

Critical analysis of an argument in ethics

Examining arguments presented in ethics requires the same care that you need in any field. Here are some hints to help determine whether an *argument is valid or invalid*.

1. List all the assumptions used in the argument. *Check whether all the assumptions are acceptable*. Some of them may be indeterminate, but if you know that any is false, then the whole argument is flawed (invalid). Note, however, that the conclusion may still be true. All you know is that the ‘argument’ is invalid.
2. Identify the conclusion of the argument. Typically in ethics the conclusion involves *should* or *ought*. *Check the reasoning (logic)*, i.e. whether the conclusion necessarily follows, if you assume all the assumptions are true. Can you construct a contradiction?

Here are some commonly used fallacious arguments.

1. *ad hominem* argument, i.e. ‘playing the man, not the idea’

There is a personal attack on the person who puts the argument, instead of an attack on the argument.

form: *We cannot accept a proposition made by Person P who is something [presumably undesirable].*

Invalid because Person *P*’s character is irrelevant to whether the proposition is worth accepting or not.

2. ‘slippery slope’ argument

There is an assumption about what will happen next.

form: *If we accept Idea i, it will be abused/extended and then Outcome j will happen.*

Whether or not *j* happens depends on more than *i*.

3. appeal to irrelevant authority

form: *Person X is an authority on topic y, and X supports idea i.*

This is only an acceptable argument if *i* and *y* are related.

4. false-cause

This makes an invalid causal link between 2 events.

form: *Outcome o happened after event e which must therefore have caused o.*

Invalid: it may be coincidence; they may have a common cause, etc.

5. begging the question

This uses circular reasoning.

form: $x > y$ because $y < x$ or equivalently *Proposition p is better because Proposition q is worse.*

6. composition/division

This equates the characteristics of the parts with the character of the whole.

form: *All the components are the best possible, so the integrated system must be the best possible* or conversely. It does not recognise interactions of the parts changing the whole.

7. ambiguity

Beware! English has many words with multiple meanings and some people use these, sometimes deliberately, to confuse people with fallacious arguments.

8. appeal to people/popularity

This is easy to spot: the style of opening gives it away.

form: *Almost everybody believes, ...*, but no evidence follows.

Equally invalid corollary: *It is obvious that ...*

9. many-any

This assumes that, if many elements of a specified set share a specific feature, then any particular one does; i.e. claims that, if many do, then all must.

form: *Many of items a_n have property b, so this specific item a_6 must have property b.*

10. ‘virtuality’

This is used to discount the relevance of ethics to actions connected with cyberspace.

form: *Event e happened in cyberspace which is virtual, so the considering the ethics of e is meaningless.*

based, in part, on Tavani (2007), ch3