

Phil 09 | Environmental Ethics

In this note, I teach you how to **present** an argument, how to **explain** its parts, and how to **evaluate** its strength. The method outlined in this lecture will teach you how to analyze an argument in a clear and orderly way.

1. Present

To present an argument, state the argument in valid form, with numbered premises and marked conclusion. If possible, identify its logical form.

EXAMPLE.

Presentation of the Argument from Moral Error

1. If cultural relativism is true, then moral error is impossible.
2. But moral error is possible.
- /. Therefore, cultural relativism is false.

The argument from moral error is a valid argument. It is in the form modus tollens.

2. Explain

Once you have presented the argument, your next step is to explain its parts. To explain an argument, give the rationale behind each premise of the argument. Your goal here is to *motivate* the premise by explaining why someone might think that the premise is true.

Sometimes philosophical arguments include technical terms. If your goal is to understand and evaluate an argument, then you must know precisely what such terms mean. When stating the rationale behind a premise, define any and all technical terms.

EXAMPLE.

Technical terms

Cultural Relativism: Cultural relativism is the view that an action *A* is morally right for culture *C* just in case *C* approves of *A*. Likewise, *A* is morally wrong for *C* just in case *C* disapproves of *A*.

Moral Error: One commits a moral error just in case one believes that the sentence 'A is morally right' is true, when really it is false.

Rationale behind premise one

If cultural relativism is true, then an action *A* is morally wrong for culture *C* just in case *C* disapproves of *A*. It follows that a culture can never be mistaken about what is morally wrong, for whatever it disapproves of is, by definition, morally wrong. Thus, for example, consider some culture *C* that disapproves of educating women. If cultural relativism is true, then this culture is morally perfect, for they are, by definition, correct in their belief that it is morally wrong to educate women. Indeed, they can not possibly be mistaken.

Rational behind premise two

The rationale behind premise two is an appeal to moral intuition. Most of us will readily agree that moral error is possible. To cite an extreme example, consider a culture *C* that approves of killing people with green eyes. If cultural relativism is true, then within the bounds of *C*, killing people with green eyes is the morally right thing to do. But most of us will have the intuition that any group who thinks that it is morally right to kill people with green eyes is simply mistaken.

3. Evaluate

Having presented the argument and explained its parts, your next step is to offer an evaluation. Generally speaking, there are two possibilities.

- **You think that the argument is unsound.**

If you think that the argument is unsound, then you must think that at least one of the argument's premises is false. In this case, say which premise you think is false and why.

Keep in mind that the conclusion of a valid argument is an innocent bystander – it simply follows from the lines above. So, if you don't like the conclusion of an argument, the source of the problem must lie with the premises. In this case, you must pick a premise and say why you think that premise is false. One common strategy is to try constructing a counterexample to the premise. Another strategy is to attack the rationale supporting the premise. For example, with respect to the argument above, you might say:

EXAMPLE.

Evaluation of the Argument from Moral Error

I think that the argument from moral error is unsound. In particular, I think that premise 2 is false. Premise 2 is the claim that moral error is possible. The justification for this is supposed to be an appeal to moral intuition. But I doubt that moral intuition is robust enough to support this claim. After all, it is nearly impossible to find two people who agree on any controversial moral issue...

• **You think that the argument is sound.**

If you think that the argument is sound, then you must think that all of the premises of the argument are true. Of course, valid arguments with true premises have true conclusions. So, if you think that the argument is sound, then you must think that the argument's conclusion is true.

If you think that an argument is sound, then you ought to try to *support* the argument. One way to do this is to identify the *weakest* premise in the argument, pose a hypothetical attack on that premise, and then show why that attack fails. For example, with respect to the argument above, you might say:

EXAMPLE.

Evaluation of the Argument from Moral Error

I think that the argument from moral error is sound. However, some may think that premise 2 is false. In particular, some may doubt that moral intuition is robust enough to support the claim that moral error is possible. After all, one may argue, it is nearly impossible to find two people who agree on any controversial moral issue. But to argue like this is mistaken...

4. Concise Summary

- Present** State the argument in valid form and identify its logical form.
- Explain** Motivate each premise by giving the author's rationale for the premise. If the author gives no rationale, say why one *might* think that the premise is true. If the premise includes any technical terms, give definitions.
- Evaluate** Pick a line. If you think that the argument is unsound, pick a line and argue that that line is false. If you think that the argument is sound, identify the weakest line and defend it from a hypothetical attack.