

Philosophical argument

At the heart of philosophy is philosophical argument. Arguments are different from assertions. Assertions are simply stated; arguments always involve giving reasons. An argument is a reasoned inference from one set of claims - the premises - to another claim - the conclusion. The premises provide reasons to believe that the conclusion is true. If the premises are true, the conclusion is more likely to be true. Arguments seek to 'preserve truth' - true premises will lead to a true conclusion. It is worth knowing a little bit more about arguments straight away.

DEDUCTIVE ARGUMENT

Philosophers distinguish between two types of argument - deductive and inductive. Successful deductive arguments are *valid* - if the premises are true, then the conclusion *must* be true. In this case, we say that the conclusion is entailed by the premises. Here is a famous example:

Premise 1: Socrates is a man.
Premise 2: All men are mortal.
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

A valid deductive argument with true premises that is called *sound*. But a valid deductive argument doesn't have to have true premises. Here is an example:

Premise 1: There are gnomes in my house.
Premise 2: My house is in Oxford.
Conclusion: Therefore, there are gnomes in Oxford.

If the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true - so the argument is valid. But the premises aren't both true.

There are two ways that a deductive argument can 'go wrong'. First, it could be *invalid*: even if the premises are true, it is possible that the conclusion might be false. Second, it could be *unsound*: even though the conclusion is entailed by the premises, at least one of the premises is false.

INDUCTIVE ARGUMENT

A successful inductive argument is an argument whose conclusion is supported by its premises. If the premises are true, the conclusion is *likely* to be true, but it is still possible that the conclusion is false. So inductive arguments are not described as 'valid' or 'sound'.

But they can also go wrong in just two ways. First, the premises might not make the conclusion more likely - they don't offer good reasons for believing the conclusion is true. Second, one of the premises may be false.

One type of induction is induction through enumeration, as in this famous example:

Premise 1: This swan is white.

Premise 2: This other swan is white.

Premise 3: That third swan is white.

...

Premise 500: That swan is white as well.

Conclusion: All swans are white.

The example shows that an inductive argument can be a good argument, but the conclusion can still be false!

Hypothetical reasoning

There are other types of inductive argument, e.g. hypothetical reasoning. A hypothesis is a proposal that needs to be confirmed or rejected by reasoning or experience. In hypothetical reasoning, we try to work out the best hypothesis that would explain or account for some experience or fact.

Medical diagnosis provides an example - what would explain exactly *this* set of symptoms? This isn't a matter of comparing this case with other cases which all have exactly the same symptoms. There may only be some overlap or the case might involve some complication, such as more than one disease being involved. We use hypothetical reasoning - if such-and-such were true (e.g. the patient has disease x), would that explain the evidence we have? The evidence supplies the premises of the argument, and the conclusion is that some hypothesis is true because it accounts for the evidence.

When we are using hypothetical reasoning, it is not usually enough to find some hypothesis that can explain the evidence. We want to find the *best* hypothesis. What makes a hypothesis a *good* hypothesis? Philosophers have argued for several criteria.

1. **Simplicity:** The best-known is probably Ockham's razor, which says 'Don't multiply entities beyond necessity'. Don't put forward a hypothesis that says many different things exist when a simpler explanation will do as well. A simpler explanation is a better explanation, as long as it is just as successful. For example, the explanation that plants flower in the spring in response to an increase in light and temperature is a better explanation than saying that they flower in the spring because that's when the fairies wake them up. The second explanation is committed to the existence of fairies - and we shouldn't think that fairies exist unless there is something we cannot explain without thinking they exist.
2. **Accuracy:** a good hypothesis fits the evidence that we are trying to explain.
3. **Plausibility:** a good hypothesis fits with what else we already know.
4. **Scope:** a good hypothesis explains a wide range of evidence.

5. Coherence: a good hypothesis draws and explains connections between different parts of the evidence.

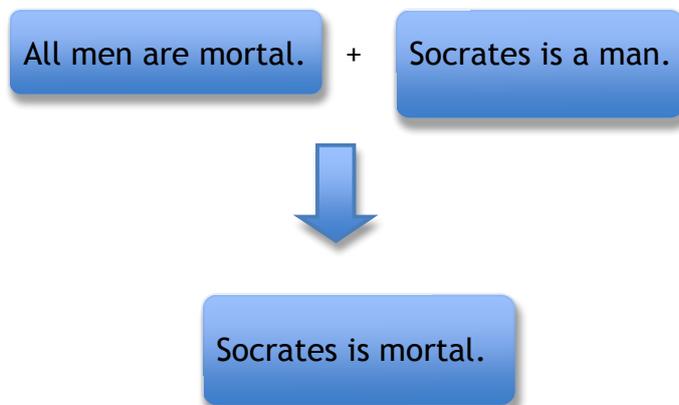
The best hypothesis will be the hypothesis that demonstrates all these virtues to a higher degree than alternative hypotheses. A lot of philosophy involves arguing about which theory provides the best hypothesis to account for our experience.

UNDERSTANDING ARGUMENTS

Understanding arguments is central to doing philosophy well. That is why throughout this book, you will be asked to outline and explain arguments. You'll be asked to do in the exam, in 5 and 9 mark questions.

Understanding an argument involves identifying the conclusion, identifying the premises, and understanding how the premises are supposed to provide reasons for believing the conclusion. Use linguistic clues, like 'since', 'because', 'if...then...', and many others, to help you do this. It is also important to distinguish between what someone supposes for the purposes of argument, and what they actually want to assert.

Many arguments involve quite a complex structure, with some premises establishing an initial conclusion, which is then used as a premise to establish a second conclusion. In coming to understand an argument, it can be very helpful to create an *argument map*. This is a visual diagram of how the argument works. For example,



EVALUATING ARGUMENTS

When you evaluate an argument, you are yourself *making* an argument. You are arguing that the argument evaluated is either a good or bad argument. In other words, the conclusion of your evaluation is that the argument evaluated is a good/bad argument, and you have to provide reasons to support this claim. There are three types of reason you can give, three different ways of evaluating arguments:

1. As already stated above, you can argue that one or more of the premises is false. If you are right, then the argument does not give you a reason to believe the conclusion, because it rests on a false premise.
2. As also already stated above, you can argue that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. If you are evaluating a deductive argument, you are claiming that the argument is not valid. If you are evaluating an inductive argument, you are claiming that the premises do not provide a (good or strong) reason to believe the conclusion. For example, with inferring the best hypothesis, you could argue that the conclusion is not the best explanation for the premises, e.g. that it isn't plausible or simple, or at least that the argument doesn't show that it is, e.g. there may be other explanations that haven't been considered.
3. You can also evaluate the formal features of an argument. Without worrying about whether it is true, you can ask whether it is clear, whether the premises are relevant to the conclusion, whether the support offered by the premises has been demonstrated, and so on. You may want to offer an improvement on the argument, e.g. rephrasing it to be clearer, supplying missing premises, identifying assumptions, and so on.

EVALUATING CLAIMS

In addition to evaluating arguments, you can evaluate claims on their own. In evaluating a claim, you provide an argument for thinking that it is true or false.

For any claim C (e.g. 'God exists'), there are four related ways of discussing it, as shown in this diagram:

C is true: God exists	C is false: God does not exist
1. Arguments for C being true	2. Arguments for C being false
3. Objections to arguments for C being false	4. Objections to arguments for C being true

When you are arguing for or against a claim, don't overstate your case. Your claim is only as strong as the reasons that you can provide for it.

If you asked to evaluate a claim, you need to break down your answer into a series of arguments and their evaluation. After you've explained the claim, for each section of the answer, you should consider an argument for or against the claim, objections to that argument, and possible responses. You'll also need to indicate how *strong* you think the argument is, and weigh up the strengths of the arguments for the claim against the strengths of the arguments against. This isn't a matter of 'comparing strengths and weaknesses' on the page, but identifying what you think the *really important and critical* arguments or objections are. This is, of course, something that you need to argue for!

AN ASIDE: WHY REASON?

Why, you may wonder, should we place so much importance on reasoning in this way? Is it worth it? Here are four quick reasons in favour of reasoning:

1. To discover the truth
2. To uncover poor reasoning, e.g. fallacies (see below) and sophistry
3. To recognise when, where, and how a dialogue ceases to be reasonable or instructive
4. To probe both sides of a controversial issue in a sensitive and intelligent way

Can I justify these claims? If I present an argument in favour of reasoning, then I'm using reasoning to justify reasoning, which is circular. Then again, if you object to reasoning for this reason, you are using reasoning to make your objection! An alternative justification of reason is to check the results of reasoning by a different method. Science does this all the time by hypothesis and observation. In many cases, we can confirm, by observation, that the conclusion of a piece of reasoning is correct. Some people are sceptical about reasoning or claim, for example, that all beliefs are equally 'reasonable'. For an excellent discussion dismantling this view, see Stephen Law's *Believing Bullshit*, Ch. 4.

To criticise an argument or claim is not necessarily to reject it. You can be concerned to reject bad reasons because you want to find stronger ones! To show respect to someone does not require that you agree with them. Taking someone else's thought seriously - so seriously that you test it rigorously in your mind - is to pay them a compliment.

It is important to remember that the *point* of philosophical argument is not personal victory.

FALLACIES

A fallacy, as philosophers use the word, is not a mistake of fact or truth. A fallacy is an error in reasoning. More exactly, it is an argument in which the premises do not offer rational support to the conclusion. If the argument is deductive, then it is fallacious if it is not valid. If the argument is inductive, it is fallacious if the premises do not make the conclusion more likely to be true.

There are many types of fallacy; the Nizkor Project lists 42, Changing Minds 53, and Wikipedia over 100 (<http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/>; http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/fallacies/fallacies_unique.htm; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies). It's good to become familiar with some of the main types. If you do, it is really important to understand *why* the fallacy is a fallacy.

Spotting fallacies has two purposes: 1) evaluating the strength of an argument and 2) improving it. When learning how to spot fallacies, try to develop the skill of how you would reformulate the argument to avoid it. It is not always clear-cut whether a fallacy is being committed or not, and the answer depends on just how the premises are being deployed or further assumptions being made. The question is always ultimately about the strength of support the premises offer.

To learn how to avoid fallacies in your own work, it can be helpful to learn first how to spot them! Fallacies are always easier to spot in someone else's work, so

start with people you don't know, then look at the work of other students, then try to spot them in your own work.