1. Ethical Reasoning

The primary way to make progress in ethics is by reasoning about moral claims, that is, by constructing and evaluating arguments. Some people get nervous around the word “argument” because it brings to mind a heated emotional exchange, usually angry. Or it makes people think of mere disagreement, one person simply contradicting another. An old British television show called *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* parodied this perception of an argument in a sketch called “The Argument Clinic,” where a customer attempts to pay someone to have an argument with him:

CUSTOMER (C): Ah, is this the right room for an argument?
ARGUER (A): I told you once.
C: No you haven’t.
A: Yes I have.
C: When?
A: Just now.
C: No you didn’t.
A: Yes I did.
…
C: You did not.
A: Yes I did.
C: Did not.
A: Yes I did.
C: Didn’t.
A: Yes I did.
…
C: Look, this isn’t an argument.
A: Yes it is.
C: No it isn’t. It’s just contradiction.
A: No it isn’t.
C: Yes it is.
…
C: All of this is futile
A: No it isn’t.
C: I came here for a good argument.
A: No you didn’t; you came here for an *argument*.
C: Well an argument’s not the same as contradiction.
A: It can be.
C: No it can’t. An argument is a connected series of statements to establish a definite proposition.
A: No it isn’t.
C: Yes it is. It is isn’t just contradiction.
A: Look, if I argue with you I must take up a contradictory position.
In this sketch, the arguer thinks of arguments in terms of “contradiction,” whereas the customer thinks of arguments the way philosophers think of arguments: reasons for thinking a claim is true. So, for our purposes:

An argument is one or more claims (called premises) intended to support the truth of another claim (called the conclusion).

We’ve noted that a moral claim is a declarative statement about some moral feature of reality that is either true or false. A claim in general is simply a declarative statement about any feature of reality that is either true or false, for instance: the barn is red; the field is grassy; the speed of light is 299,792,458 m/s.

In an argument, one or more claims (moral or otherwise) is being used as evidence for the truth of another claim. For instance, let’s say someone made the claim that: “Abortion on demand is wrong.” As a critical thinker, you would want some reasons for thinking this is true. A classic argument for this claim looks like this:

1. A fetus has a right to life.
2. A person’s right to life is stronger than a woman’s right to decide what happens in and to her body.
3. Therefore, a fetus may not be killed on the grounds that a woman has decided she does not want the fetus.

(1) and (2) are claims providing support for (3), which says that abortion because a woman decides she does not want a fetus (essentially: abortion on demand) is wrong.

In order to evaluate this argument, we need to know what makes an argument good or bad (note: arguments are not true or false; only claims are true or false). In a good argument (i) the conclusion follows from the premises and (ii) the premises are true. A conclusion follows from the premises in one of two ways, either (a) if the premises were true, the conclusion could
not be false (note: not that they actually are true, but, if they were—subjunctive mood), or (b) if the premises were true, the conclusion would be more likely than not. If an argument meets condition (i) because of (a), the argument is valid. If an argument meets condition (i) because of (b), the argument is strong.

An argument that is only valid or strong is not yet a good argument. We also need to know that the premises are true. If an argument is valid and has true premises, it is a sound argument. If an argument is strong and has true premises, it is a cogent argument. If either (i) or (ii) is not met or if neither are met, the argument is not good. If both (i) and (ii) are met, the argument is good.

Now, consider once again our argument against abortion. The conclusion follows from the premises in a way that, if the premises were true, the conclusion would have to be true, so it is a valid argument. Therefore, to determine whether it is a good argument, we need reasons for thinking the premises are true. For instance, why think premise (1) is true? Here’s an example of an argument:

4. A fetus is a person.
5. All persons have a right to life.
1. Therefore, a fetus has a right to life.

Here we have another valid argument for the claim that a fetus has a right to life. We’re making progress, but to know whether we have good reasons to believe (3), we still need to know whether (2) is true and whether premises (4) and (5) of the new argument are true. This can be a long process, but this is how arguments work, whether they are moral arguments, scientific arguments, metaphysical arguments, religious arguments, etc.

2. Four Ways of Evaluating Moral Arguments
In order to evaluate an argument, we need only to check to see whether it meets both conditions (i) and (ii) above. Of course, some arguments are very complicated and it is often difficult to see clearly whether both conditions are met. To help with this process, philosophers have discovered a handful of principles to help us evaluate moral claims and arguments.

a. The Principle of Charity

In season 1 of 30 Rock, Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) tells Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), “The Italians have a saying, Lemon. ‘Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.’ And although they’ve never won a war or mass-produced a decent car, in this area, they are correct” (“Blind Date”). Evidently Donaghy forgot the small matter of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, we also think the Italians are correct (well, Mario Puzo anyway) because this saying highlights an important principle of reasoning, called the “principle of charity.” Don’t be deceived by its wimpy-sounding name; it will do more work for you than most other principles. It will keep you focused on the important parts of an argument.

The principle of charity directs us to be “charitable” to those who argue against our claims by presenting their arguments in the strongest way possible; it directs us to present their case in the best light. The idea is that, since we’re after truth and not simply out to win an argument, it does not matter whether someone’s original argument is weak or faulty, as long as a stronger argument in favor of their claim is available. An argument is good or bad independently of who offers it. Therefore, if we take the process of argumentation seriously, we are well-advised to adhere to the principle of charity.

The principle has two dimensions: first, it allows us to determine whether our own claims are plausibly true (if the strongest argument against one of my beliefs is flawless, then I have a
reason to change my belief), and second, it allows us to show, in the clearest and most objective manner, the flaws in our opponents’ arguments.

It is probably clear to you that, for any belief you hold, there is a chance that that belief is false. In some cases, the chance you are wrong is incredibly small, for instance, a belief like 2+2=4. Nonetheless, you must allow that a really intelligent mathematician could offer a proof showing that, however useful it is to believe 2+2=4, it is not, strictly speaking, true. In most cases, on the other hand, the chances of being wrong are much greater: I won’t die on this airplane, I won’t get the flu this year; it’s going to rain tomorrow; the universe is strictly guided by the second law of thermodynamics, etc.

A realistic perspective on our chances of being wrong should encourage us to take arguments against our beliefs all the more seriously. 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill explains:

He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. The rational position for him would be suspension of judgment… (On Liberty, chapter 2).

The idea here is that, to believe securely, or to be justified in our beliefs to at least some degree, we are well-advised to seek out the opposition. Perhaps they are right and we are wrong. But we cannot determine which if we have not at least considered the best available evidence for the opposing claim.

The second dimension of the principle of charity assumes that, just as we could be wrong about our beliefs, so could our opponents. In order to show convincingly that an opponent’s claim is implausible, an arguer must show both that the opponent’s actual argument is faulty in some way, and that any similar or stronger argument for the same claim is faulty.
A variety of fallacies follow from not taking this second dimension seriously. If someone does not take an opponent’s argument seriously, she may reformulate it in a way that does not accurately express the opponent’s reasons. If her formulation does not accurately represent her opponent’s argument, she is committing the “straw man” fallacy, which involves presenting an over-simplified or absurd version of an opponent’s argument in order to make it easier to convince others to reject it. Similarly, if an arguer does not take an opponent’s argument seriously, he may focus on an unimportant aspect of the argument or (intentionally or unintentionally) change the subject altogether. If he does, he is committing the “red herring” fallacy, leading his audience to ignore the force of the original argument. These fallacies, and others that tend to result from not taking the principle of charity seriously, show an arguer’s laziness or incompetence rather than that his opponent’s claims are implausible.

b. “Ought implies Can” (though Can doesn’t imply Ought)

Can you be held responsible for an act that you cannot possibly perform? Could you be morally obligated to jump over a building or run faster than a car? Could you be held morally responsible for breathing? It seems odd to think so. The principle of “ought implies can,” often attributed to Immanuel Kant, means that, if there is some action you cannot possibly perform, we have a reason to believe you are not morally obligated to perform that act. For instance, a person cannot change skin color, so they cannot be morally responsible for being a certain race. This goes for a number of features of human psychology that have been the object of moral scorn throughout the ages. For instance, someone who has a genetic disposition toward being attracted to members of the opposite sex or the same sex, or toward alcoholism, or toward pedophilia, or kleptomania, according to this principle, cannot be held morally responsible for having those dispositions. This is because he has no choice with respect to having them. Of course, we do
think he has a choice with respect to acting on them. We want the genetic alcoholic to refrain from drinking and the pedophile to refrain from performing acts of pedophilia and both of these are moral concerns.

This principle is important because it helps us distinguish which aspects of certain behaviors are morally salient and can be used in counterexamples to any claim or argument that suggests that we are morally obligated to do something we cannot do. We just distinguished the genetic origins of an action from the performance of an action. Similarly, we can distinguish responsibility for an action at a time from responsibility for a previous action. For instance, at the moment a drunk driver hits a pedestrian he could not have done otherwise, but he made a moral decision that led to this event by getting in the car drunk. Similarly, someone who takes out a loan who knowingly cannot pay it back makes a moral decision to defraud the lender.

This principle is controversial among philosophers primarily because there seem to be some obvious counterexamples. If I borrow money, then accidentally spend all my money or, through no fault of my own, lose all my money along with the ability to make money, the principle seems to suggest that I cannot be held morally responsible, since, in fact, I cannot pay back the loan. This, of course, would not be good for banks.

A standard response to this sort of case is that, if I have simply lost all my money, then, since I still have the capacity to make money, I am obligated to pay it back. If, however, I have agreed to pay it back on a certain day and just happen to have no money on that day, it seems the lender is right in holding me responsible for not doing so, even if I would have the money on the following day. And the same problem applies if I have lost the ability to pay it back (for instance, if I have lost my job).
Note also, we could not solve this problem by pointing out that I made a promise in good faith that I would be able to pay it back. This is because now the action that I am unable to perform is keeping my promise. Yet, it still seems as if I am morally responsible for not making good on my word even if I cannot.

Nevertheless, the proponent of the principle may respond that, in cases where I am not morally responsible for either not being able to pay or not keeping my promise, the moral obligation to pay is lifted until I am able to pay it back. This response is plausible for two reasons: (a) it does not absolve the borrower of the debt, it simply acknowledges that the obligation cannot apply in cases where it is physically impossible for the borrower to repay. Note that this only holds if the borrower is not in this position because of negligence. If his actions caused his bankruptcy, he remains responsible for the debt just as the drunk remains responsible for any unintentional actions that occur as a result of his drunkenness. And (b) it does not leave it open that the borrower can remain destitute in order to avoid the debt; the moment he can take advantage of an opportunity toward repayment of the debt, he is once again responsible for the debt.

Interestingly, the bankruptcy laws in the United States reflect this implication of the principle. A lender may take action against a delinquent lender up to and unless the borrower can prove that he is physically unable to repay due to reasons outside his control. Under these circumstances a borrower may file for bankruptcy and receive legal protection against his creditors. Therefore, we conclude that the principle of “ought implies can” is a plausible restriction on moral obligations. These laws fall short, however, after the period of bankruptcy is over, when the debt is regarded as forgiven.
Before concluding this section, it is important to point out that the converse of the principle, “can implies ought,” does not hold. The counterexamples here are obvious, but they are worth noting given some advancements in medical science. Though we can drop atomic bombs on our enemies, have sex with multiple random partners, take hallucinogenic drugs, eat pie for 24 hours straight, stand on baby kittens, or harvest organs from perfectly healthy people against their will doesn’t mean we ought to do so. In each of these cases, important moral questions must be answered before we are justified in believing they are permissible or impermissible. Interestingly, some argue that certain advancements in medical science, for instance, the harvesting of stem cells from fertilized embryos, is morally permissible simply because we can do it. Given the above examples, this is an insufficient justification.

To be sure, the most common argument for harvesting stem cells is the great good that it might do, and that this good outweighs any moral value attaching to a fertilized embryo. This might be right and it is not a “can implies ought” argument. It more closely resembles a principle known as “the end justifies the means.” We will discuss this principle in the chapter on Utilitarianism, but it faces problems similar to those of “can implies ought,” for instance, harvesting organs from perfectly healthy people against their will might result in more healthy people overall. But in this latter case, the means do not seem to justify the ends.

c. Counterexample

A useful tool for testing a claim or argument is called a counterexample. A counterexample is an example used to show either that a claim is false or that an argument is not good. A counterexample to a claim is an argument showing that a mutually exclusive claim is true. Two claims are mutually exclusive if they cannot both be true at the same time, for instance, “the barn is red right now” and “the barn is blue right now”; “Michael Bluth has no
sisters” and “Lindsay Fünke is Michael Bluth’s sister.” Therefore, if there is a better argument for the latter claim than the former, we have reason to believe the former is not true. Here’s an example from ethics:

**Argument 1:**
1) Intentional killing is wrong.
2) Abortion is an intentional killing.
3) Therefore, abortion is wrong.

**Counterexample to premise (1):**
4) It is not morally wrong to kill a mosquito.
5) Killing a mosquito is an intentional killing.
6) Therefore, some intentional killings are morally permissible.

This counterexample highlights the inconsistency between the claims “Intentional killing is wrong” and “some intentional killings are morally permissible”; both cannot be true. Since most people have good reasons to believe there is no moral harm in killing a mosquito, premise (1) is much too strong, and therefore, we have a reason to reject it. If an argument could be made for protecting mosquitoes from intentional killings (that is, an argument that premise 4 is false), this counterexample would not work.

Note: There would also be no problem if premise (1) read, “Intentional killing is *often* wrong,” or “Intentional killing is *sometimes* wrong.” But if the arguer defended that as a premise, the conclusion would also change. Now the conclusion would be, “Abortion is often wrong” or “Abortion is sometimes wrong.” But almost everyone could agree with the latter and many with the former, so there would be little need for argument. The whole point is to determine the circumstances under which abortion is morally permissible and impermissible. This requires precise principles that help determine, for any particular pregnancy, if or when abortion is permissible.

Using the same example, consider a counterexample to an argument:

**Argument 1:**
1) Intentional killing is wrong.
2) Abortion is an intentional killing.
3) Therefore, abortion is wrong.

**Counterexample to argument 1:**
4) Killing bacteria with antibiotics is an intentional killing.
5) Therefore, taking antibiotics is wrong.
6) But we have good reasons to believe it is not wrong to kill bacteria.
7) Therefore, there might be reasons for thinking intentional killing is not wrong in the case of abortion.
In this case, the counterexample shows that inserting a different action into premise 2 yields an unfortunate conclusion, namely, that we are never morally permitted to take antibiotics. But if these premises do not justify the claim that taking antibiotics is wrong, they do not justify the claim that abortion is wrong.

One problem with Argument 1 is made obvious by the counterexample. In the counterexample, premise 1 leads to an absurd conclusion (taking antibiotics is wrong), therefore premise 1 is likely false. Therefore, we should conclude that premise 1 is likely false in Argument 1. There are two at least two ways to show that premise 1 is false: (i) argue directly that it is false (that is, offer a counterexample to a claim), or (ii) argue that substituting a different action in the same circumstances leads to an undesirable conclusion (offer a counterexample to an argument).

There are dozens of ways to offer direct arguments against a claim. These involve simply offering a set of premises in support of the conclusion that the claim is false. For instance, if we wanted to construct a direct argument that premise 1 of Argument 1 is false, we might offer an argument like the following:

**Argument 1:**
1) Intentional killing is wrong.
2) Abortion is an intentional killing.
3) Therefore, abortion is wrong.

**Counterexample to Premise 1 of Argument 1:**
11) If intentional killing is always wrong, then life is essentially morally valuable.
12) Life is not essentially morally valuable.
13) Therefore, intentional killing is not always wrong.

Additional reasons might be required to support the truth of premise 2, but if these premises are true, we have direct reasons for believing that the claim “intentional killing is (always) wrong” is false.

There are two general types of counterexample to an argument, one of which is called **The Technique of Variant Cases.** In this type, an argument is constructed that has *all* the same
elements as the argument under consideration except the act in question. So, the above
Counterexample to Argument 1 is Variant Case Counterexample; we just substituted “killing
bacteria” for “abortion” to show that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. If
someone could offer good reasons for thinking that taking antibiotics is morally impermissible or
that taking antibiotics is not a case of intentional killing, this counterexample would not work.

The second general type of counterexample to an argument is called a **Bare Difference**
**Argument**. In this type of counterexample, an argument is constructed that has *none* of the same
elements as the argument under consideration except the act in question. Consider, one last time,
argument 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument 1:</th>
<th>Bare Difference Counterexample to Argument 1:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Intentional killing is wrong.</td>
<td>11) Killing in self-defense is not always wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Abortion is an intentional killing.</td>
<td>12) Abortion when the mother’s life is threatened is killing in self-defense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Therefore, abortion is wrong.</td>
<td>13) Therefore, abortion is not always wrong.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, we have changed the circumstances, now we are not simply considering killing, we
are considering cases of self-defense. In light of common views about self-defense, some cases
of abortion are morally permissible. Therefore, we have provided reasons for doubting the
conclusion of argument 1. If someone could show that killing in self-defense is always wrong or
that we never need to perform abortions in defense of a mother (for instance, perhaps a doctor
could always perform a Caesarian), then this counterexample would not work.

Keep these techniques in mind as you evaluate and construct moral arguments. They will
help you discover the strengths and weaknesses of arguments. And understanding these strengths
and weaknesses will help you construct arguments with more strengths than weaknesses and
therefore, to make real moral progress.

**d. The Principle of Caution**
Moral claims, if any are true, contribute to society in important ways. They help us express and explain why certain actions should not be performed, such as rape and murder, and they help encourage us to perform other actions, such as actions that are charitable and self-sacrificial. Ethical problems are often, as ethicist Tom Regan named one of his books, *Matters of Life and Death*. But in some cases, there doesn’t seem to be enough evidence to make an informed judgment about the truth of a moral claim.

For instance, in the animal rights debate, it is not clear to many what it would mean for an animal to have moral “rights,” or even moral value, independently of their relationship to humans. (What are “rights” anyway?) Animals fight, kill, and eat one another, and there seems to be nothing good or bad, moral or immoral, about any of it—at least no more than a volcano erupting 2,000 years before humans walked the earth. But just because it is difficult determine whether animals have rights, since they might and since rights are morally significant, it seems we would be well-advised to proceed with caution with respect to how we treat animals.

For instance, James Rachels (2004) writes, “…there is no general answer to the question of how chimps may be treated. There are only the various ways of treating them and the various considerations that count for and against those treatments.” Similarly, there is very little consensus (and very little evidence to go on) about what conditions constitute “personhood,” “welfare,” or “happiness,” or under what conditions it might be morally permissible to steal from the greedy, lying owners of a record label by illegally downloading their productions.

Nevertheless, we don’t want to be murderers or thieves or cruel (at least we hope you don’t want to be those things). Therefore, with respect to ethical claims and arguments, it is advisable to err on the side of caution. Just as we would not want anyone in our contemporary society to say, “Well, the reasons given for and against the claim that Hispanics have the same
rights as Caucasians sort of cancel one another out, therefore, I am not rationally obligated to believe they have the same rights,” we must also be careful with broad statements like, “Well, the reasons given for and against the claim that animals have rights are inconclusive, therefore I am not rationally obligated to treat them as if they do,” or “The argument that an 8-week-old fetus is a person and has a right to life is seriously flawed, so I can treat my fetus however I want.” It is true that if the reasons are really inconclusive, there is no rational obligation either way. But the principle of caution is not, strictly speaking, a rational principle; it is a pragmatic and moral principle. It may be that animals do not have rights and it may be that an 8-week-old fetus is no more morally significant than my fingernail, but the consequences of being wrong are very high. Therefore, a prudent reasoner will evaluate moral claims carefully and believe cautiously.

3. Six Common Fallacies in Ethical Reasoning

A fallacy is an error in reasoning. A fallacious argument seems good, but something has gone wrong. Either the premises only appear to support the conclusion or the premises only appear true. We briefly explain six common fallacies.

1. *argumentum ad populum* (appeal to the people)

What if everyone suddenly came to believe that Special Relativity is false or that God does not exist? Would everyone’s believing these things make them true? Of course not. They are true or false independently of what anyone believes. Since someone’s belief about a claim does not make it true or false, you will need a different sort of evidence to make a good judgment about its truth or falsity. If someone attempts to convince you to believe something or to do something on the grounds that large numbers of people believe it or do it, that person is committing a fallacy called *ad populum*, or appeal to the people.
This fallacy is common in popular culture: everyone believes *the world is flat*; everyone believes that *premarital sex is morally permissible*; everyone believes that *driving after nine PM is morally permissible*; no one thinks *you should drink and drive*, and so on. In each of these cases, the highlighted claim might be true or false. But the fact that everyone believes it or no one believes it does not constitute sufficient ground for believing it. Everyone could be wrong!

You’re mother even recognized these arguments as fallacious: “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do that, too?”

Perhaps you have been tempted to think that a politician is doing a bad job because everyone else thinks he or she is doing a bad job. Or maybe you have been persuaded to believe there are objective moral facts, like “murder is always wrong,” on the grounds that every culture in history has agreed on at least a few basic moral principles. There is a chance you have considered ingesting certain illegal substances since “*everyone* has tried it” (and, heaven forbid you miss out). And you have probably even been tempted to buy something just because it is the “best selling *x* in America,” or “Mothers have been giving it to their children for thirty years.”

All of these arguments commit the *ad populum* fallacy. Make sure you recognize that, in each case, the conclusion—“I should believe *x,*” or “I should do *x*”—may be true or false. There may really be objective moral facts. Some politicians really do a bad job. But evidence that “everyone believes *x*” or that “everyone does *x*” cannot help you make an informed decision about whether *x* is true.

Here are four more appeals to the people:
2. *argumentum ad misericordium* (appeal to pity/emotion)

Is it *right* that you help starving kids in Ethiopia? Probably. Should you believe this because a television commercial with Sally Struthers makes you *feel bad*? Absolutely not. Your emotions have *nothing* to do with the truth of a claim. Just because you feel you deserve a new car for graduating, this does not place any moral obligation on your parents to buy you one. Just because you feel bad for criminals serving life in prison doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be there. Just because you don’t like to go the speed limit doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. These arguments are fallacious because their premises are irrelevant to the truth of the conclusion. The conclusion might be true or false, but emotions cannot tell you which.

If someone tries to convince you that a claim is true by *appealing to emotions, especially negative emotions like pity*, she is committing the fallacy, *ad misericordiam*, or *appeal to pity*. Appeals to pity show up in less conspicuous ways than in the starving kids commercials. Sometimes you can find talk shows where “noted” psychologists try to convince you and the audience that people who have committed horrible atrocities are not *really* bad at heart, they have just had a difficult childhood or poor role models. They try to convince you to feel sorry for them and to believe they should not be held to the same moral standards as those of us who did not share their experiences.

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**EXAMPLES:**

a. *PenguinTears Shampoo*—used by more salons than any other all-natural shampoo

b. *Reading*—*everybody’s doing it!* (This is from a real commercial on PBS during a block of children’s programming.)

c. “The majority of congressmen, including members from both parties, believe that Iran is a threat to the United States. Therefore, we should probably go ahead with the invasion.”

d. “Everyone on the board believes that the superintendent’s policies are biased against male teachers. Therefore, we should not reelect her.”
There is no doubt that, in some cases, a person’s circumstances might mitigate blame or praise. For instance, if someone had a really awful childhood, we tend to consider her more praiseworthy if she becomes a productive and charitable member of society than someone who had a loving and encouraging childhood. Alternatively, we tend to regard someone who had a loving and encouraging childhood as more morally blameworthy if he becomes miserly and bitter—surely he knew better. But, these arguments are not appeals to emotion; they are appeals to psychological obstacles, or lack thereof, that help us sort out the extent of social or political punishment for immoral acts. There is no question as to whether the acts are immoral, even on the part of the psychologist offering the evidence; the arguer wants you to believe that the same moral standard does not apply because the victim’s story is so tragic. This is an appeal to pity.

Here are four more appeals to pity:

**EXAMPLES:**

a. “You’ll say what I need you to, right? You wouldn’t want us to lose our land!”

b. *Student:* Please re-think my grade.
   *Professor:* But you did not answer the question.
   *Student:* My mom will kill me if I flunk History.

c. “Don’t fire Jack, even if he is incompetent. He has a huge family to provide for.”

d. “If I don’t get this promotion my husband will leave me!”

3. **petitio principii** (begging the question; circular reasoning)

If you listen closely, you will hear many people use the phrase, “that begs the question.” But few use this phrase the way philosophers and logicians do. This is because the phrase has come to have two uses in the English language. One is rhetorical and the other is logical. The rhetorical use is the one you’re probably most familiar with. The rhetorical use means to raise a question, to make a question obvious, or to make a question relevant. The other use is logical,
and it means: in an argument, to assume in the premises something you are attempting to prove in the conclusion; it is also called a **circular argument**. The logical use is the phrase’s original meaning, but clever journalists have co-opted it for rhetorical purposes, and now it is standard to accept its rhetorical use. We, however, will only ever employ the term in its logical use—to mean a circular argument.

A circular argument is an argument that includes the conclusion in the premises. For example:

1) It is raining outside.
2) If it is raining outside, my car is wet.
3) Therefore, it is raining outside.

In this argument, the conclusion is already assumed in the premises. The arguer assumes that it is raining outside in order to prove that it is raining outside. Now, you might wonder: why in the world would anyone construct such a foolish argument? It’s actually much easier to commit this fallacy than you might think. Consider the following, more subtle version:

1) The Bible says God exists.
2) The Bible is true because God wrote it.
3) Therefore, God exists.

In this argument, God’s existence is assumed in premise (2). God could not have written the Bible if he did not exist to write it. But the whole point is to prove that God exists! The next example is even subtler:

1) Murder is morally wrong.
2) Abortion is murder.
3) Therefore, abortion is morally wrong.

Why is this fallacious? It is not explicitly, but implicitly, since almost everyone accepts that murder is morally wrong, premise (2) is really the claim that requires evidence. If we already thought premise (2) was true, we wouldn’t be having the abortion debate in the first place. So, since the term “murder” means “immoral killing,” then we are assuming in the premises what we
are trying to prove in the conclusion. Therefore, be careful not to beg the question in your own arguments, and watch that someone does not slip something by you by begging the question.

Here are four more circular arguments:

EXAMPLES:

a. “I believe Professor Williams that X. Look; it’s even in his textbook on p. 322!”

b. “Of course the government should provide health care. The government is supposed to protect our rights and health care is a basic human right.”

c. “Cheating violates academic integrity. Therefore, it is wrong to cheat.”

d. “It is wrong to assign grades according to relative student performance. But grading on a curve does just that! Therefore, grading on a curve is immoral.”

4. Appeal to Inappropriate Authority

People love to tell you that there is some scientific evidence behind their claims. Advertisements for shampoo, weight-loss supplements, cars, and pain killers all cite some form of “research” that supports some claim about their product. One commercial for a diet pill actually had a piece of paper in the background with the words, “Journal of Research,” written in bold at the top while the announcer explained the “amazing results!” Just after the terrorist bombings in London in 2005, a CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) News anchor interviewed a guest, whom they labeled, “Terrorism Expert,” to explain just how serious the attacks were. Political pundit Glenn Beck said repeatedly, over the span of half an hour, that evidence for global warming is “false science.”

What do all these sources of evidence have in common? They are not authorities on the claim in question. The “Journal of Research” does not exist, so it can’t be an authority, and even if a journal with this name existed, it’s not clear why it is a relevant authority on diet pills. It could be dedicated to agriculture or horticulture or veterinary medicine—who knows? Similarly,
what is a “terrorism expert” and what college grants a degree in this field? Would a radical Islamic suicide bomber count as a “terrorism expert”? Pasting these words under someone’s name does not establish his authority to inform a lay audience about terrorism. And finally, Glenn Beck is not a scientist, he did not interview scientists, he did not read scientific research on the air, he cited no independent source whatsoever—he simply authoritatively pronounced that a claim (made by scientists) is false.

To be clear, the diet pill may work, the terrorism expert may be legitimate, and global warming may, in fact, be a liberal myth. The problem is that you, as a critical thinker, have not been given appropriate evidence to think any of these claims are true. All three examples commit the fallacy of appeal to inappropriate authority.

There are two ways an appeal to authority can be inappropriate:

(1) the authority can be irrelevant, or
(2) the authority can be biased.

If an authority is irrelevant, he or she is just not in any position to speak on the claim being evaluated. If an authority is biased, he or she pretends (knowingly or unknowingly) to be in a position of authority on the subject.

If your math teacher drones on and on about the deplorable character development in Jane Austen novels, it might be wise to take his opinions with a grain of salt. On the face of it, he is an irrelevant authority. Who cares what a mathematician has to say about literature? He might be right, but you should look for independent evidence. On the other hand, if you also learn that one of his long-time hobbies is 19th century literature, you may take his claims a little more seriously. In this case, he is a relevant authority.
If a representative from the National Rifle Association (NRA) tells you that it is your Constitutional right to own whatever gun you want, you should look for some independent evidence. Since the NRA is devoted to the promotion of firearm ownership, they are a potentially biased authority. This does not mean they are wrong, it just means that they have a vested interest in promoting certain claims. This vested interest can bias their testimony, that is, it could lead them to exaggerate the truth or mislead you about a claim. This is tricky because it is not always the case. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency has a vested interest in promoting certain claims about the environment. However, it is better for them to be unbiased if they want to keep getting funding.

Consider a more difficult case. What if a publication called The Journal of New Testament Studies publishes an article on Jesus of Nazareth? Whether it is an appropriate authority depends on what else you know about the journal. If it is a journal that publishes based on “blind reviews” (the reviewer does not know the author’s name) and its editorial board is made up of well-respected scholars who study the New Testament, then it might be a reliable source. On the other hand, if all the editing scholars are known to have a certain take on the New Testament (say, that Jesus didn’t exist), or that they only publish scholars who agree with them, the journal is less reliable—it is not an appropriate authority.

Jamie once saw a magazine ad with John Travolta wearing a Breitling watch. He immediately wondered: Why should this make me want to buy a Breitling watch? He decided there were two possible reasons, both fallacious. First, the ad might have been trying to convince Jamie that he should “be like Travolta,” join an elite club of celebrities who wear Breitling. This would not be an appeal to inappropriate authority, but another fallacy, called appeal to snobbery.
Second, the ad might have been trying to convince Jamie that Travolta, being rich and famous, and having access to the finer things in life, has some insight into which things count as “finer,” or at least as “fine timepieces.” We are supposed to assume, implicitly, that Travolta is a connoisseur of fine watches (or at least fine things) and therefore, recommends Bretiling. But, John Travolta is an actor and a pilot. Acting and flying are his realms of authority. If Travolta recommended an airplane, then fine; he’s an authority. But a watch? Hardly. It’s like Whoopi Goldberg telling me to vote for Barak Obama, or the Red Hot Chili Peppers telling me to Rock the Vote! Who are these people to tell me anything outside of their realm of expertise?

Here are four more appeals to inappropriate authority:

**EXAMPLES:**


b. “The president of Ford Motor Company recently said that American cars are built better than any of their Japanese competitors.”

c. “The Journal of Paranormal Research says that 75% of people experience psychic phenomena on a daily basis.”

d. The Sun (tabloid) newspaper prints: “Monkey-boy is his own father!”

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5. Slippery Slope

In a slippery slope fallacy, an arguer inappropriately concludes that a series of unfortunate or undesirable consequences would follow if some claim, \( p \), were true, therefore, \( p \) must be false. In South Park season 1, someone suggests that the Terrance and Phillip show is corrupting the minds of the children of South Park (“Death”). In response, Kyle’s mom, Mrs. Broflovski starts a protest: “Not allowing our kids to watch the show is not enough. We need to boycott the entire network. … These boys’ minds have been tainted by the garbage on television that they see and we are fed up!” The implication seems to be that what is on television will lead
to negative consequences for kids and then society. Rob has written that Mrs. Broflovski’s worry could be formulated as follows:

If we allow a show like *The Terrance and Phillip Show* on the air, then it’ll corrupt my kid, then it’ll corrupt your kid, then it’ll corrupt all our kids, then shows like this will crop up all over the TV, then more and more kids will be corrupted, then all of TV will be corrupted, then the corrupt TV producers will corrupt other areas of our life, etc., etc., etc. So, we must take *The Terrance and Phillip Show* off the air; otherwise, it will lead to all these other corruptions!!! (2006: 58).

The problem with this sort of argument is that it is not at all clear that all these negative consequences will follow from leaving *The Terrance and Phillip Show* on the air. In order to have a cogent argument, the arguer must give reasons for each particular consequence. To be sure, there is psychological evidence that continued exposure to violence tends to produce in children a more violent disposition. This means there might be some evidence that bad programming could have negative effects on children. But the further implications that shows like this will flourish until more and more kids are corrupted and other aspects of our lives are corrupted are unwarranted. Note: if all the causal connections between the *p* and the consequences identified in the argument can be established with good reasons, the argument does not commit the slippery slope fallacy.

Here are four more examples of the slippery slope fallacy:
6. The Naturalistic Fallacy (inferring an “ought” claim from an “is” claim)

Recall that moral claims are normative, that is, they prescribe some action (e.g., you shouldn’t steal, no one should lie to their mothers out of selfishness). Normal claims, on the other hand, are descriptive; they describe reality (e.g., the cat is on the mat, New York is north of Charlotte, etc.). Where does the normative force of a moral claim come from? Most philosophers agree that, wherever it comes from, we cannot infer normative claims (“ought” claims) from descriptive claims (“is” claims). To do so is to commit what is known as the naturalistic fallacy.

For instance, you may know that plants need water to survive. This is a descriptive claim. But this claim tells us nothing about whether anyone should water the plant. The claim, “You should water the plant,” does not follow from, “The plant needs water to survive.” It is true that, if you want the plant to survive, then you have a normative reason to water the plant—you ought to water the plant. But even this sort of normativity (based on what you want) does not establish a moral obligation to water the plant. Rob may want his daughter to grow up to be beautiful,
and it may be a fact that if he gets her plastic surgery she will, but that does not mean he is under a moral obligation to get her plastic surgery. In fact, she will probably grow up to be beautiful even if Rob doesn’t do something he knows will guarantee her beauty.

Not everyone agrees that it is irrational to derive an ought claim from an is claim. For example, some philosophers argue that the truth of the claim, “X causes pain,” constitutes at least a prima facie reason to believe it is wrong to do X, even though “X causes pain” is a descriptive claim. But things here are not so tidy. These philosophers believe that increasing pain is essentially immoral. This means that, even though “X causes pain” is descriptive, since pain has moral implications, we have moral reasons not to do X. But on what grounds could you establish that increasing pain is immoral? Surely not on descriptive claims like, “brain state x is a pain state,” or “smashing toes causes pain,” or “I don’t like pain.” It seems plausible that we still need some moral claim to establish that pain is immoral. To be sure, this problem raises heated debates about where moral normativity comes from. Nevertheless, we feel it is safe to assume it does not derive from descriptive claims.

Here are four more examples of the naturalistic fallacy:

**EXAMPLES:**

a. “Bodies naturally break down over time, so exercise is just a struggle against nature. Therefore, you shouldn’t exercise.”

b. “It’s very natural for a child to lash out at her brother and hit him once in a while. You should just let her.”

c. “Animals eat each other, therefore, how could it be wrong for me to eat animals?”

d. Homosexuality is a genetic predisposition, even if it cannot be linked to one specific gene. If homosexuals cannot choose whether to be homosexual, it cannot be immoral.