Moral Reasoning

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The most fundamental critical-thinking skill is the ability to evaluate reasons for belief. Despite the skepticism people sometimes express about morality, people nonetheless have moral opinions and often try to support these opinions with reasons. How do we distinguish good moral reasons from bad ones? Is it possible to prove anything in ethics? In this module, we discuss some elementary logical concepts, examine two types of moral arguments, and learn how to recognize common fallacies in moral reasoning.

1. Elementary Logical Concepts

Moral arguments often advance bold conclusions. In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,”1 Australian philosopher Peter Singer calls into question the morality of the consumer lifestyle with the following argument:

[S]uffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. . . . [I]f it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it. . . . When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look “well-dressed” we are not providing for an important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving. It follows . . . that we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm.

Singer claims that it is morally wrong to spend money on unnecessary things when this money could be used to help desperately poor people. His argument for this can be reconstructed, step by step, as follows:

(1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
(2) If it is within our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought to do so.
(3) We would not be sacrificing anything morally significant if we did not spend our money on unnecessary items, such as unneeded clothes, but instead donated this money to help prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.

Therefore:

(4) Rather than spending our money on unnecessary items, we ought to donate this money to help prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.

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1 This module is intended primarily as a resource for teachers, but various parts can be adapted for use in the classroom. All boldfaced terms are included in the Glossary.
Should we accept this argument? Singer imagines a case in which a small child is drowning in a pond. You could easily save the child by stepping into the water and pulling the child to safety. You choose not to, however, because you don’t want to ruin your new pair of shoes. You abandon the child, and the child drowns. Obviously, your behavior in this imaginary example is deplorable. If you are in a position to save a child’s life without thereby sacrificing anything “morally significant” then you ought to do so. But consider this. Rather than spending money on a new pair of shoes, or some other unnecessary item, you might contribute this money to an effective humanitarian organization, such as UNICEF, which could use this money to save a child’s life. (More than three million children die annually from dehydration caused by diarrhea. A rehydration tablet, which can reverse the deadly effects of diarrhea, costs only pennies. Tuberculosis kills nearly two million people a year. A full course of treatment for the disease costs only $10—about the price of a movie ticket.) Is there a morally significant difference between refusing to save a child’s life because you don’t want to ruin your new pair of shoes, and refusing to save a child’s life because you would rather spend your money on a new pair of shoes? If not, then the privileges that affluent consumers take for granted are morally indefensible.

An argument, in the philosophical sense of the term, is something that embodies reasons for belief. When presenting an argument, what is argued for is called the “conclusion” of the argument, and the reasons given for believing the conclusion are called the “premises.” In the above example, statement (4) is the conclusion of the argument, and statements (1), (2), and (3) are the premises. In some cases, the conclusion of an argument may only be implied, or a premise may be assumed without being explicitly stated. In such cases, it is necessary to fill in some of the steps in reasoning. Consider, for example, the following argument given by J. Gay-Williams against the practice of euthanasia:

Contemporary medicine has high standards of excellence and a proven record of accomplishment, but it does not possess perfect and complete knowledge. A mistaken diagnosis is possible, and so is a mistaken prognosis. . . . In such circumstances, if euthanasia were permitted, we would die needlessly. Death is final and the chance of error too great to approve the practice of euthanasia.2

Fully spelled out, the reasoning appears to be:

(1) It is wrong to permit any practice if some people will die needlessly as a result of that practice.
(2) If euthanasia is permitted, then (owing to the fallibility of medical science) some people will die needlessly as a result of that practice.

Therefore:

(3) It is wrong to permit euthanasia.

Is this a good argument? It satisfies one important condition: if the premises are true, then the conclusion has to be true. This is what is meant by describing an argument as valid. It is doubtful, however, whether the argument satisfies another important condition. Every year approximately 6,000 American workers are killed on the job or die
as a result of work-related injuries, and more than 40,000 Americans are killed in automobile accidents. Should no one be permitted to work or to drive because of these risks? Consider also that patients sometimes die because of the mistakes that physicians make in performing routine tasks, such as performing surgeries or prescribing medications. Should physicians not be permitted to practice medicine at all because of the possibility that some of their patients will die needlessly? Perhaps the second premise of the above argument is true, but the first premise is implausible. A good argument, or what is called a sound argument, satisfies two conditions: first, the reasoning is valid; and second, the premises are true.

2. Validity

Since even false propositions have logical implications, the conclusion of an argument can validly follow from the premises even if the premises are false. To describe an argument as valid means only this: if the premises are true then (as a matter of logical necessity) the conclusion has to be true. (To repeat: for an argument to be sound, the reasoning must be valid and the premises must be true.) Try to evaluate the following arguments as valid or invalid.

1. All ethicists are decent people. No decent people are deceitful people. Therefore, no ethicists are deceitful people.

2. All murderers are criminals. All criminals should be punished. Therefore, all murderers should be punished.

3. All clairvoyants are psychics. All psychics read tarot cards. No Libras read tarot cards. Therefore, no clairvoyants are Libras.

4. If shoplifting is theft, then it is wrong. Shoplifting is wrong. Therefore, it is theft.

5. All pigs are winged creatures. All winged creatures are devil worshippers. Therefore, all pigs are devil worshippers.

6. If there are no moral facts, then it is impossible for people to be mistaken in their moral beliefs. But this is possible. Therefore, there must be moral facts.

7. All humanists are atheists. All communists are atheists. Therefore, all humanists are communists.

8. The moral standards which people should live by are the standards accepted by their society. There is no moral standard that is accepted by every society. Therefore, there is no moral standard which all people should live by.

9. If the butler didn’t do it, then either the gardener or the cook did it. Whoever did it was over six feet tall, and neither the gardener nor the cook is over six feet tall. Therefore, the butler did it.
10. All Darwinians are evolutionists. No fundamentalists are evolutionists. All fundamentalists are creationists. Therefore, no creationists are Darwinians.

3. Moral Syllogisms

The following two arguments share something in common:

1. It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. To commit euthanasia is to kill an innocent human being. Therefore, euthanasia is wrong.

2. It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. To have an abortion is to kill an innocent human being. Therefore, abortion is wrong.

Though they reach different conclusions, both arguments rest on the same general principle: that it is wrong to kill an innocent human being. This is what is meant by a moral syllogism. Moral syllogisms illustrate the role that rules play in moral reasoning. According to some ethicists, moral decision-making rests upon a handful of rules, or perhaps upon one basic principle. If this is true, then moral reasoning is fundamentally “syllogistic.”

What questions should we ask when evaluating such an argument? A moral syllogism applies a moral rule to a particular case. So one question we should ask is whether there are relevant exceptions to the rule. (Is it always wrong to kill an innocent human being, as both of the above arguments assume? Or is it just ordinarily wrong?) Another question we should ask is whether the rule has been correctly applied. (Is it true that a human fetus is a human being, as the second argument assumes?) Let us see how these considerations come into play when evaluating the above two arguments.

There appear to be two reasons why it is ordinarily wrong to kill an innocent human being: one is that it violates the victim’s right to life, and the other is that it inflicts upon the victim a tremendous loss. Neither of these considerations, however, typically applies in the case of voluntary euthanasia, where a terminally ill patient, in constant pain, chooses death. First, rights can be waived, and when a patient requests death, that person has waived his or her right to life. For this reason, voluntary euthanasia would not violate the patient’s right to life. Second, it is not always the case that death is a loss, for terminally ill patients sometimes experience such unbearable pain that death is a welcome alternative. The word “euthanasia” literally means “good death.” There are, in short, exceptions to the rule that it is wrong to kill an innocent human being, and voluntary euthanasia seems to fall into this category.

The problem with the second argument is not whether the rule against killing an innocent person holds without exception, but whether it can be correctly applied to the abortion issue. Is a human fetus a human being? Or is it merely a potential human being? Many philosophers have challenged the claim that human life begins at conception. Henry Morgentaler presents one such challenge:

At the moment of conception the sperm and the ovum unite, creating one cell. To proclaim that this one cell is already a full human being and should be treated as such is so patently absurd that it is almost difficult to refute. It is as if someone claimed that one brick is already a house and should be treated with the same respect a full house deserves. Even if you have a hundred bricks, or two hundred bricks, it is not yet a house. For it to be a house it needs walls, plumbing, electricity, and a functional organization. The same is true for a
developing embryo. In order for it to be a human being it needs an internal organization, organs, and especially a human brain to be considered fully human. This entity is the result of sexual intercourse, where procreation is often not the goal, and whether it is called a zygote, blastocyst, embryo, or fetus, it does not have all the attributes of a human being and thus cannot properly be considered one.4

For each of the following arguments, identify the general principle on which the argument is based. Are there relevant exceptions to the principle? Has the principle been correctly applied? Is the reasoning valid?

1. It is wrong to kill innocent people. Waging war inevitably involves killing innocent people. (On average, about 90 percent of the people killed in modern wars are innocent people.) Therefore, it is wrong to wage war.

2. It is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering. Using animals for food causes them to suffer unnecessarily. Therefore, it is wrong to use animals for food.

3. It is natural for people to eat meat. If something is natural then it is morally acceptable. Therefore, it is morally acceptable for people to eat meat.

4. It is permissible to use extreme forms of coercion to prevent people from committing serious crimes. (People are imprisoned to prevent them from committing serious crimes. Isn’t this permissible?) Torture is an extreme form of coercion used to prevent people from committing serious crimes. (If a terrorist is tortured to extract information that is used to prevent a planned attack, then the terrorist is prevented from committing the attack.) Therefore, it is permissible to use torture to prevent people from committing serious crimes.

5. If torture is used as an interrogation technique, it is inevitable that innocent people—people falsely suspected of terrorism or other criminal activities—will be tortured. It is wrong to torture innocent people. Therefore, it is wrong to use torture as an interrogation technique.

4. Moral Analogies

A moral syllogism applies a general principle to a particular case. Another type of moral argument involves a comparison between cases and is “analogical” in character. Consider, for example, the following argument in support of a liberal stance on the abortion issue advanced by Judith Jarvis Thomson:

[Let] me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist’s circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, “Look, we’re sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you—we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and now the violinist is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it’s only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from this ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you.” Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? 5
Of course, Thomson believes that you would be morally justified in unplugging yourself from the violinist, even if this cost him his life. If so, then wouldn’t a woman be justified in “unplugging” herself from her fetus? Compactly stated, Thomson’s argument runs as follows:

(1) In the case imagined by Thomson, a woman would have the right to unplug herself from the violinist, even though this would mean that the violist would die.
(2) There is no relevant difference between this case and a case in which a woman is pregnant with an unwanted child and chooses to have an abortion.

Therefore:

(3) A woman has the right to have an abortion when she is pregnant with an unwanted child.

This argument does not rest upon a moral rule—such as that a woman has the right to decide how her body is used—but upon a comparison between two cases. There may be important differences between them, but if the two cases are alike in all respects that matter, and if a woman would have the right to unplug herself from the violinist, then, by analogy, a woman has the right to have an abortion. This is what is meant by a moral analogy. According to some ethicists, our moral intuitions about particular cases are fundamental to moral reasoning. Moral rules are simply generalizations that usually hold. If this is correct, then moral reasoning is not fundamentally syllogistic, but analogical.

The basis for analogical reasoning in ethics is the fact that moral judgments are universalizable in the following sense: if we make a moral judgment about a particular case, then we are logically committed to making the same judgment about any other case exactly like it in all relevant respects. To see what this means, compare the following two cases:

Trolley Case 1: A runaway trolley is about to strike five people tied to the track. You are standing beside the track, and you could easily divert the trolley down an alternate track by pulling a lever, but there is one person tied to the alternate track. If you pull the lever, this person will die. If you don’t, five people will die. The choice is between one life and five lives. Should you pull the lever?

Trolley Case 2: A runaway trolley is about to strike five people tied to the track. You are standing beside the track, and you could prevent the accident by dropping a sufficiently large object in its path. Unfortunately, the only available object large enough to stop the trolley is an extremely fat man who is standing next to you. If you nudge the man, he will topple onto the track preventing the accident, but he will be killed. In this case, only one person will die. If you don’t push the fat man onto the track, five people will die. The choice is between one life and five lives. Should you push the fat man onto the track?

Most people say that it would be right to pull the lever in the first case, but wrong to push the fat man onto the track in the second. This is true even though the outcome is the same in both cases. It is not obvious what the relevant differences are, if there are any, but we
recognize that there must be such differences if we are right in judging the two cases differently. In other words, if the two cases are alike in all respects that matter, and if it is permissible to sacrifice one person to save five people in Trolley Case 1, then it must be permissible to do the same thing in Trolley Case 2. If it is not permissible in Trolley Case 2, then the two cases cannot be alike in all relevant respects.

Because moral judgments are universalizable, we can always validly reason by analogy in ethics. When evaluating such an argument, the crucial question to ask is whether there are relevant differences between the cases being compared. If so, then the argument is unsound. One objection to Thomson’s “violinist” argument, for example, is that there is an important difference between the case imagined by Thomson and the typical abortion case. In Thomson’s case, the violinist has been strapped to a woman’s back without her knowledge or consent. In the typical abortion case, however, a woman has voluntarily engaged in sexual intercourse, knowing what the consequences might be, and has become pregnant as a result. Thomson’s case, therefore, is not strictly analogous to the typical abortion case. At most, Thomson’s argument shows that abortion is permissible when a woman has been raped.

Try to evaluate the following moral analogies. Are the cases being compared alike in all relevant respects? If not, what are the important differences?

1. There is no moral difference between a lion eating a zebra and a human being eating meat. There is nothing wrong with a lion eating a zebra. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with a human being eating meat.

2. It would be wrong for an employer to show preferential treatment to someone simply because that person was white. There is no difference between this and showing preferential treatment to someone simply because that person is a member of a minority group. But this is exactly what affirmative action involves. Therefore, affirmative action is wrong.

3. There is nothing wrong with the recreational use of alcohol. There is no relevant difference between the recreational use of alcohol and the recreational use of narcotics. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with the recreational use of narcotics.

4. There are human beings who are permanently at the intellectual level of small children. Clearly, it would be wrong to use such people as research tools. Yet chimpanzees are intellectually as sophisticated as small children. Therefore, it is wrong to use chimpanzees as research tools.

5. Suppose a terrorist group has planted a nuclear bomb somewhere in Miami. It is set to explode in an hour, and there is no time to evacuate the city. If the authorities could locate the bomb, they could disarm it and prevent a catastrophe. The police have captured one of the terrorists, but he is unwilling to cooperate. Wouldn’t it be permissible to torture the terrorist for information? Surely, it would be permissible to injure or kill the terrorist to prevent such an attack. For example, if the terrorist were about to press a button and detonate the bomb, it would be permissible for the authorities to prevent the attack by shooting the terrorist. But what’s the difference between shooting the terrorist to prevent
the attack and *torturing* the terrorist to prevent the attack? Apparently, none. Therefore, torture is sometimes permissible.

5. Fallacies in Moral Reasoning

A *fallacy* is a logically defective argument. Logicians study and catalogue fallacies so that we can avoid such mistakes in reasoning. The following are some common fallacies associated with moral reasoning.

**Appeal to Nature**

This fallacy, as illustrated by the two examples below, occurs whenever it is argued that something is moral because it is natural, or that something is immoral because it is unnatural.

1. Human beings are by nature meat eaters. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with eating pork chops and hamburgers.

2. Homosexuality is wrong because it is a perversion of nature.

These arguments are fallacious because there is no conceptual connection between what is natural and what is moral. (The first category has to do with how things *are*, whereas the second has to do with how things *ought to be*. For example, it is natural for women to experience pain and suffering during childbirth. Does this mean that such suffering is good, or that it is wrong for women to have some form of pain-relief during childbirth? It is unnatural for human beings to fly. Does this mean that it is morally wrong for people to travel by airplane?

**Appeal to the People**

Does either one of the arguments below seem plausible to you?

1. No one should criticize me for taking pencils, paper clips, or other office supplies. Who doesn’t?

2. Is it wrong to smoke marijuana? Opinion polls show that it is not. Overwhelmingly, American’s condone the use of this drug.

The moral principle underlying both arguments is that the right thing to do is to “follow the crowd.” Clearly, this is a fallacy. In one form, this fallacy occurs whenever it is argued (as in the first example above) that something is right or permissible because many people practice it. In another form, this fallacy occurs whenever it is reasoned (as in the second example above) that something is right simply because many people *believe* that it is right.
**Appeal to Tradition**

This fallacy occurs whenever it is reasoned that something is permissible because it has been practiced for a long time, or that something is wrong because it is contrary to an established practice. The two arguments below illustrate this fallacy:

1. Marriage has always been an institution between a man and a woman. Therefore, gay marriages should not be condoned.

2. America has traditionally been an English-speaking country. Therefore, it should remain the national language.

Both arguments are fallacious because the mere fact that people have engaged in some practice for a long time does nothing to justify that practice. After all, people have practiced slavery, murder, religious persecution, robbery, and rape throughout human history.

**Argumentum ad Hominem**

The following brief dialogue, or something like it, may sound familiar:

A: I can’t believe that you’re late. Now we’re going to miss the beginning of the movie.

B: Don’t criticize me for being late. The other night I waited in the restaurant for nearly an hour before you showed up.

The Latin *ad hominem* means “at the man.” The *ad hominem* fallacy occurs whenever an argument is directed at a person rather than at the person’s views. There are several forms of the fallacy. In one form (what is referred to as *tu quoque*, meaning “you too”), this fallacy occurs, as in the above dialogue, whenever someone attempts to deflect moral criticism by pointing out that the person making the accusation is guilty of similar offenses. To give another example, suppose someone criticizes you for lying. You respond, “Who are you to tell me not to lie? The other day you told your wife that you were working late at the office when you were really out drinking beer with your buddies.” Does it follow from this that it is not wrong for you to lie? Of course not, but this is the conclusion you are arguing for. (It may be hypocritical to criticize others for their moral failures while making excuses for one’s own, but even the hypocrite can correctly point out other people’s faults.)

**Slippery Slope Fallacy**

“This insane drive towards gay marriage isn’t the last stop for the bus,” writes talk-show host Michael Savage.

It’s about expanding marriage to include polygamy, polyamory, transsexual marriages, and open marriage. Perhaps bestiality will get a new image. Why not? There are also single people who want to marry themselves and, in turn, enjoy the benefits afforded married couples.
Sometimes, as in this example, it is argued that a practice should not be condoned because it will lead to other unacceptable practices. This is what is meant by a “slippery slope” argument. Such an argument is not always fallacious, but a mistake occurs whenever the potential for harm is exaggerated. Is it reasonable to suppose that if gay marriage is permitted, this will lead to polygamy, polyamory, and bestiality?

**Appeal to Religion**

Consider the following two arguments:

1. Capital punishment is justified because it says so in the Bible.

2. There is nothing wrong with eating meat. In the Bible, it says that God gave us animals for food, and even Jesus ate fish.

People often appeal to religion to support their moral beliefs, but this is deeply problematic. First, different religions accept different scriptures as authoritative: Christians accept the moral authority of the Bible; Muslims, the Koran; Hindus, the Bhagavad-Gita; and there are many other sources to choose from. Is one religion right and all the others wrong? How can we know? Second, even if we did know that one religious document, such as the Bible, was an accurate account of God’s revelation to humanity, people often disagree about how such documents are to be interpreted. Peter Wenz explains the problem:

> Theocrats believe that society should follow God’s commands, as theocrats understand them, to know with certainty the difference between right and wrong. I find this view untenable in part because religious people differ among themselves about God’s will and the conduct He requires. . . Consider first the influence of disparate group traditions on interpretations of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments. In Deuteronomy 12:23, God tells people when they eat meat they should not eat blood; “for the blood is the life; and you shall not eat the life with the flesh.” Traditional Jews interpret the verse to require that meat be cooked well done. But the traditional interpretation among Jehovah’s Witnesses holds that the verse forbids life-saving transfusions of whole blood. Jehovah’s Witnesses often refuse blood transfusions because they think violating God’s command jeopardizes their immortal souls. The tradition among most Christians, by contrast, is to ignore this passage.8

Finally, if there is development and progress in our understanding of morality (as there is, for example, in our understanding of mathematics), then any religion established hundreds or thousands of years ago (which includes all of the world’s major religions) is likely to contain some rather primitive moral notions. In the Bible, for example, we find the following passages:

> If two men are fighting and the wife of one of them comes to rescue her husband from his assailant, and she reaches out and seizes him by his private parts, you shall cut off her hand. Show her no pity (Deuteronomy 25:11).

> If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads (Leviticus 20:13).
A man or woman who is a medium or spiritualist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads (Leviticus 20:27).

Students sometimes protest that such passages, gleaned from the Old Testament, do not reflect the teachings of Christianity. Should we, then, simply ignore the Old Testament? Isn’t the Bible as a whole revered by Christians as the revealed word of God? If it is, then it must be conceded that God at one time demanded that people be put to death for homosexuality and witchcraft. Was this ever right? If it is argued that Old Testament commandments are not binding upon Christians, then what are we to make of the following passage in which Jesus himself proclaims that such commandments should never be relaxed?

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19).

This, of course, is a controversial issue, but the fact that it is controversial underscores the point that we can never morally justify a practice simply by arguing that the Bible (or some other religious document) condones it. The argument “Capital punishment is justified because it says so in the Bible” is logically indistinguishable from the argument “Homosexuals should be put to death because it says so in the Bible.” Both arguments rely upon the unstated but assumed premise that if the Bible says that something is right, then it is right.

Test your understanding of these ideas by trying to identify the following fallacies.9

1. I learned in anthropology that male primates are by nature polygamists. So I guess there is nothing wrong with a married man fooling around with other women.

2. The Bible says, “Thou shalt not kill.” Therefore, abortion is wrong.

3. Public opinion polls show that the majority of Americans (64 percent) support capital punishment. Therefore, it would be wrong to abolish the death penalty in favor of life imprisonment.

4. You say that it is wrong for me to cheat on my income taxes. But who are you to criticize me? On your tax return, you claimed your vacation to Hawaii as a business expense.

5. There is nothing wrong with cheating on your income taxes. Everyone does it.

6. It is human nature to be selfish. So there is nothing wrong with always putting yourself first.
7. People have been using narcotics for thousands of years. How could there be anything wrong with it?

8. Some people believe that torture should be allowed as an interrogation technique in the war on terror. But this is a grave mistake. If we torture known terrorists, why not torture people who are simply suspected of terrorism? Why not torture a terrorist’s children? Why stop with terrorism? Why not torture people suspected of shoplifting?

9. You’re telling me that I shouldn’t eat meat. But look at you! You’re wearing leather shoes and a leather belt! How can I take you seriously?

10. If marijuana were legalized, this would lead to the legalization of crack-cocaine, heroin, and gay marriages. Therefore, marijuana should not be legalized.

6. Reconstructing Arguments

For each of the following arguments, identify the premises and the conclusion, and attempt to decide whether the argument is sound. Do the premises provide good reasons for believing the conclusion? If not, why not? (In some cases, it may be necessary to supply missing steps in reasoning.)

1. “[T]here is no stronger moral presumption than that against the doing of violence to innocent persons. And knowingly killing them against their will is to do violence to them. . . . But if it is presumptively wrong to kill innocent persons, and if . . . war should inevitably involve such killing, then war itself is presumptively wrong.”

2. “It is unclear . . . that we would always be justified in treating wrongdoers as they have treated others, since this would mean torturing those who have tortured others and raping those who are guilty of rape.”

3. “The good cannot seize power, nor retain it; to do this men must love power. And the love of power is inconsistent with goodness; but quite consistent with the very opposite qualities—pride, cunning, cruelty.”

4. “In Switzerland, every adult male is issued an assault rifle for militia duty and is allowed to keep the gun at home. On a per capita basis, Switzerland has more firearms than just about any other country, and yet is one of the safest places in the world. In other words, guns do not cause crime.”

5. “The general retort to relativism is simple, because most relativists contradict their thesis in the very act of stating it. Take the case of relativism with respect to morality: moral relativists generally believe that all cultural practices should be respected on their own terms, that the practitioners of the various barbarisms that persist around the globe cannot be judged by the standards of the West, nor can the people of the past be judged by the standards of the present. And yet, implicit in this approach to morality lurks a claim that is not relative but absolute. Most moral relativists believe that tolerance of cultural diversity is better, in some important sense, than outright bigotry. This may be
perfectly reasonable, of course, but it amounts to an overarching claim about how all human beings should live. Moral relativism, when used as a rationale for tolerance of diversity, is self-contradictory.””

6. “We are told . . . that God allows evil in order to make room for man’s free will. And this, despite the fact that detailed scrutiny shows that no such response stands up. On the one hand, much of the pain and evil in this world comes from natural causes. On the other hand, does anyone seriously think that Hitler’s free will outweighs the death of six million Jews—not to mention twenty million Russians?”

7. “Although the advantages of allowing a current market in human kidneys are obvious, it is equally obvious why the proposal has been viciously condemned as unethical: the people who would sell their kidneys are likely to be poor, while the people who would buy them are likely to be rich. Moreover, as the sale of a kidney is a drastic measure, the people who would sell their kidneys in such a market would not only be poor but desperately poor. Since this is so, the opponents of such markets allege, the only people who would sell in a market for human kidneys would be those coerced into doing so by their poverty. The buyers of the kidneys would thus be exploiting the poverty of the vendors to secure organs for the buyers’ own use.”

8. “Males commit a disproportionate number of violent crimes in our country, over 90 percent, with young, black males (between the ages of 15 and 24) constituting the group with the greatest tendency toward committing violent crimes. Why is this? Many people in the United States believe that poverty causes crime, but this is false. . . . The majority of people in India are far poorer than most of the American poor, yet a person, male or female, can walk through the worst slum of Calcutta or New Delhi at any time of the day or night without fearing molestation.”

9. “From this arises the question whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved. The reply is, that one ought to be both feared and loved, but as it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting. For . . . love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.”

10. “I oppose abortion. I do so, first, because I accept what is biologically manifest—that human life commences at the time of conception—and, second, because I believe it is wrong to take innocent human life under any circumstances.”

11. “If empathy, nurturance, and taking responsibility for caring for others are characteristic of the feminine voice, then abortion does not appear to be a feminine response to an unwanted pregnancy. If, as [Carol] Gillian says, ‘an ethic of care rests on the premise of non-violence—that no one should be hurt’, then surely the feminine response to an unwanted pregnancy would be to try to find a solution which does not involve injury to anyone, including the unborn.”
12. “[An] argument, based on purely economic issues, is the ‘I don’t want to pay for their oatmeal’ position towards those on death row. There is no evidence to back up this argument. . . . A ‘New Jersey Policy Perspectives’ report, commissioned by New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, found that convicting a killer and putting him or her to death costs about four times more than imprisoning him for life without parole. . . . Of course there’s an argument that those sentenced to death should only get one appeal, but this perspective overlooks the 172 exonerations of innocent people—including 14 people who were at one time sentenced to death—that the Innocence Project has won.”21

13. “It is widely assumed that parents do have the right to inflict violence on their children, for a variety of reasons. . . . I myself would say that all such acts of violence are to be condemned. . . . Since these are not cases of self-defense of the parent against the child, or even acts of revenge for the child’s earlier violence, they are really no different, morally, from hitting another adult because he disobeys you or does something you think is wrong. Only violence can justify violence, and in the vast majority of cases parental violence against children has no such justification. Naughtiness and disobedience are simply not forms of violence.”22

14. “Miscarriages of justice are rare, but do occur. Over a long enough time they lead to the execution of some innocents. Does this make irrevocable punishments morally wrong? Hardly. Our government employs trucks. They run over innocent bystanders more frequently than courts sentence innocents to death. We do not give up trucks because the benefits they produce outweigh the harm, including the death of innocents.”23

15. “It is generally thought that the gravest ethical problem we face in resorting to torture is that we would be bound to torture some number of innocent men and women. . . . It appears that such restraint in the use of torture cannot be reconciled with our willingness to wage war in the first place. What, after all, is ‘collateral damage’ but the inadvertent torture of innocent men, women, and children? Whenever we consent to drop bombs, we do so with the knowledge that some number of children will be blinded, disemboweled, paralyzed, orphaned, and killed by them.”24

16. “The mere fact that a text or film may have strange effects on strange minds doesn’t look like a strong enough reason to keep these materials away from people who don’t respond in that way. So the mere having of occasional bad effects isn’t enough to justify making pornography illegal. For lots of legal things are known to have occasional, even frequent, bad effects in the wrong hands.”25

17. “It should be clear that no man, in an attempt to exercise his right of self-defense, may coerce anyone else into defending him. For that would mean that the defender himself would be a criminal invader of the rights of others. Thus, if A is aggressing against B, B may not use force to compel C to join in defending him, for then B would be just as much a criminal aggressor against C. This immediately rules out conscription for defense, for conscription enslaves a man and forces him to fight on someone else’s behalf.”26
18. “In any enterprise involving a number of persons, there must be the voluntary consent of every member—if some member has not consented but is forced to belong anyway, his rights are being violated because force is being used against him. Well, government is something that involves a large number of people—all the people in the geographical area bounded by the nation in question. And it is certain that not all of these people (democracy or not) consented to the laws by which they are governed, nor the men who administer these laws. By what right, then, do the rulers rule the non-consenters? This has been a troublesome point all along, and the no-government libertarian’s answer is clear: no one should be governed by another without his consent.”

19. “A school program to fight childhood obesity that includes yoga is drawing complaints from some Christian parents in the Quesnel area in B.C.’s Cariboo region. They say yoga is a religion, and shouldn’t be taught in public schools. Chelsea Brears, who has two children in the school system, said her son was asked to do different poses and ‘to put his hands together’. Brears, a Christian, said she doesn’t want her children exposed to another religion during class time. ‘It’s not fair to take prayer out, and yet they’re allowing yoga, which is religion, in our schools’.”

20. “But can’t torture at least be used on someone who might know of an imminent terrorist act? Not without opening the door to pervasive torture. The problem with this ‘ticking bomb’ scenario is that it is infinitely elastic. Why stop with the terrorist suspect himself? Why not torture his neighbor or friend who might know something about an attack? And why stop with an imminent attack? Aren’t the potential victims of possible future attacks just as worthy of protection by torture? The slope is very slippery.”

7. Glossary

**Appeal to Nature:** The fallacy of reasoning that something is moral because it is natural, or that something is immoral because it is contrary to nature.

**Appeal to the People:** The fallacy of reasoning that something is moral because most people approve of it, or that something is immoral because most people disapprove of it.

**Appeal to Religion:** The fallacy of reasoning that something is moral because a religion condones it, or that something is immoral because a religion denounces it.

**Appeal to Tradition:** The fallacy of reasoning that something is moral because it has been practiced for a long time, or that something is immoral because it is contrary to an established practice.

**Argument:** An argument is a set of statements, one of which is the conclusion and the others premises. The “conclusion” of an argument is what is argued for, and the “premises” are the reasons given for believing the conclusion.

**Argumentum ad Hominem:** The fallacy of directing an argument at a person rather than at the person’s views. In the *tu quoque* form, this fallacy occurs whenever someone
attempts to deflect moral criticism by pointing out that the person making the accusation is guilty of similar offenses.

**Fallacy:** A logically defective argument.

**Moral Analogy:** A moral argument based upon a comparison between cases.

**Moral Syllogism:** A moral argument based upon a general moral principle.

**Slippery Slope Fallacy:** To give a slippery slope argument is to argue that, while a practice is not necessarily objectionable in itself, it will lead to some other practice that is objectionable. The fallacy occurs whenever it is unreasonable to suppose that one practice will lead to another.

**Sound:** A sound argument is one in which (1) the premises are true and (2) the reasoning is valid.

**Universalizable:** If we make a moral judgment about a particular case, then we are logically committed to making the same judgment about any other case exactly like it in all relevant respects. In this sense, moral judgments are universalizable.

**Valid:** An argument is valid when the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises in the following sense: if the premises are true, then (as a matter of logical necessity) the conclusion has to be true.

**Notes**


