

Arguments and Argumentation in Moral Philosophy

One might wonder why we need to learn any skills related to morality or moral reasoning. Haven't we, since Sunday school or since we were small children, already learned all that we need to know about right and wrong? My suggestion is both yes and no. In part, many of our basic moral intuitions are acquired in childhood, and some would say, all ethical theory does is make clear and coherent our already acquired moral intuitions. Others claim that by being enculturated, we have acquired a hotch-potch of ideas about right and wrong, some correct, others not so. Still others claim that we simply need to remember only those things our mothers told us at the end of her wagging finger to know right from wrong.

Confusing? Yes. I do not plan on addressing each of these claims in turn, but would like to suggest at least a pattern for clarifying this confusion. My suggestion is simple. As we need a way to clarify our beliefs about the world, in order to know what is and is not true, so we need a way to clarify our beliefs about actions, so as to know what is right and wrong. Let me press this analogy further. As we need data, facts, and experience to back up and support our beliefs about the world, so we also need data, facts, and experience about actions to support our beliefs about actions. As we use different patterns of reasoning to know information about the world, so too will we have different patterns of reasoning to know information about actions. Here the analogy can carry us no further. For there is a fundamental difference in the nature of claims about the world and claims about actions. In the patterns of reasoning that result in knowledge about the world, the nature of these claims are factual. That is, with the right tools, experiments or experience, these claims can be verified. You can, if you will, check the facts to know whether these facts are or are not true.

For example, if I claim "all humans are mortal", then in order to know if that claim were true, I would need to discover if there were any cases of humans not dying. If I could not find even one case where someone was human and did not die, then I would know that this claim is true.

In other cases, where investigating the truth of some factual claim is more complicated, I might need to rely on the tools of scientific reasoning, or verify the claims by looking up the sources used to derive the claim. In short, there is an entire system of standard ways to verify the truth or falsehood of some factual claim. Wouldn't it be nice if there were an entire system of standard ways to verify the truth about some evaluative claim? My suggestion is that there is an entire system of standard ways to verify these claims and that is the point of this initial suggestion.

Over the course of the next few class periods, I will chart out the skeleton of these most fundamental patterns. These are the scaffolding upon which the entire course is based. Some of you may have some experience with parts of this, others will not. But, I think it is important no matter what background you may have, to cover the territory again. Let's start with some definitions.

Argument: By an 'argument' I do not mean a verbal conflict. What I do mean is a pattern of reasoning. Arguments consist of **premises** and **conclusions**.

Premise: A 'premise' is a claim offered to give you a reason for believing the conclusion.

Conclusion: A 'conclusion' is a claim supported by the premises.

An example of a basic argument follows:

(Argument 1)

Premise One: All humans are mortal

Premise Two: Socrates is human

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

We could get far more sophisticated about what is and what is not an argument, what are all of the names of its parts, the types of premises, the types of conclusions, and the like. But that is not the point or direction I would like us to follow. Needless to say, arguments are the primary tool philosophers use to present and evaluate positions. Positions, typically, are presented using clusters of arguments. Having some fundamental awareness of arguments is absolutely essential if we are to proceed. What I would like to illustrate, by this example, is the relationship between the premises and the conclusion. If we are asked, “on what basis do you claim ‘Socrates is mortal?’” our collective answer would be “all humans are mortal, and Socrates is human”. In other words, the proof we are offered for believing the conclusion is the premises. The truth, then, of the premises will affect the truth of the conclusion. That is, in those cases where everything works out correctly.

Wait a minute. What do you mean by “when everything works out correctly?!?” Patterns of reasoning, arguments, can be evaluated in order to determine their entailment relationships. Remember, when I said that the conclusion follows from the premises and the premises are offered as proof for believing the conclusion? This is what we mean by an entailment relationship. In other words, by ‘entailment’ I mean simply what follows from what. Sometimes entailment works out correctly, sometimes not. There are two criteria used for evaluating arguments that affect entailment, these are **validity** and **soundness**.

Definitions:

An argument is ‘**valid**’ if and only if it is not the case that all of the premises are true and the conclusion is false.

An argument is ‘**sound**’ if and only if it is valid and all of the premises are true.

Two things to notice here with respect to these definitions. Validity and soundness depend on the truth values of the premises and conclusions of arguments. Soundness requires validity as a condition. So, if an argument is invalid, it must be unsound. One further consideration here. Arguments are valid, invalid, sound or unsound. Sentences (or claims) are true or false. Sentences are not valid, invalid, sound, or unsound. Arguments are not true or false. Let’s examine a few additional examples to help illustrate these concepts.

Argument 2

Premise One: All celestial objects are spherical. F

Premise Two: The Moon is a celestial object. T

Conclusion: So, the Moon is spherical. F

Argument 3

Premise One: All Georgians are liberal. F

Premise Two: Bill Clinton is from Georgia. F

Conclusion: So, Bill Clinton is a liberal. T

Argument 4.

Premise One: All platypuses are mammals. T
 Premise Two: All mammals gestate their young internally. T
 Conclusion: So platypuses gestate their young internally. F

The point of these arguments is to illustrate the distribution of truth and falsity in valid arguments. Argument 1, the ‘Socrates argument’, is the only argument that is both valid and sound. Arguments 2 and 3 are both valid but unsound, and argument 4 is both invalid and unsound. We can illustrate this by looking at the following table.

Argument	1	4	3	2
Premise	T	T	F	F
Conclusion	T	F	T	F
Valid	Y	N	Y	Y
Sound	Y	N	N	N

Remember, an argument is invalid if and only if the premises are all true and the conclusion is false. An argument is sound if and only if it is valid and all of the premises are true. Only argument 1 satisfies both the criterion of validity and the criterion of soundness. Although arguments 2 and 3 are both valid, the premises are not all true. So, these arguments fail the soundness criterion.

Soundness and validity are powerful tools we can use to evaluate arguments. These tools rest on our ability to determine the truth and falsity of the claims being made in an argument. But, not all arguments are factual or, in other words, some arguments have evaluative claims in the premises.

Let’s compare the following two arguments to illustrate this point.

Argument 1

- P1. All humans are mortal.
- P2. Socrates is human.
- 3. So, Socrates is mortal.

Argument 5

- P1. Killing humans is morally wrong.
- P2. War involves killing humans.
- 3. So, war is morally wrong.

Both arguments 1 and 5 have exactly the same logical structure. The difference between 1 and 5 lies in the nature of the first premise. In argument 1, the first premise is a factual claim. In argument 5, the first premise is an evaluative claim. The predicates in these two premises reveal their nature. Predicates like ‘is wrong’, ‘is right’, ‘is good’, ‘is evil’, ‘is just’, ‘is unjust’, ‘is fair’, or ‘is unfair’ are evaluative predicates. These predicates evaluate some feature of the name in the sentence, and do not themselves refer to some quality about the name. In other words, the predicate in the sentence ‘all humans are mortal’ refers to some quality all humans possess. This is different than the work done by the predicates in the sentence ‘killing humans is wrong’. Here the predicate does not refer to some quality killing humans possesses, but is an evaluation of killing humans. This is why I refer to sentences with these predicates as evaluative claims.

My point here is not to raise nay philosophical point concerning the nature of predicates

in the realm of philosophy of language. My point here is far simpler. Evaluative claims require an ethical theory to fix their content. I will have more to say about this in future lectures.

One further observation I would like to make here is the following. As we use data, experiments, experience and the rules of logic to help us determine the content of factual claims (which is to say, their truth or falsity) so we need something analogous in the evaluative cases to fix their content. My suggestion here is that in addition to data, experience, the rules of logical evaluation, ethical theories fill that gap.

So far, we have taken a glance at some formal techniques for evaluating arguments comprised of factual claims. There are a number of very useful informal techniques available for evaluating arguments. These are the fallacies.