

Some Basic Points about Arguments

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Philosophy without argument would be a lifeless exercise. What good would it be to produce a theory, if there were no reasons for thinking it correct? And of what interest is the rejection of a theory, if there are no good reasons for thinking it incorrect? A philosophical idea is exactly as good as the arguments in its support.

Therefore, if we want to think clearly about philosophical matters, we have to learn something about the evaluation of arguments. We have to learn to distinguish the sound ones from the unsound ones. This can be a tedious business, but it is indispensable if we want to come within shouting distance of the truth.

Arguments

In ordinary English, the word *argument* often means a quarrel, and there is a hint of acrimony in the word. That is not the way the word is used here. In the logician's sense, an argument is a chain of reasoning designed to prove something. It consists of one or more *premises* and a *conclusion*, together with the claim that the conclusion *follows from the premises*. Here is a simple argument. This example is not particularly interesting in itself, but it is short and clear, and it will help us grasp the main points we need to understand about the nature of arguments.

(1) All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The first two statements are the premises; the third statement is the conclusion; and it is claimed that the conclusion follows from the premises.

What does it mean to say that the conclusion “follows from” the premises? It means that a certain logical relation exists between the premises and the conclusion, namely, that *if* the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true also. (Another way to put the same point is: The conclusion follows from the premises if and only if it is impossible for the premises to be true, and the conclusion false, at the same time.) In example (1), we can see that the conclusion does follow from the premises. If it is true that all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, then it must be true that Socrates is mortal. (Or, it is impossible for it to be true that all men are mortal, and for Socrates to be a man, and yet be false that Socrates is mortal.)

In example (1), the conclusion follows from the premises, *and* the premises are in fact true. However, the conclusion of an argument may follow from the premises even if the premises are not actually true. Consider this argument:

(2) All people from Georgia are famous.

Jimmy Carter is from Georgia.

Therefore, Jimmy Carter is famous.

Clearly, the conclusion of this argument does follow from the premises: *If* it were true that all Georgians were famous, and Jimmy Carter was from Georgia, then it follows that Jimmy Carter would be famous. This logical relation holds between the premises and conclusion even though one of the premises is in fact false.

At this point, logicians customarily introduce a bit of terminology. They say that an argument is *valid* just in case its conclusion follows from its premises. Both the examples given above are valid arguments, in this technical sense.

In order to be a *sound* argument, however, two things are necessary: The argument must be valid, *and* its premises must be true. Thus, the argument about Socrates is a sound argument, but the argument about Jimmy Carter is not sound, because even though it is valid, its premises are not all true.

It is important to notice that an argument may be unsound even though its premises and conclusion are both true. Consider the following silly example:

(3) The earth has one moon.

John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Therefore, snow is white.

The premises of this “argument” are both true, and the conclusion is true as well. Yet it is obviously a bad argument, because it is not valid—the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The point is that *when we ask whether an argument is valid, we are not asking whether the premises actually are true, or whether the conclusion actually is true. We are only asking whether, if the premises were true, the conclusion would really follow from them.*

So far, our examples have all been trivial. I have used these trivial examples because they permit us to make the essential logical points clearly and uncontroversially. But these points are applicable to the analysis of any argument, trivial or not. To illustrate, let us consider how these points can be used in analyzing a more important and controversial issue. We will look at the arguments for Moral Skepticism in some detail.

Moral Skepticism

Moral Skepticism is the idea that *there is no such thing as objective moral truth.* It is not merely the idea that we cannot *know* the truth about right and wrong. It is the more radical idea that, where ethics is concerned, “truth” does not exist. The essential point may be put in several different ways. It may be said that:

- Morality is subjective; it is a matter of how we feel about things, not a matter of how things *are*.
- Morality is only a matter of opinion, and one person’s opinion is just as good as another’s.
- Values exist only in our minds, not in the world outside us.

However the point is put, the underlying thought is the same: The idea of “objective moral truth” is only a fiction; in reality, there is no such thing.

We want to know whether Moral Skepticism is correct. Is the idea of moral “truth” only an illusion? What arguments can be given in favor of this idea? In order to determine whether it is correct, we need to ask what arguments can be given for it and whether those arguments are sound.

The Cultural Differences Argument. One argument for Moral Skepticism might be based on the observation that in different cultures people have different ideas concerning right and wrong. For example, in traditional Eskimo society, infanticide was thought to be morally

acceptable—if a family already had too many children, a new baby might have been left to die in the snow. (This was more likely to happen to girl babies than to boys.) In our own society, however, this would be considered wrong. There are many other examples of the same kind. Different cultures have different moral codes.

Reflecting on such facts, many people have concluded that there is no such thing as objective right and wrong. Thus, they advance the following argument:

- (4) In some societies, such as among the Eskimos, infanticide is thought to be morally acceptable.

In other societies, such as our own, infanticide is thought to be morally odious.

Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong; it is merely a matter of opinion that varies from culture to culture.

We may call this the “Cultural Differences Argument.” This kind of argument has been tremendously influential; it has persuaded many people to be skeptical of the whole idea of moral “truth.” But is it a *sound* argument? We may ask two questions about it: First, are the premises true, and second, does the conclusion really follow from them? If the answer to either question is no, then the argument must be rejected. In this case, the premises seem to be correct—there have been many cultures in which infanticide was accepted. Therefore, our attention must focus on the second matter: Is the argument *valid*?

To figure this out, we may begin by noting that the premises concern *what people believe*. In some societies, people think infanticide is all right. In others, people believe it is immoral. The conclusion, however, concerns not what people believe, but whether infanticide *really is* immoral. The problem is that this sort of conclusion does not follow from those sorts of premises. It does not follow, from the mere fact that people have different beliefs about something, that there is no “truth” in the matter. Therefore, the Cultural Differences Argument is not valid.

To make the point clearer, consider this analogous argument:

- (5) In some societies, the world is thought to be flat.

In other societies, the world is thought to be round.

Therefore, objectively speaking, the world is neither flat nor round. It is merely a matter of opinion that varies from culture to culture.

Clearly, *this* argument is not valid. We cannot conclude that the world is shapeless simply because not everyone agrees what shape it has. But exactly the same can be said about the Cultural Differences Argument: We cannot validly move from premises about what people *believe* to a conclusion about what is so, because people—even whole societies—may be wrong. The world has a definite shape, and those who think it is flat are mistaken. Similarly, infanticide might be objectively wrong (or not wrong), and those who think differently might be mistaken. Therefore, the Cultural Differences Argument is not valid, and so it provides no legitimate support for the idea that moral “truth” is only an illusion.

There are two common reactions to this analysis. These reactions illustrate traps that people often fall into.

1. The first reaction goes like this: Many people find the conclusion of the Cultural Differences Argument very appealing. This makes it hard for them to believe that the argument is invalid—when it is pointed out that the argument is fallacious, they tend to respond: “But right and wrong really *are* only matters of opinion!” They make the mistake of thinking that, if we reject an argument, we are somehow impugning the truth of its conclusion. But that is not so. Remember example (3) above; it illustrates how an argument may have a true conclusion and still be a bad argument. If an argument is unsound, then it fails to provide any reason for thinking the conclusion is true. The conclusion may still be true—that remains an open question—but the point is just that the unsound argument gives it no support.

2. It may be objected that it is unfair to compare morality with an obviously objective matter like the shape of the earth, because we can prove what shape the earth has by scientific methods. Therefore, we know that the flat-earthers are simply wrong. But morality is different. There is no way to prove a moral opinion is true or false.

This objection misses the point. The Cultural Differences Argument tries to derive the skeptical conclusion about morality *from a certain set of facts*, namely, the facts about cultural disagreements. This objection suggests that the conclusion might be derived from a *different set of facts*, namely, facts about what is and what is not provable. It suggests, in effect, a different argument, which might be formulated like this:

- (6) If infanticide (or anything else, for that matter) is objectively right or wrong, then it should be possible to *prove* it right or wrong.

But it is not possible to prove infanticide right or wrong.

Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion that varies from culture to culture.

This argument is fundamentally different from the Cultural Differences Argument, even though the two arguments have the same conclusion. They are different because they appeal to different considerations in trying to prove that conclusion—in other words, they have different premises. Therefore, the question of whether argument (6) is sound is separate from the question of whether the Cultural Differences Argument is sound. The Cultural Differences Argument is not valid, for the reason given above.

We should emphasize the importance of *keeping arguments separate*. It is easy to slide from one argument to another without realizing what one is doing. It is easy to think that, if moral judgments are “unprovable,” then the Cultural Differences Argument is strengthened. But it is not. Argument (6) merely introduces a different set of issues. It is important to pin down an argument and evaluate it as carefully as possible, before moving on to different considerations.

The Provability Argument. Now let us consider in more detail the question of whether it is possible to prove a moral judgment true or false. The following argument, which we might call the “Provability Argument,” is a more general form of argument (6):

(7) If there were any such thing as objective truth in ethics, we should be able to prove that some moral opinions are true and others false.

But in fact we cannot prove which moral opinions are true and which are false.

Therefore, there is no such thing as objective truth in ethics.

Once again, we have an argument with a certain superficial appeal. But are the premises true? And does the conclusion really follow from them? It seems that the conclusion does follow. Therefore, the crucial question will be whether the premises are in fact true.

The general claim that moral judgments can't be proven *sounds* right: Anyone who has ever argued about a matter like abortion knows how frustrating it can be to try to “prove” that one's point of view is correct. However, if we inspect this claim more closely, it turns out to be dubious.

Suppose we consider a matter that is simpler than abortion. A student says that a test given by a teacher was unfair. This is clearly a moral judgment—fairness is a basic moral value. Can the student prove the test was unfair? She might point out that the test was so long that not even the best students could complete it in the time allowed (and the test was to be graded on the assumption that it should be completed). Moreover, the test covered trivial matters in detail while ignoring matters the teacher had stressed as very important. And finally, the test included questions about some matters that were not covered in either the assigned readings or the class discussions.

Suppose all this is true. And further suppose that the teacher, when asked to explain, has no defense to offer. (In fact, the teacher, who is rather inexperienced, seems muddled about the whole thing and doesn't seem to have had any very clear idea of what he was doing.) Now, hasn't the student proved the test was unfair? What more in the way of proof could we possibly want?

It is easy to think of other examples that make the same point:

- *Jones is a bad man.* To prove this, one might point out that Jones is a habitual liar; he manipulates people; he cheats when he thinks he can get away with it; he is cruel to other people; and so on.
- *Dr. Smith is irresponsible.* She bases her diagnoses on superficial considerations; she drinks before performing delicate surgery; she refuses to listen to other doctors' advice; and so on.
- *A certain used-car salesman is unethical.* He conceals defects in his cars; he takes advantage of poor people by pressuring them into paying exorbitant prices for cars he knows to be defective; he runs false advertisements in any newspaper that will carry them; and so on.

The point is that we can, and often do, back up our ethical judgments with good reasons. Thus, it does not seem right to say that they are all unprovable, as though they were nothing more than "mere opinions." If a person has good reasons for his judgments, then he is not *merely* giving "his opinion." On the contrary, he may be making a judgment with which any reasonable person would have to agree.

If we can sometimes give good reasons for our moral judgments, what accounts for the persistent impression that they are "unprovable"? There are two reasons why the Provability Argument appears to be more potent than it actually is.

First, there is a tendency to focus attention only on the most difficult moral issues. The question of abortion, for example, is an

enormously difficult and complicated matter. If we think only of questions like *this*, it is easy to believe that “proof” in ethics is impossible. The same could be said of the sciences. There are many complicated matters that physicists cannot agree on; if we focused our attention entirely on *them*, we might conclude that there is no “proof” in physics. But, of course, there are many simpler matters in physics that can be proven and about which all competent physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics, there are many matters far simpler than abortion, about which all reasonable people must agree.

Second, it is easy to confuse two matters that are really very different:

1. Proving an opinion to be correct
2. Persuading someone to accept your proof

Suppose you are having an argument with someone about some moral issue, and you have perfectly cogent reasons in support of your position, while they have no good reasons on their side. Still, they refuse to accept your logic and continue to insist they are right. This is a common, if frustrating, experience. You may be tempted to conclude that it is impossible to prove you are right. But this would be a mistake. Your proof may be impeccable; the trouble may be that the other person is being pig-headed. (Of course, that is not the *only* possible explanation of what is going on, but it is one possible explanation.) The same thing can happen in any sort of discussion. You may be arguing about intelligent design versus evolution, and the other person may be unreasonable. But that does not necessarily mean there is something wrong with your arguments. There may be something wrong with him.

Conclusion

We have examined two of the most important arguments in support of Moral Skepticism and seen that these arguments are no good. Moral Skepticism might still turn out to be true, but if so, then other, better arguments will have to be found. Provisionally, at least, we have to conclude that Moral Skepticism is not nearly as plausible as we might have thought.

The purpose of this exercise, however, was to illustrate the process of evaluating philosophical arguments. We may summarize what we have learned about evaluating arguments like this:

1. Arguments are offered to provide support for a theory or idea; a philosophical theory may be regarded as acceptable only if there are sound arguments in its favor.

2. An argument is sound only if its premises are true and the conclusion follows logically from them.
 - (a) A conclusion "follows from" the premises just in case the following is so: *If* the premises were true, then the conclusion would have to be true also. (An alternative way of saying the same thing: A conclusion follows from the premises just in case it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false at the same time.)
 - (b) A conclusion can follow from premises even if those premises are in fact false.
 - (c) A conclusion can be true and yet not follow from a given set of premises.
3. Therefore, in evaluating an argument, we ask two *separate* questions: Are the premises true? And, does the conclusion follow from them?
4. It is important to avoid two common mistakes. We should be careful to keep arguments separate, and not slide from one to the other, confusing different issues. And, we should not think an argument stronger than it is simply because we happen to agree with its conclusion. Moreover, we should remember that, if an argument is unsound, that does not mean the conclusion must be false—it only means that *this* argument does nothing to show it is true.