Philosophical Methods In Ethics

Arguments

An **argument** is a series of claims, the last of which, the **conclusion**, is supposed to be supported by or shown to be true by, the previous ones, or the **premises**.

An argument can be written in paragraph form, but in philosophy we often condense them to render their structure maximally clear and explicit, like so:

1. No one who went to the party could have done the crime. ← premise
2. Janice went to the party.
3. Therefore, Janice could not have done the crime. ← conclusion

Good Arguments

A **good argument** has at least three properties:

1. The premises, if true, would *guarantee* that the conclusion is true.
2. The premises are all true.
3. The argument could potentially persuade someone who was unsure of the conclusion

An argument with property 1 is a **valid argument**.

An argument with property 1 *and* 2 is a **sound argument**.

An argument with property 3 is a **non-question-begging argument**.

Testing for Validity

In a valid argument, it is *impossible* for the premises to be true without the conclusion also being true. Thus, we can tell if an argument is invalid if there is a possible situation in which the premises are true but the conclusion is false. By imagining such situations, we test for invalidity:

1. Rafa is a tennis player.
2. Some tennis players win championships.
3. Therefore, Rafa wins championships.

If we are unable to imagine such a situation, this is good evidence that an argument is valid:

1. All apples are blue.
2. This is an apple.
3. This is blue.

Good Arguments?

1. Some rectangles are squares.
2. All squares have equal sides.
3. Therefore, some rectangles have equal sides.

1. Every species that has a heart has veins.
2. Every species that has veins has a heart.
3. Therefore, every species that has a heart has veins.

1. If the moon is made of cheese, then cheese is made of pickles.
2. The moon is made of cheese.
3. Therefore, cheese is made of pickles.

1. Some vampires are men.
2. Some men are tall.
3. Therefore, some vampires are tall.

The Method of Cases

Ethicists seek **ethical principles** that tell us when, in general, behavior is right or wrong, good or bad.

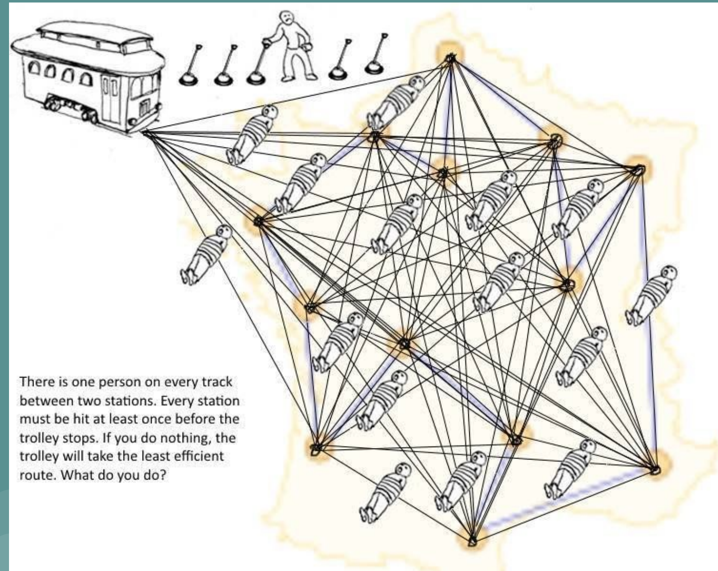
To be general, such principles are **universal** statements, meaning that they apply to everything, everywhere, all the time.

But to disprove a universal statement, all one needs is a single example that doesn't conform to the statement. This is known as a **counterexample.**

Therefore, ethicists try to come up with cases that constitute counterexamples to ethical principles, in order to stress test these principles.

Why Thought Experiments?

Why do ethicists often use unrealistic examples that would never actually happen as counterexamples?



Why Thought Experiments? (2)

- Using unrealistic cases allows the ethicist to ignore complicating factors in real life that might introduce irrelevant complexities.
- It sometimes takes an unusual case to bring out what's wrong about a certain principle.
- Ethical principles are supposed to be true in all possible scenarios, so the fact that a case would never actually happen is irrelevant to assessing the truth of that principle.

Cases as the Data of Ethics

Our moral judgments about various cases constitute the *data* that the ethicist is trying to make sense of in ethical theorizing.

While one cannot prove a universal ethical principle by means of any number of individual cases, it is good evidence for an ethical principle if it can accommodate our moral judgments across a variety of cases, especially when it is otherwise difficult to formulate a different principle that does so.

So in addition to their negative use as counterexamples, cases have a positive use as data.