

Tools for Ethical Analysis

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The study of moral philosophy involves analyzing and evaluating various ethical theories. In order to do this effectively, we first need to understand the kinds of questions which these ethical theories are intended to answer. Next, we need to understand the arguments which comprise these theories. Finally, we must apply analytical tools to the arguments to determine their strengths and weaknesses.

(1) Ethical Questions

Questions are what drive the ethicist to seek answers. They are the motivation behind our study of ethics. In many ways, our questions determine our answers. The way we ask a question can open some avenues of discovery and close others. This is one reason why the study of ethics should be done in the context of a learning community. The questions we ask arise from our own experiences and life contexts. For example, your experiences will vary from mine in some ways and will cause you to ask different questions or to frame those questions in different ways. It's only in cooperation with one another that we can gain a broader perspective, as we ask questions and seek the best answers, together.

Judith Boss writes:

Moral philosophers constantly ask questions such as: "What kind of life should I live?" "How can I know what is good?" "What are my obligations and rights?" "Do we have free will?" "Why should I be moral?" "What is the source of morality?" "How can I justify my moral beliefs?" "Do I have a moral obligation to nonhuman beings and the rest of nature?" "Are people basically good or are they basically selfish?" and "What happens when moral principles come into conflict?"

Moral theories provide a coherent structure by which to analyze and answer these and other important questions.¹

You'll notice that these are fundamental questions. We're not yet asking about specific ethical scenarios, such as stem-cell research, the ethics of war, social justice, abortion, etc. Before we can address these types of ethical issues, we must first have answers to our earlier questions regarding the nature of ethics itself. Our answers to this first type of question are what form the basis of our ethical model, which we then can use to approach specific ethical situations. It's theory followed by application.

What are some of the ethical questions that *you* bring to our "moral quest?"

(2) Understanding Ethical Arguments

If this is your first exposure to philosophical writings, then you might feel a bit overwhelmed. Be encouraged – you're not alone! It's not as intimidating as it may look at first glance. Remember that each theorist is trying to convince you that his or her ethical model or position is the correct one. You hold all the cards. It's up to the writer to convince *you*. Keep in mind that this isn't a new subject for you. You've been making moral judgments your whole life.

¹ Boss, Judith, *Perspectives on Ethics*, 2nd Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2003), xvi.

As you read, take an active posture rather than a passive one. In other words, try to engage and really think about what you're reading. Take as your starting point an attitude of *qualified skepticism*. Question your own beliefs as well as those of others. Ask "why" or "upon what basis" the philosopher is saying what she's saying. Ask yourself "why" or "upon what basis" *you* hold certain ethical ideas.

This process of questioning ideas, especially our own, can be an uncomfortable one. But it's worth the effort. This is the process by which we move from an *embedded* ethic toward a *deliberative* ethic.

An **embedded ethic** is one that we have accepted without much reflection or questioning.

A **deliberative ethic** is one that we have examined/tested, we can explain, and we hold to intentionally.

It's important that we actively set aside our own prejudices and preconceptions and attempt to be objective when we approach the readings. Try to understand what the philosopher is saying before making a judgment.

Boss shares the following advice:

Be aware of your own reactions to the readings and various theories. Being objective requires controlling, or at least being aware of, your emotional reactions to the readings. Most of us hate to be proven wrong and will use defense mechanisms, known as resistance, to avoid having our cherished world views challenged. These defense mechanisms include anger, boredom, distractions, superficial tolerance, and avoidance. ... Resistance keeps you from thinking in depth and, hence, engaging in critical analysis. If you are aware of these reactions, you can take steps to work through these defenses when reading a particular section.²

She goes on to provide the following helpful tips for recognizing and breaking down arguments:

Breaking down each selection into its essential parts will make the readings more manageable. Most writings in moral philosophy include two main parts: (1) the main argument with its conclusion and premises and (2) the explanations and clarifications of key terms and concepts used in the argument. Some readings may also include background material or examples of application of the theory. It is usually easiest to begin with the main argument because this generally forms the focal point of the reading. A summary of the main argument is often found in the first paragraph or two of the reading.³

² Ibid., xvii-xviii.

³ Ibid., xx.

Tips for Recognizing and Breaking Down Arguments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The entire argument may appear in either one sentence or several sentences.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conclusion can appear anywhere in the argument.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the conclusion first. Ask yourself: What is this person trying to prove?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conclusion is often, though not always, preceded by words or phrases known as conclusion indicators, such as therefore; hence; thus; which shows that; for these reasons; or consequently.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The premises are often, though not always, preceded by words or phrases known as premise indicators, such as because; for; since; may be inferred that; the reason that; or as shown by.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underline or highlight the conclusion and the premises.

(3) Applying Analytical Tools

It's not enough to simply understand an argument. We must also think critically about it – analyze it to determine its strengths and weaknesses. Only then can we assess the value of an ethical model or proposal and, eventually, formulate and evaluate our own.

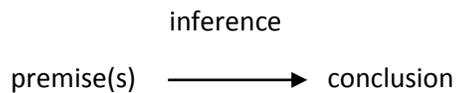
This last piece is the most important. Being able to think critically and to analyze arguments applies to every area of life. It's part of what makes the difference between an informed and engaged person, who makes a difference in the world, and a passive one who simply believes and does whatever his peer group and pop culture tell him. Those who think critically produce answers to problems and promote positive change in their environments. They can consider the impact that decisions and actions will have on a variety of fronts, not just the area of immediate concern. They are not easily swayed by superficial flash and pomp, or the pressure of those around them. Rather they can think well for themselves and influence others to do the same. Most important, those who think critically are constantly learning and growing, as they engage the world around them.

Developing our moral reasoning skills enables us to critically evaluate our *own* beliefs, but it also allows us to interact with others from a foundation that we all hold in common, which is a necessity in a local and global community as diverse as ours. People with vastly different perspectives should be able to hold meaningful discussions about ethics with one another. Giving attention to this area, can enable you to contribute to these kinds of discussions in a constructive way.

As with all things of value, learning to think critically takes effort. It begins with learning to ask good questions and to examine arguments.

The ability to analyze arguments and to recognize faulty reasoning is important in the study of ethics. *Logic*, the study of correct and incorrect reasoning, provides people with the methods and skills to formulate sound moral arguments, as well as to distinguish good arguments from poor arguments.

An **argument** is made up of two or more propositions, one of which is supported by the others. A **proposition**, in logic, is a statement that expresses a complete thought and that can be true or false. The **conclusion** is the proposition that is affirmed or denied on the basis of the other propositions. The conclusion of an argument can appear anywhere in the argument. The **premise** is the proposition that provides reasons or support for the conclusion. An argument can have more than one premise. The process by which we move from the premise(s) to the conclusion is known as **inference**, as seen in this diagram.



The premises form the foundation of an argument. In a good argument, the premises must be strong enough to support the conclusion. A well-constructed argument, like a well-built house, must be able to withstand challenges. If the premises are weak, the whole argument can collapse like the proverbial house built on sand.

If any of the key premises are weak or based on an incorrect fact, the whole argument is weak, no matter how compelling the conclusion. Also, the conclusion must be based on the premises. The conclusion can't make an assertion that goes beyond what is stated in the premises.

An argument can also be weak because it contains fallacies. When an argument is psychologically or emotionally persuasive, but logically incorrect, it contains what logicians call an **informal fallacy**.⁴

⁴ Ibid., xviii-xix.

Thirteen Informal Fallacies ⁵	
Informal fallacies are psychologically persuasive but incorrect arguments.	
Equivocation	A key term shifts meaning during the course of an argument
Abusive	Attacking an opponent's character rather than addressing her conclusion
Circumstantial	Arguing that an opponent should accept a particular position because of his or her lifestyle or membership in a particular group
Appeal to force	Force or threat of force is used to coerce an opponent into accepting one's conclusion
Popular appeal	The opinion of the majority is used as support for a conclusion
Appeal to inappropriate authority	The testimony of someone who is an authority in a different field is used as support for one's conclusion
Ignorance	Arguing that a certain position is true because it hasn't been proven false, or that it is false because it hasn't been proven true
Begging the question	The premise and conclusion are different wordings of the same proposition
Hasty generalization	The conclusion is based on atypical cases
Slippery slope	A position or proposal is rejected, without sufficient evidence, on the grounds that it will set off a chain of events that will lead to a situation that is dangerous or undesirable
Irrelevant conclusion	An argument is directed at a different conclusion than the one under discussion
Naturalistic	Arguing an "ought" from an "is"
Appeal to tradition	Arguing that something is moral because it is traditional

There will be plenty of opportunities to put these tools into practice as we move forward in this course and encounter various ethical positions. Please keep this resource at hand so that you can refer to it throughout the course.

⁵ Ibid., xix.

For more on critical thinking, feel free to check out the following texts:

- Irving Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 13th Edition (Prentice Hall, 2008)
- Jerry Cederblom, *Critical Reasoning*, 6th Edition (Wadsworth, 2005)
- John Chaffee, *Thinking Critically*, 8th Edition (Houghton Mifflin, 2006)
- Richard Epstein, *Critical Thinking*, 3rd Edition (Wadsworth, 2006)

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