Arguments

1. Arguments: In this class, we will be concerned with arguments. By "arguing," I do not mean people yelling and throwing things at each other. I mean this:

Argument: An argument is a collection of sentences that attempt to establish that some conclusion is true.

Arguments have the following two features:

Two Central Features of Arguments
(1) It is trying to CONVINCE us of something, or PROVE something to us.
(2) It supplies some EVIDENCE in order to SUPPORT the thing being proved.

The claim that is being proved is called that "**conclusion**," and claims which provide the evidence to support that conclusion are called the "**premises**." They are the *reasons* given for why we should accept the conclusion.

For example:

1. The thief had blonde hair and brown eyes. (based on witnesses & video footage)
2. Perry does not have blonde hair and brown eyes.
3. Therefore, Perry is not the thief.

In this example, the first two sentences are the premises. The third sentence is the conclusion. The detective is presenting points (1) and (2) as bits of EVIDENCE, or as REASONS for why you should believe the conclusion (3) that Perry is not the thief.

2. Validity and Soundness: Any successful argument must first be **valid**. What does that mean?

Validity: An argument is valid when, IF all of its premises were true, then the conclusion would also HAVE to be true.

In other words, a "valid" argument is one where the conclusion *necessarily* follows from the premises. It is IMPOSSIBLE for the conclusion to be false whenever the premises are true.

Note: The argument above about Perry is valid. Do you see why? Because, IF (1) and (2) WERE true, then (3) would also HAVE to be true.

Note that validity doesn't say anything about whether or not the premises in fact ARE true. An argument could be valid, but be completely and obviously false. Consider, for example:

1. Chad is a duck.
2. All ducks are rabbits.
3. Therefore, Chad is a rabbit.

Though the premises and the conclusion are all false, this argument is valid. Why? Because, IF the premises WERE true, then the conclusion would also HAVE to be true. The truth of the premises would GUARANTEE the truth of the conclusion. And this is all we mean by 'valid'.

So, the argument for the conclusion that I am a rabbit is valid. But, clearly it's not successful. The evidence presented for that conclusion doesn't actually PROVE that I'm a rabbit. For, I'm NOT a rabbit! (Right?) So, what's missing? Why, the evidence presented is BAD evidence! In other words, the premises are FALSE! Ultimately, in order for an argument to be entirely successful, it needs to be both **valid** AND **sound**. What's soundness? It's this:

Soundness: A sound argument is one that is (1) valid, and (2) has true premises.

The argument about ducks and rabbits was **valid**—so it had feature #1—but, it did not have **true premises**. So, it was unsound.

Note: All sound arguments will have a true conclusion. Do you see why? Consider: A sound argument is both valid AND has true premises. But, recall that all valid arguments are such that, if their premises are true, then the conclusion MUST also be true. So, since all sound arguments DO have true premises, they must also have true conclusions.

Now, what about the argument about Perry not being the thief? Well, we don't know yet! The argument is valid, but won't know whether it is sound until we verify the truth of the premises. DOES the thief have blonde hair and brown eyes? Is it TRUE that Perry does NOT have blonde hair and brown eyes? We'll need to verify these claims.

It might help to give one more example. Here's an argument that is obviously valid AND sound:

1. Williamsburg is in Virginia.
2. Virginia is in the United States.
3. Therefore, Williamsburg is in the United States.

In this argument, the truth of the premises DO in fact entail the truth of the conclusion (i.e., if the premises are true, then the conclusion must also be true). So, it is valid. But ALSO, as it turns out, the premises ARE in fact true (Williamsburg IS in Virginia, and Virginia IS in the U.S.). So, the argument is sound.

3. Arguments in Ethics: Can we prove things in Ethics? Is there any EVIDENCE for any moral conclusion? In ethics, we may not have the sort of tangible data that, e.g., chemists and biologists do—organs, chemicals, etc.—but we DO appeal to the data of *intuition* and *reason*. In this class, we will assume that our moral intuitions about simple situations are reliable.

We will then use our intuitions about simple situations to try to answer questions about complex situations. We will do this in a number of ways. Here is the most common strategy:

Argument by Analogy: Using this method, we begin with our (presumably reliable) ethical intuition about a simple, uncontroversial case, and then attempt to demonstrate that it is morally analogous to some other, more controversial case. We then conclude that we should have the same intuition about the controversial case as we did about the *un*controversial case.

For instance, an argument by analogy might take the following form:

1. Action A is morally wrong.
2. Action B is morally on a par with action A.
3. Therefore, action B is morally wrong.

This is taken to be a valid argument form in ethics. That is, any argument which has this form is valid. Let's look at a specific example of an argument which has this form. The following is from Peter Singer's argument in favor of famine relief:

1. Ignoring a child that is drowning in a pond is morally wrong.
2. Not donating to charities that save starving children in third world countries is morally on a par with ignoring the drowning child.
3. Therefore, not donating to charities that save starving children in third world countries is morally wrong.

Here, Peter Singer begins with an uncontroversial case. *Clearly* it is wrong to not try to save a drowning child. He then reasons to a conclusion about a controversial case (not donating to famine relief) by claiming that the two cases are morally on a par with one another. That is, not saving a drowning child (by not jumping into the pond to rescue him) is morally equivalent to not saving a starving child (by not donating to famine relief charities). If the first action is wrong, he says, then the second action must also be wrong.

If we don't like the conclusion of Singer's argument, then we will need to prove that either it is invalid, or that it is unsound. Since he argument is taken to be a valid argument form in Ethics, then—to prove that his argument is unsuccessful—we must demonstrate that it is unsound.

Sound arguments are (a) valid, and (b) have true premises. We've already said that Singer's argument meets criterion (a). It is valid. But, does it meet criterion (b)? Are both premises true? Well, premise 1 seems obviously true. But, what about premise 2? Are the two cases really morally equivalent? (*What do you think?*)