

Background: What is philosophy?

The English word 'philosophy' comes from ancient Greek roots meaning literally "the love of wisdom." Traditionally philosophy has been defined in opposition to rhetoric. Where the art of rhetoric focuses on presentation and persuasion, philosophy focuses on knowledge and truth.

One 20th Century American philosopher (David Hills) offered the following humorous but illuminating characterization:

"Philosophy is the art of asking questions that come naturally to children using methods that come naturally to lawyers."

That is, philosophers ask the same kind of basic questions about truth, reality, meaning, and ethics that curious children do. But in answering them, we often use a rigorous style that aims for the same level of detail and (sometimes tedious) precision of a legal contract.

- There are a number of high quality, freely available online resources for philosophy, including:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

Ask Philosophers: <http://www.askphilosophers.org/>

Resources from the National High School Ethics Bowl:

<https://nhseb.unc.edu/preparation-resources/>

Cautionary note: Being able to give the names and descriptions of philosophers or philosophical theories will be of limited effectiveness in Ethics Bowl (and in life!). The key is to be able to incorporate what you learn from them into your own arguments and reasoning about the cases.

Philosopher's Toolkit, Part I: Arguments

Note: For a more detailed introduction to philosophical arguments see Anthony Westin, A Rulebook For Arguments (5th Ed.), Hackett Publishing, 2018. ISBN: 9781624666544

In philosophy, the word 'argument' does not refer to a verbal dispute or disagreement. Rather, a philosophical argument is a verbal representation of a process of reasoning. A philosophical argument offers an answer to the question, "Why believe this?"

- Parts of an argument: premises and conclusion

Conclusion: the result of the argument; the "this" of the question "Why believe this?"

Premises: the claims offered in support of the conclusion – the answer to the "Why..."

- Evaluating arguments:

Step 1: Do the premises support the conclusion? Is it possible for the conclusion to be false, even if all the premises are true?

Step 2: Are the premises true? Do we have good reason to believe them?

Don't: simply agree or disagree with the conclusion; if the conclusion is wrong, the argument must be faulty in (at least) one of these two ways.

The Philosopher's Toolkit for Ethical Reasoning
Rhode Island High School Ethics Bowl (2019-20)

- Ethical principles and moral arguments:

One common form of argument in ethics works by applying a general moral principle to a specific case. In its simplest form this means one premise will assert the moral principle, while another premise will assert that the case meets the conditions to which the principle applies. For example -

Premise 1: It is always wrong to steal.

Premise 2: Borrowing your sister's bike without asking is stealing.

Conclusion: Therefore, borrowing your sister's bike without asking is wrong.

Question: How could someone challenge this argument using the steps laid out in this section?

The Philosopher's Toolkit, Part II: Fallacies

Fallacies are common errors of reasoning that we should try to avoid. A fallacious argument fails to provide good reason to believe its conclusion, either because the premises are insufficient to support the conclusion or because we have no reason to believe the premises (see Steps 1 and 2 of Evaluating Arguments, above). Common fallacies include:

- **Is/Ought Fallacy:** Arguing for a moral conclusion without appealing to any moral premises. Logically speaking, you can't infer what *ought* to be the case merely on the basis of what *is* the case. The same applies for conclusions containing other value terms such as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' 'bad,' etc.

Example: Human beings are naturally disposed to favor their friends and relatives over distant strangers, therefore you should prioritize the needs of your children over those of impoverished children in other countries.

How to avoid: Be clear about the underlying ethical principles or other value judgments you are relying on to support ethical conclusions. The example argument could avoid this fallacy by adding an explicitly ethical premise, such as "Parents have special ethical obligations to care for their own children which outweigh general duties to strangers."

- **Appeal to Tradition and Appeal to Popularity:** Arguing that something is right because it has been traditionally done, because most people do it, or because most people approve of it. Or, arguing that something is wrong because it has been traditionally or commonly prohibited or disapproved of.

Example: People lie on their job applications all the time, so there's nothing wrong with me lying on my application.

How to avoid: Focus on the reasons *why* this behavior or approval/disapproval has been traditionally held to be good or bad, or why it is commonly done. If there are good reasons, appeal directly to those reasons, rather than to their popularity. Are there any good reasons in the example? If not, the argument should be abandoned.

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- **Inappropriate Appeal to Authority:** Arguing for a conclusion merely on the basis that a famous or impressive sounding person says it is true. While it is appropriate to rely on appropriate experts in specific scientific or technical fields, there are no generally recognized ethical experts that can be appealed to in this way.

Example: It is always wrong to lie because the famous 18th Century moral philosopher Immanuel Kant said so.

How to avoid: Again, focus on the reasons *why* the cited authority endorses the conclusion. If there are good reasons, appeal directly to those reasons. The fallacy could be avoided in this example by explaining the arguments Kant gives for this conclusion.

- **False Dilemma:** Arguing on the assumption that there are only two possible choices, options, or outcomes when, in reality, at least one relevant alternative has been left out.

Example: If we don't execute convicted murderers, there will be nothing to stop them from killing again.

How to avoid: Look for and identify additional options, or some middle ground, especially when the initial alternatives look like two extremes. The example above ignores alternative punishments, such as life-imprisonment, and it ignores the possibility that murderers could be rehabilitated so that they are no longer a danger to others.

- **Strawman:** Presenting a weak version of an opposing argument to make it easier to refute.

Example: Opponents of the president's travel ban apparently believe that our country has no right to protect its citizens from international terrorists.

How to avoid: Work to see things from the perspective of those you disagree with. First present opposing arguments as you would if you were defending that position. Then defend your own position by showing why we should reject the opposing argument even in its strongest form. A good way to do that in this example would be to look at some of the actual arguments given by opponents of the policy in question.

- **Circular reasoning:** Assuming as a premise the very claim you're trying to prove in the conclusion.

Example: We should believe that God exists because my holy text says so, and we know my holy text is reliable because it is the infallible word of God.

How to avoid: Be careful to keep in mind what conclusion you're trying to prove, and work to see things from the perspective of someone who might disagree with that conclusion. In the example, anyone who is skeptical about the existence of God will also be a skeptic about the reliability your specific religious text, so that text can't serve as a common ground for this discussion.

Philosopher's Toolkit, Part III: Ethical Theories

Note: For a more detailed primer on applying ethical theories to Ethics Bowl cases, see:

<https://nhseb.unc.edu/files/2018/06/THSEB-Moral-Reasoning-Primer.pdf>

For a more thorough (but still brief) introduction to ethical theory, see:

<https://nhseb.unc.edu/files/2013/10/Ethics-in-a-Nutshell-an-Intro-for-Ethics-Bowl-Participants.pdf>

Although philosophers have defended, and continue to defend, a wide variety of different ethical theories, contemporary philosophers often divide them all into three main categories:

- **Consequentialist** ethics defines right and wrong entirely in terms of the outcomes of one's actions. On such views, the right course of action is the one that produces (or is likely to produce) the best consequences of any available alternative. In other words, these theories think ethics is all about producing good results. Typically consequentialist theories define the "best" outcome in impartial terms. For example, utilitarian forms of consequentialism define the right action as the one that produces the most overall happiness for all affected parties.

Questions for applying consequentialist reasoning to Ethics Bowl cases: Who might be affected by different choices presented in the case? What will the overall effects of those actions be – what are the costs and benefits? Which course of action is likely to produce the best outcome for all parties involved?

- **Deontological** theories define right and wrong partly in terms of compliance with rights, duties, or other moral principles. Most deontological theories agree that the outcomes of actions are ethically relevant, but they insist that outcomes are not the only important ethical considerations. For example, many theories of justice in war say that it is wrong to intentionally target civilians, even if doing so would produce better overall results by ending the war sooner.

Questions for applying deontological reasoning to Ethics Bowl cases: What are the rights of the different parties involved in the case, and what limitations or obligations do those rights place on other involved parties? Are there any important moral duties or obligations that are relevant to the choices being considered (e.g. don't lie; don't steal)? Do any of the parties have special rights or duties due to promises made, contractual obligations, or special roles or relationships (e.g. friends, parents, employers/employees)?

- **Virtue ethics** places the primary focus on the character of the person acting rather than action itself. A virtue ethical theory offers an account of what it means to be a good person. The right action is then defined in terms of what such a virtuous person would do, or which actions best express specific virtues or which avoid exhibiting specific vices. For example, many virtue ethicists would say that you should help a stranger in need, not because of obligations or consequences, but because it is the generous or compassionate thing to do.

Questions for applying virtue ethical reasoning to Ethics Bowl cases: What would a virtuous person (or some specific person you admire) do in this case? Which choices would exhibit honesty, kindness, compassion, courage, or other virtues? Alternatively, which choices would be dishonest, cruel, petty, cowardly, or exhibit other vices?