Arguments

1. Arguments: In this class, we will be concerned with arguments. By "arguing," I do not mean the sort where two people yell and throw 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. Witnesses said that the thief had blonde hair and brown eyes.
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 speaker 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 killer.

Any successful argument must have two features: It must be both **valid** and **sound**. What do these words mean?

Validity: An argument is valid when, IF all of it's 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 if the premises are true. The argument above about Perry is valid. Here's another example of a valid argument:

1. Poople is loathed by Moople.
2. Anyone who is loathed by Moople is force-fed peas every night.
3. Therefore, Poople is force-fed peas every night.

So, an argument is valid if it has the proper **form**. An argument can have the right form, but be completely and obviously false. For example:

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

The argument just given is valid. But, premise 2 as well as the conclusion are both false. Notice however that, IF the premises WERE true, then the conclusion would also have to be true. The conclusion necessarily **follows from** the premises. This is all that is required for validity.

So, a valid argument need not have true premises or a true conclusion. On the other hand, a **sound** argument DOES need to have true premises and a true conclusion:

Soundness: An argument is sound if it meets these two criteria: (1) It is valid. (2) Its premises are true.

In other words, a sound argument has the right *form* AND it is *true*.

Do you see why this is the case? First, recall that a sound argument is both valid AND has true premises. Now, refer back to the definition of "valid". For all valid arguments, if their premises are true, then the conclusion MUST also be true. So, all sound arguments have true conclusions.

Looking back to our argument about ducks and rabbits, we can see that it is **valid**, but not **sound**. It is not sound because it does not have all true premises. In fact, NEITHER of its premises are true.

So, the argument about Chad, ducks, and rabbits is valid, but NOT sound. Here's an example of an argument that is 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, if the premises are true, then the conclusion is necessarily true (so it is valid). AND, as it turns out, the premises ARE true (Williamsburg IS in Virginia, and Virginia IS in the U.S.)—so the conclusion must also be true (so the argument is sound).

3. The Power of Arguments: We have looked at only "boring" arguments so far. But, arguments are powerful tools that can be used to prove very exciting and remarkable things. For instance:

If there were a child drowning in front of me, and I just watched him drown, this is clearly morally wrong (right?). But, then, consider this argument for that puzzle known as the problem of human freedom vs. divine foreknowledge:

1. If God exists, then He knows the future.
2. If God knows the future, then the future is already determined.
3. But, if the future is already determined, then I do not have free will (i.e., I am not free to do anything other than what God already knows in advance that I'll do).
4. Therefore, if God exists, then I do not have free will.

Or consider: Murder seems wrong because it takes away every good thing that the person will ever get to experience in their future. But, Don Marquis proposed:

1. It is morally wrong to deprive an individual of future happiness.
2. But, abortion deprives a fetus of future happiness.
3. Therefore, abortion is morally wrong.

Whether you agree with the premises of these arguments or not is not my point here. My point is that arguments can be used to prove (or attempt to prove) very remarkable things. Imagine: If the first argument is correct, then theists should believe that they are not in control of their own lives. And if Marquis is right, then we have settled one of the most controversial moral questions of our day, and abortion is as wrong as murder! Part of the goal of this course will be to help you to analyze and assess arguments such as these, and to help you to generate careful, successful arguments of your own.