived. We may then need to reex-

amine the claims involved and how they a related. If we do, we may find that our judgmer are on solid ground and the premise, principle, theory needs to be adjusted—or vice versa. If o purpose is solely to evaluate a moral premise an argument, we need not carry our investigati this far. But we should understand that wideni our investigation may sometimes be appropria and that our moral beliefs are often more int connected than we might realize. Our ultima goal should be to ensure that all our moral beli are as logically consistent as we can make then

ASSESSING NONMORAL PREMISES

Sometimes the sticking point in a moral argume is not a moral premise but a nonmoral one—claim about a nonmoral state of affairs. Often pe ple on both sides of a dispute may agree on a mor principle but differ dramatically on the nonmor facts. Usually these facts concern the cons quences of an action or the characteristics of th parties involved. Does pornography cause peop to commit sex crimes? Does capital punishme deter crime? Is a depressed person competent decide whether to commit suicide? When does th fetus become viable? Are African Americans und represented among executives in corporate Ame ica? Does gay marriage undermine the institutic of heterosexual marriage? These and countle other questions arise—and must be answered—we try to develop and analyze moral argument:

The most important principle to remember that nonmoral premises, like all premises, *must . supported by good reasons.* As we have already see simply believing or asserting a claim does no make it so. We should insist that our own no: moral premises and those of others be backed l reliable scientific research, the opinions of trus worthy experts, pertinent examples and analogie historical records, or our own background know edge (claims that we have excellent reasons t believe).

"Pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing an incapacitated person to die.

Therefore, "pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is wrong.

Premise 1 now seems a bit more reasonable. In current form, it rules out the counterexamples ·olving self-defense and war. But it does not ape the killing-to-save-lives counterexample. In ne circumstances it may be morally permissible kill someone to save many others, even if the :son is incapacitated. To get around this prob-1, we can amend Premise 1 so the counter-imple is no longer a threat (and make a responding change in the conclusion). For imple:

Causing the death of a person who is incapacitated is wrong, except to save lives.

Individuals in a deep, irreversible coma are persons.

"Pulling the plug" on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing an incapacitated person to die.

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 cor-t than before. It may not be flawless, but it is ich improved. By considering counterexamples, have made the whole argument better.

Checking a moral premise against possible interexamples is a way to consult our consid-:d moral judgments, a topic we broached in apter 1 and take up again in Part 3 (Theories of rality). If our considered moral judgments are odds with a moral premise that is based on a erished moral principle or moral theory, we may ve a prima facie reason to doubt not only the emise but also the principle or theory from ich it is derived. We may then need to reex-

amine 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 the 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?"

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 different words. The best protection against circular reasoning is a close reading of the argumen.

Equivocation
The fallacy of **equivocation** assigns two different meanings to the same term in an argume. Here's an example that, in one form or another is a 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 Premise 2, *human* is used in the sense of *person* that is, an individual having full moral right Since the premises refer to two different thing 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

Appea

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

The defendant is obviously guilty of murder in th case. Look at him in the courtroom—he's terrifyir and menacing. And no one can ignore the way f

oral argument is to discover the truth. We must
brave enough to let the evidence point where
will.

VOIDING BAD ARGUMENTS

call that a good argument has true premises plus
conclusion that follows from those premises. A
d argument fails at least one of these conditions—
has a false premise or a conclusion that does not
llow. This failure, however, can appear in many
fferent argument forms, some of which are
tremely common. These commonly bad argu-
ents are known as *fallacies*. They are so distinc-
e and are used so often that they have been
ren names and are usually covered in courses on
tical reasoning. Though flawed, fallacies are
:en persuasive and frequently employed to mis-
ıd the unwary—even in (or *especially* in) moral
ısoning. The best way to avoid using fallacies—
being taken in by them—is to study them so you
ow how they work and can easily identify them.
e following is a brief review of some fallacies
ıt are most prevalent in moral argumentation.

gging the Question
gging the question is the fallacy of arguing
a circle—that is, trying to use a statement as
th a premise in an argument and the conclu-
n of that argument. Such an argument says, in
ect, *p* is true because *p* is true. That kind of rea-
ıing, of course, proves nothing.
For example:

Women in Muslim countries, regardless of
their social status and economic limitations,
are entitled to certain rights, including but not
necessarily limited to suffrage.

Therefore, all women in Muslim countries
have the right to vote in political elections.

This argument is equivalent to saying "Women
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 circu-
lar reasoning is a close reading of the argument.

Equivocation
The fallacy of **equivocation** assigns two differ-
ent meanings to the same term in an argument.
Here's an example that, in one form or another,
is a 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 physiologi-
cally 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 pay-
ing close attention, though, you might not detect
the equivocation and accept the argument as it is.

Appeal to Authority
This fallacy is 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 desig-
nated 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 auto-
matically carry over to another, and even nonex-
perts 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 rea-
son to doubt it.

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 some-
one 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 com-
mitted 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.

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 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 *absenc* *evidence* entitles us to believe a claim. Cons these two arguments:

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

Both these arguments are **appeals to ig rance.** The first one says that because a statem has not been proven false, it must be true. The ond one has things the other way around: bec a statement has not been proven true, it mus false. The problem in both these is that a *lac* evidence cannot be evidence for anything dearth of evidence simply indicates that we ignorant of the facts. If having no evidence c prove something, we could prove all sorts of rageous claims. We could argue that because one has proven that there are no space aliens trolling all our moral decisions, there are in space aliens controlling all our moral decisior

Straw Man

Unfortunately, this fallacy is rampant in deb about moral issues. It amounts to misrepresen someone's claim or argument so it can be n easily refuted. For example, suppose you are ing to argue that a code of ethics for your pro sional group should be secular so that it car appreciated and used by as many people as p ble, regardless of their religious views. Suppose ther that your opponent argues against your cl in this fashion:

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

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?

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.

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 argument is to treat them as deductive. This tack enables y to uncover implicit premises. Implicit premises a often moral premises, which may be controvers or dubious. They can be tested through the use counterexamples.

In moral reasoning, you frequently encoun fallacies—bad arguments that arise repeatedly. Some those you are most likely to come across are beggi the question, equivocation, appeal to authority, sl pery slope, faulty analogy, appeal to ignorance, stra man, appeal to the person, and hasty generalizatic

EXERCISES

Review Questions

1. What is the difference between persuasion an argument? (p. 45)
2. What is a deductive argument? an inductive argument? (p. 46)
3. What is a valid argument? a strong argument (pp. 46–47)
4. What is the term designating a valid argumen with true premises? a strong argument with true premises? (p. 47)
5. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? (p. 48)

    If *p*, then *q*.

    p.

    Therefore, *q*.
6. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? (p. 48)

    If *p*, then *q*.

    If *q*, then *r*.

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

- 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?

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.

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 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 validity of deductive arguments. Using the counterexample method can also aid your analysis. The typical moral argument consists of at least moral premise and at least one nonmoral prem-

ise. 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. What is the difference between persuasion and argument? (p. 45)
2. What is a deductive argument? an inductive argument? (p. 46)
3. What is a valid argument? a strong argument? (pp. 46–47)
4. What is the term designating a valid argument with true premises? a strong argument with true premises? (p. 47)
5. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? (p. 48)

   If *p*, then *q*.

   p.

   Therefore, *q*.
6. Is the following argument form valid or invalid? (p. 48)

   If *p*, then *q*.

   If *q*, then *r*.

   Therefore, if *p*, then *r*.
7. What is the counterexample method? (p. 49)
8. What is a moral argument? What kind of premises must it have? (p. 51)
9. What is the best method for evaluating moral premises? (p. 54)
10. What is the fallacy of the slippery slope? appeal to ignorance? straw man? (pp. 58–59)

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?