

Rich Feldman, Reason & Argument, Prentice Hall.

of an action are the consequences or other features of the action that are bad or undesirable. The *benefits* of an action are the consequences or other features of the action that are good or desirable. In many cases, then, when we reason about whether we should do something, we look at the harms and benefits associated with the action.

B. Simple Moral Arguments

One common way to argue about moral issues is to point out that an action has some benefit and on that basis conclude that it should be done. Equally common is to argue that something should not be done because it has a harmful feature. For example, people argue that we should institute gun control because it would save lives or that we shouldn't pollute the environment because it causes disease and suffering. Arguments that conclude that some action should (or should not) be done simply because it has some property are called *simple moral arguments*.

We can extract a simple moral argument from Anna Quindlen's essay in Example 11.1. Quindlen says that one reason the death penalty is wrong is that by using it the government is "stooping to the level of the killers." Her idea may be that by using the death penalty the government is doing the same thing that killers do, namely, intentionally causing the death of another person.¹¹ Thus, an initial reconstruction of her argument might be

Argument 11.1

1. When the government imposes the death penalty, it intentionally causes the death of someone. (EP?)
2. The government should not impose the death penalty. (1)

Argument 11.1 is ill-formed. To make it well-formed, there must be a premise linking (1) and (2). Any such premise must connect the action of intentionally causing someone's death with being a thing that should not be done.

It is possible to make Argument 11.1 valid by resorting to cheap validity, or adding a conditional saying that if (1) is true, then (2) is true. However, it is far better to get at the underlying idea of the argument by adding a linking premise containing a generalization. The generalization must say that all (or most or typical) actions of a certain kind should not be done. This kind of statement is a *general moral principle*.

In the case of Argument 11.1, we might add a generalization to the effect that no person or group should ever intentionally cause the death of anyone else. The resulting argument looks like this:

11. Our goal in examining this argument is to see how simple moral arguments work. Whether Quindlen really defended this argument is not crucial for us now.

Argument 11.1a

1. When the government imposes the death penalty, it intentionally causes the death of someone. (EP?)
2. No one (an individual or the government) should intentionally cause the death of anyone. (IP)
3. The government should not impose the death penalty. (1), (2)

Now the argument is valid. Notice that the implicit premise is a general moral principle, saying that all actions of a certain kind should not be done. The pattern of argument here is a familiar one:

1. All As are Bs.
2. All Bs are Cs.
3. All As are Cs.

To make the argument follow this pattern explicitly, we can rewrite it as follows:

Argument 11.1b

1. All executions of murderers are actions that intentionally cause the death of another person. (EP?)
2. All actions that intentionally cause the death of another person are actions that should not be done. (IP)
3. All executions of murderers are actions that should not be done. (1), (2)

Argument 11.1b is an example of a simple moral argument. One premise of this kind of argument picks out a feature, a particular action, or kind of action. The second premise says that all actions having that feature are right, or should be done, (or that they are wrong, or should not be done).

Thus, simple moral arguments often follow this pattern:

Simple Moral Arguments (Pattern 1)

1. Action *x* has property *P*.
2. All actions having property *P* are right (wrong).
3. Action *x* is right (wrong). (1), (2)

You can replace "right" or "wrong" in this argument with "should be done" or "should not be done" or "moral" or "immoral" or any other term of moral evaluation. It is also possible to form cogent arguments by replacing "all" with a different quantifier.

In the pattern above, the argument is about a single action. Simple moral arguments can also be about kinds of actions. They can be about all actions hav-

ing some particular feature. The general pattern here is

Simple Moral Argument

1. All actions of kind *x* are actions of kind *y*.
2. All actions of kind *y* are actions of kind *z*.
3. All actions of kind *x* are actions of kind *z*.

Notice that simple moral arguments are often stated as premises. In fact, the first premise is a general moral principle. Typical simple moral arguments have several options for the second premise: principles of charity, or of justice, or of any other case.

Let's turn now to argument 11.1b. It is valid, but there are good reasons to doubt that it is a good argument. In reconstructing it, we can refuse to accept the first premise that there are complete moral principles. It is possible that there are complete moral principles that is the only way to justify killing the life of another person. For example, if the only way to prevent a person from killing millions of people is to kill the person.

Defenders of the first premise. The procedure of argument is refined to say that it is always possible to prevent even more

Argument 11.1c

1. All executions of murderers are actions that intentionally cause the death of another person.
2. All actions that intentionally cause the death of another person are actions that should not be done.
3. All executions of murderers are actions that should not be done.
4. All executions of murderers are actions that should not be done.

ing some particular feature, as we saw in the case of Quindlen's argument. The general pattern here is

Simple Moral Arguments (Pattern 2)

1. All actions of kind *A* have property *P*.
2. All actions having property *P* are right (wrong).
3. All actions of kind *A* are right (wrong). (1), (2)

Notice that simple moral arguments have both moral and nonmoral propositions as premises. In general, any well-formed moral argument will have at least one moral premise. Typically, but not always, the moral premise will be implicit. Thus, when you reconstruct a simple moral argument from a written passage, you will often have several options for the moral generalization to include in the argument. The principles of charity, faithfulness, and generality govern the choice, just as they do in any other case.

Let's turn now to the evaluation of simple moral arguments. Although Argument 11.1b is valid, it is doubtful that it is strong. Premise (1) is unquestionably true. But there are good reasons to question premise (2). Since (2) is a universal generalization, we can refute it by finding counterexamples. A moment's thought reveals that there are compelling counterexamples to this principle. It seems clear that there are times when it is not wrong to kill another person intentionally. For example, if that is the only way to defend oneself or to prevent a great many deaths, then taking the life of another person seems to be morally acceptable. To take an extreme example, if the only way to prevent a person from setting off a powerful bomb that would kill millions of people is to kill the person, then it is morally acceptable to kill the person.

Defenders of Argument 11.1b might respond to this criticism by revising their principle. The process here is the same as we have seen in other cases, in which an argument is refined in response to criticism. Perhaps defenders of the argument would say that it is always wrong to cause a death except in self-defense or when doing so prevents even more deaths. Their revised argument would look like this:

Argument 11.1c

1. All executions of murderers are actions that intentionally cause the death of another person. (EP?)
2. All actions that intentionally cause the death of another person and are not done in self-defense or to prevent even more deaths are actions that should not be done. (IP)
3. All executions of murderers are actions that are not done in self-defense and are not done to prevent even more deaths. (IP)
4. All executions of murderers are actions that should not be done. (1)-(3)

Argument 11.2

1. By requiring that children be vaccinated against measles, mumps, and chicken pox, the government is doing something that causes some innocent children to die. (EP)
2. The government should not do anything that causes innocent children to die. (EP)

3. The government should not require that children be vaccinated against measles, mumps, and chicken pox. (1), (2)

This is a valid argument. It could be rewritten in the pattern of a simple moral argument:

Argument 11.2a

1. The government's requiring that all children be vaccinated against measles, mumps, and chicken pox is a case of the government doing something that will cause some innocent children to die. (EP)
2. All actions that are cases of the government doing something that will cause some innocent children to die are actions that should not be done. (EP)

3. The government's requiring that all children be vaccinated against measles, mumps, and chicken pox is an action that should not be done. (1), (2)

To evaluate (2), you must consider possible counterexamples, of which there are many. Consider the action of building a highway. If the government builds a highway, then people will use it. Inevitably, there will be some accidents, and some of the accidents will lead to the deaths of innocent children. Thus, building a highway is a government action that will lead to death of innocent children; but it is obviously an action that in some cases should be done. If (2) were true, it would follow that the government should not build highways—a highly implausible conclusion. So (2) is not justified and this argument against the vaccination requirement is weak. Naturally, it is possible to revise the argument with the aim of improving it, but we will leave that project to the exercises at the end of this section.

C. The Overall Value Principle

While simple moral arguments argue that an action is right or wrong because it has some particular harmful or beneficial feature, more complex moral arguments involve a weighing of harms and benefits. When you add up the harms and benefits associated with an action, you are assessing its *overall value*.

Much of our thinking about what to do involves weighing the pros and cons of an action, or determining its overall value. Going to college is costly and time-consuming and requires hard work. However, it can make one more employable and