4.6 Fallacies

> This committee must recognize that Prof. Frankenstein's proposed research on human stem cells is immoral. We know from past experience that when scientists are allowed to experiment with human life, dire consequences usually follow. We know Frankenstein is a very disagreeable character. And we also know that this research is opposed by the vast majority of the public. So, we have a choice: do we allow the professor to take us down a dangerous road, or do we make a stand for what is right and deny his application?

In moral discourse, as in all others, bad reasoning is legion. And this imagined paragraph is full of it. Therefore, to argue well in ethics, one needs to be able to spot these errors of logic and avoid making them oneself. To do this it helps to be familiar with common fallacies.

Formal fallacies

An argument that doesn't work is described as fallacious. But fallacies come in various forms. Formal fallacies are those where the error lies in the structure of the argument. In these fallacies, one can often see why the argument is fallacious without even paying attention to what it is about. Consider this example:

1 If you kill innocent people for the mere fun of it, you are a bad person.
2 You are a bad person.
3 Therefore, you kill innocent people for the mere fun of it.

This fallacy is called, "affirming the consequent," and any argument that has its structure must be fallacious. The structure can be represented like this:

1 If p, then q
2 q
3 Therefore, p

The conclusion just doesn't follow from the premises. One can see this clearly in a counterexample that uses the structure to draw a clearly false conclusion from true premises:

1 If it's a cat (p), then it's a mammal (q).
2 This dog is a mammal (q).
3 Therefore, this dog is a cat (p).

Informal fallacies

Informal fallacies, in contrast, are fallacious in virtue of their actual content. For example, in the speech above, several reasons are presented for the conclusion that the proposed research is wrong. One is that "it is opposed by the vast majority of the public." So, the argument hinges on the premise that "If something is opposed by the public, it is wrong." If we accept that premise, the argument does follow logically:

1 If something is opposed by a majority of the public, it's wrong.
2 Stem cell research is opposed by a majority of the public.
3 Therefore, stem cell research is wrong.

This is a valid structure (called *modus ponens*), therefore there's no formal fallacy. But there's an informal one, because the first premise is false (and false in a commonly misleading way). If a majority of the public believed that the Sun orbited the Earth or that witches existed, that wouldn't make it true. Because this fallacious way of reasoning is so common, it has its own name: *argumentum ad populum*.

Four more fallacies

The short speech above actually contains examples of at least four other fallacies. An *argumentum ad hominem* attacks the person holding a position rather than the position itself: the fact that Prof. Frankenstein has "a very disagreeable character" is irrelevant to the morality of his research.

"Do we allow the professor to take us down a dangerous road, or do we make a stand for what is right and deny his application?" presents a *false dichotomy* and also *begs the question*. It presents a false dichotomy (or false alternatives) by offering just two exclusive choices whereas in fact there are other options – such as allowing the professor to conduct his research with certain conditions attached. It begs the question because it assumes what is supposed to be still up for debate: that it would be wrong to allow the research to go ahead.

Still there's more: The speech also commits the *fallacy of accident*, in that it argues from what is (allegedly) *usually* the case (that when scientists are allowed to experiment with human life, dire consequences follow) to the conclusion that this *particular* case is wrong. But what's "usual" rather than "universal" is by its very nature subject to exceptions. So, it can't be assumed that any particular result will follow from what is usual; it might in the given case be an exception.

There are simply too many varieties of fallacy to be listed in a book dedicated specifically to ethics. Although it's more than possible to spot examples of fallacious arguments without formally studying the classic varieties, it's certainly useful to familiarize yourself with their most common forms. After all, the reason why they're so common is that they're very effective: people don't seem to be naturally very good at spotting them, and many people even seem to find them convincing. To study fallacies is therefore to help immunize oneself against the rhetorical power of bad but persuasive arguments. It's a precaution that's well worth the time.

See also

4.3 Consistency, 4.4 Counterexamples, 5.3 Bad faith and self-deception

Reading

John Shand, *Arguing Well* (London: Routledge, 2000)
Nigel Warburton, *Thinking from A to Z*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2000)
*Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003)

4.7 Impartiality and objectivity

Chapter nine of Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1992) is called "Living with an incorruptible man." The man in question was Chang's father, Wang Yu, a regional governor in Mao's China. He strictly adhered to the communist party's line that it was wrong to give any privileges to family members. He went so far as to reprimand a colleague who sent for an official car to take his wife home from hospital after giving birth, saving her a half-hour walk. Wang Yu insisted that an official car should not be used unless the official himself was in it, and he was out of town at the time.

Whatever one thinks of the value system that Wang Yu was following, isn't it nevertheless admirable that he applied it so objectively? Isn't objectivity to be desired in ethics? Yet, most people's initial reaction to the story is that his response was heartless, not morally upright.

The meanings of objectivity

The story brings into question just what moral "objectivity" means. In its strictest sense, morality is objective if it exists or can be defined independently of human conventions, desires, beliefs, or anything else subjective. This is objectivity with regard to the nature of ethical principles themselves.

There is, however, another sense of "objective" that concerns the way morality is applied – irrespective of whether moral principles are themselves truly objective. Compare this sense to the way a teacher might impose rules on a classroom. Clearly, these rules are merely artificial social constructs that have no objective existence outside of the culture and context in which they have been created. But nevertheless, the teacher can apply these rules objectively, if she treats everybody the same and neither grants favors nor withdraws privileges arbitrarily.

This kind of objectivity is often called "impartiality," and there are clearly many occasions when it's the appropriate way to follow moral maxims. As Jung Chang's story suggests, however, to be completely impartial and never privilege those with whom one has a special relationship seems inhuman. So, must objectivity always entail complete impartiality?

Objective but partial

Not necessarily. To see why, we need to distinguish rules themselves, their application, and their justification. As it turns out, it's possible for moral rules to permit partiality and still be objective (in the sense of being applied or justified impartially). In short, things break down this way:

- *Impartiality of rules.* Moral rules do not allow us to treat those close to us any differently, and we must follow these rules objectively.
- *Impartiality of application.* Moral rules do allow us to treat those close to us differently in certain ways, and we must follow these rules objectively.
- *Impartiality in the justification of rules.* Moral rules may allow for, or even require, partiality in many contexts but these rules may themselves be justified from a completely impartial perspective, by a normative position such as utilitarianism.

The second possibility shows how it is possible to imagine a moral system that itself allows people to show more concern and care for immediate family and close friends. The requirement to apply moral rules objectively therefore would involve the need not to bend the rules in inappropriate ways for those close to us and to allow others to also favor their own in the