



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 *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

TESTING MORAL PREMISES

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 moral 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:

Causing a person’s death is wrong.

Individuals in a deep, irreversible coma are incapacitated persons.

“Pulling the plug” on someone in a deep, irreversible coma is causing a person to die.

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 incapacitated 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 incapacitated 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

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- 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 commonsense 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.

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, 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 common 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 are 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 the 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 fallacy consists 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 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.

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.

- 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?

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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 that first action should not be done.

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 probably 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 that the meaning of the claim is clear and that 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 whether the conclusion logically follows from them).

Setting forth the argument involves explaining and amplifying each premise and supporting it 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 should always avoid the fallacies mentioned earlier, of course, 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 misrepresentation 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.

CHAPTER REVIEW

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—forms of 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.

KEY TERMS

- statement (p. 41)
- argument (p. 42)
- premise (p. 42)
- conclusion (p. 42)
- indicator words (p. 43)
- deductive argument (p. 44)
- inductive argument (p. 44)
- valid argument (p. 44)
- invalid argument (p. 44)
- strong argument (p. 45)

- weak argument (p. 45)
- sound argument (p. 45)
- cogent argument (p. 45)
- moral statement (p. 51)
- nonmoral statement (p. 51)
- begging the question (p. 56)
- equivocation (p. 57)
- appeal to authority (p. 57)
- slippery slope (p. 58)
- faulty analogy (p. 58)
- appeal to ignorance (p. 59)
- straw man (p. 59)
- appeal to the person (p. 59)
- hasty generalization (p. 59)

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 kinds of premises must a moral argument have? (p. 57)
9. What is the best method for evaluating moral premises? (pp. 54–55)

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.