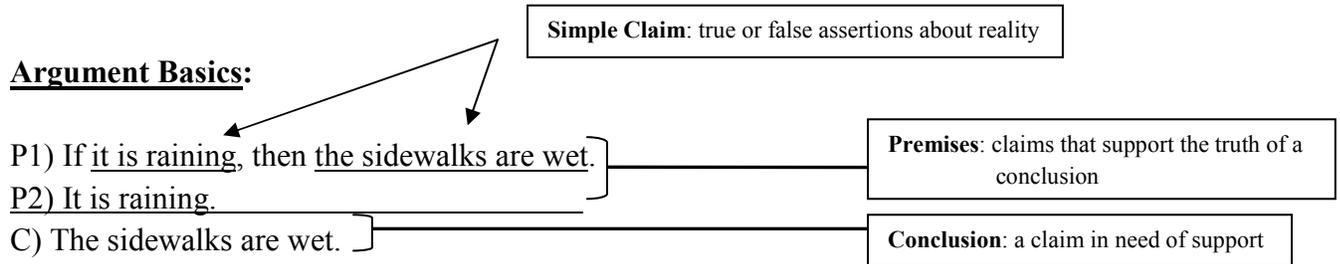


Ethics across the Curriculum Workshop
November 5, 2009
Common Fallacies in Moral Reasoning



- **Claim:** a declarative statement, proposition, or claim about reality that is either true or false.
- **Complex claim:** one or more simple claims joined with an operator (and, or, not, if...then...).
- **Argument:** one or more claims (called *premises*) intended to support the truth of another claim (called a *conclusion*).
- **Premises** provides: *grounds, reasons, justification, support, evidence* for a conclusion.
- **Arguments** are *not true or false*; only **claims** are true or false.
- **Arguments** are either good or bad.
- **Fallacy:** an error in reasoning.

• **Five Fallacies** •

1. Appeal to the People (*argumentum ad populum*)

df.: concluding that *p* on the grounds that many people believe *p*.

Example 1: (non-moral)

“Ford: America’s best-selling pickup.” Implicit conclusion: **You should buy a Ford pickup.**

Example 2: (moral)

“**Pre-marital sex isn’t wrong;** no one thinks twice about it.”

Example 3: (moral)

All cultures have held that murder is wrong. Therefore, **murder must be wrong.**

2. *ad hominem* (appeal to the man)

df.: concluding that not-*p* on the grounds that someone with a bad character or that was in unfavorable circumstances

Example 1: (non-moral)

“I had dinner with Senator Geary last night. He was rude, obnoxious, and his wife wouldn’t shut up. **Senator Geary’s proposal cannot be worth the paper it is printed on.**”

Example 2: (moral)

“Christians are cliquish and judgmental. **They cannot possibly be right about my eternal destiny.**”

Example 3: (moral)

“Sister Sara was raised by a bunch of right-wing bigots! **You can’t seriously think she is right that birth control is immoral.**” (Reformulated conclusion: You should not believe that birth control is immoral.)

Addendum: Variation on the *ad hominem*—*tu quoque* (“you, too”)

df.: concluding that *p* is morally permissible because the person arguing against *p* does *p* (is a hypocrite)

Example: “You can’t tell me adultery is wrong; you’re an adulterer!”

3. Begging the Question (*petitio principii*)

df.: concluding that *p* from premises that include *p* (whether explicitly or implicitly)

Example 1: (non-moral)

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

Example 2: (moral)

“Of course the government should provide health care. Health care is a basic human right.”

Example 3: (moral)

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

Example 4: (moral)

- 1) It is immoral to assign grades according to relative student performance.
- 2) Grading on a curve does just that!
- 3) Therefore, grading on a curve is immoral.

Addendum: Question-Begging Claims

Claims or disguised questions that presuppose other relevant information:

- “Have you stopped beating your wife?”
- “Will you support further unnecessary spending?”
- “Are you no longer a pedophile?”
- Florida abortion statute:

Illegal abortion: Termination of pregnancy during last trimester which does not meet requirements of legal abortion.

4. Slippery Slope

df.: concluding a series of very bad implications from p in order to show that p is false (p will lead to, x , y , and then z , and you don't want z , therefore not- p)

Example 1: (non-moral)

"The CEO's proposal will frustrate middle management, who will then take it out on the factory workers. When the factory workers are angry enough, they will go on strike and sink the whole company. Surely, we should not accept the proposal."

Example 2: (moral)

"If we permit gay marriage, what is to prevent brothers from marrying sisters, or adults from marrying children, or, heaven forbid, a man from marrying his sheep?"

Example 3: (moral)

"Censorship is immoral. If we censor 2LiveCrew, we have to censor anything the public finds distasteful. Pretty soon we will be burning books and putting people in jail as instigators. This is a fast track to fascism!"

5. The Naturalistic Fallacy

df.: concluding that p ought to be the case (or someone should do p) on the grounds that p is the case (or on the grounds that someone has a tendency to do or want to do p)

Example 1: (non-moral)

"Plants need water to survive. You should water your plant, man."

Example 2: (non-moral)

- 1) Bodies naturally break down over time.
- 2) Exercise just goes against nature.
- 3) Therefore, you shouldn't exercise.

Example 3: (moral)

"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."

Example 4: (moral)

"Animals eat each other, therefore, how could it be wrong for me to eat animals?"

- Ben Franklin on eating fish: "If you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you."

Example 5: (moral)

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.

Case Study

Jimmy: “You shouldn’t have treated her like that.”

Rick: “What are you talking about?”

Jimmy: “You slept with her and didn’t call her back, and then you asked out her roommate.”

Rick: “You’re no saint, either, you know.”

Jimmy: “Fine. But we’re not talking about me. She’s a good girl.”

Rick: “What do you know about being a good girl? You’re whole family has been a mess since you were born!”

Jimmy: “All I’m saying is that some people are sensitive about relationship stuff and you should be more considerate.”

Rick: “Look, everyone does this. This is part of dating in college. She knew what she was getting into.”

Jimmy: “Maybe. But a lot of girls take sex very seriously. They think it implies you’re in a relationship. Did you at least talk about that?”

Rick: “Why should it mean we’re in a relationship? Look, Jimmy, humans are mammals. There are only like three mammals that are monogamous. It’s just unnatural. If she hasn’t figured that out, yet, I feel sorry for her.”

Jimmy: “That doesn’t make sense. If you give up monogamy, then you lose a sense of trust in relationships, then communities are much less stable. Pretty soon, people are aimless and frustrated, and since the idea of family holds our culture together, our government could fall apart.”

Rick: “That’s ridiculous! She’s gonna be fine and I’ll just avoid her.”

Jimmy: “Well you at least can’t deny that it’s wrong to mislead someone.”

Rick: “Why?”

Jimmy: “Because it’s deceptive! Everyone knows deceit is immoral.”

Rick: “Wait a minute. I think I just learned about this. Isn’t that the fallacy of ...”