

Lesson 3

Creating Arguments

When it comes to discussing ethical and moral decisions, the ability to think critically through information is vitally important. Employers today are looking for workers who can think through issues to solve problems. In this lesson, we will discuss the process of critical thinking and the use of defense mechanisms, how to form arguments, and the use of fallacies in arguments.

When we sharpen our critical thinking skills, we can become more independent in our thinking and less susceptible to a narrow-minded focus. Critical thinking can be broken down into experience, interpretation, and analysis. In looking at these three, there is not only overlap among them, but each, on its own, is the building block for the next level. If our analysis is inconsistent with our experience, we need to start over and fine-tune our analysis to take all relevant experience into account. Let's take a look at each level.

Experience: Experience is linked to our observations and all around us. It is more than just our five senses, and it is all the information we receive from the world. This is all we have been and will be a part of in our lives. Experiences are both the good and the bad. We have to recognize that the end results of the analysis will differ for everyone because we all have different experiences. The person who has had a family member murdered may look at the issue of capital punishment differently than someone who has not had that experience. At this level, we simply are describing and understanding our experiences. We do not pass judgment on our experiences or someone else's.

Interpretation: Interpretation is trying to make sense of the world around us. This is where we will develop our worldview. Most of us like to think that we came up with our worldviews regarding morality. In reality, our worldviews are strongly influenced by our

experiences. Both experience and interpretation are connected. Our experience contributes to our worldview (interpretation), and our worldview also shapes how we experience the world.

Analysis: Analysis is when we raise our level of consciousness and reach a conclusion on the issue. When we conclude, we are looking beyond our opinions and considering the facts that are more relevant to our decision. We refuse to accept narrow opinion-based interpretations of our experience. We can discuss this with others during the analysis and learn how we each arrived at that conclusion.

Sometimes people come to the analysis stage, reach their conclusion, and stop. But critical thinkers know that this process is ongoing, so it is important to return to our experience and start it again continually.

One of the issues that people struggle with in concluding an issue is overcoming resistance. Nobody likes to be proven wrong, especially when we have a particular worldview that has been entrenched in our lives. If we take slavery, for example, when it was legal, it was seen as a natural part of society. Still, when slavery was abolished, many people used defense mechanisms to stop their worldview from being challenged. When Abraham Lincoln first took office, he favored Southern states retaining slavery. Still, when challenged, he allowed the new information to be interpreted and concluded that all slavery needed to come to an end. To avoid having our worldview challenged, we may use a defense mechanism known as resistance. Defense mechanisms are tools we learn to cope with difficult situations and usually are learned at an early age. Defense mechanisms are divided into two main types: healthy and unhealthy.

Healthy defense mechanisms are called coping. Coping allows us to work through challenges to our worldview and adjust our lives to maintain our integrity. That is because coping will involve

logical analysis and objectivity when challenged by new information. Coping with an issue does not necessarily mean reaching a different conclusion, but it will allow us to process that information before stating our beliefs.

Unhealthy defense mechanisms can also be referred to as immature defense mechanisms. That is because many are rigid, impulsive, or lack rationalization in their thinking. A critical thinker will be able to identify the use of a defense mechanism in others' arguments. But we are also not immune to using defense mechanisms ourselves. When we exhibit these defense mechanisms in our adult lives, we shut ourselves off from critical thinking and become chained to our past. We can take steps to overcome immature defense mechanisms that hinder our ability to make effective moral decisions in our lives. We are going to look at several different immature defense mechanisms.

Immature Defense Mechanisms

- **Resistance:** the habitual use of all immature defense mechanisms. It creates a barrier in the stages of critical thinking that will prevent us from reaching a different conclusion or being challenged by new ideas. Resistance always arises at the end of the interpretation level and will prevent analysis of critical information.
- **Ignorance:** Ignorance is not learning about a particular issue because we do not want to or because the information is not available. Socrates said, "the unexamined life is not worth living." Some people believe that not knowing excuses them from thinking about the issue or taking a stand. But the opposite happens, creating problems that can worsen.
- **Avoidance:** We will avoid people or situations that will challenge our worldviews. We tend to have friends with similar interests, but we want to avoid those who may challenge our beliefs. The tendency to avoid controversial situations or people with opinions that differ

from our own can lead to a severe lack of communication and even hostility between people who hold widely opposing points of view.

- **Denial:** We refuse to acknowledge problems or issues. This is the captain of the Titanic, refusing to believe the ship was sinking because he had been told it was unsinkable. This is the mother refusing to think there is sexual abuse happening to her children at the hands of her husband. Denial is common among addicts. Denial keeps people from acknowledging and addressing moral issues.
- **Anger:** If there is an immature defense mechanism widely used today, it is anger. Anger is the use of threats or violence to keep others from challenging our views. We cannot always avoid people who disagree with us, but we respond to those challenges with anger. Anger can be the expression of physical violence or simply using angry phrases such as, "don't force your views on me." We do need to understand that not all anger involves resistance. As we will discuss in Lesson Four, sometimes anger plays a role in our moral sentiments or moral indignation, like when children are harmed in acts of abuse.
- **Cliches:** We may have trite sayings that we use daily. "I'm just saying." "To each his own." "It's all good." If used sparingly, cliches can help illustrate ideas, but their chronic use in responding to challenges to our worldview keeps us from thinking seriously about issues.
- **Superficial Tolerance:** This is the idea of agreeing simply for argument, and it can also be the idea of deciding to remain neutral so that we do not stand out. The cliché "I can see both sides of the issue" often reflects a reluctance to analyze moral issues. Dante had a dim view of people who use this sort of resistance; in his Divine Comedy, he states, "the darkest places in Hell" are for those who decide to remain neutral when confronted with a moral conflict.

- **Doublethink:** Like anger, this defense mechanism is used today, especially on college campuses. It involves holding two contradictory views simultaneously and believing both to be true. For example, students want free speech on campus but want to stop people with different views from speaking. You cannot argue for free speech while discouraging others from speaking. Doublethink often goes unnoticed in our lives because we believe that it is okay to hold to both ideas.

Overcoming unhealthy and immature defense mechanisms involves being aware of our conversations and arguments, and understanding that we will become better critical thinkers when we focus on removing them from our thinking.

Creating Arguments

There is a difference between what is and what should be in ethical discussions. We use two types of statements in creating moral arguments: descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive statements tell us what is and whether these are true or false statements. Here, we will provide the details of our arguments. On the other hand, prescriptive statements tell us what ought to be. Here, we will talk about those morally obligatory items that have a moral value. For example, “We ought to allow for abortion” or “We ought not to allow for abortion” provide the ethical framework for our argument in the prescriptive form. That will be followed by descriptive statements that will support our prescriptive ideas.

In constructing moral arguments, there are two key components of an argument. These would be the conclusion and the premise statements. An argument comprises two or more premise propositions that express a complete thought, and these would come from the descriptive statements of information. The conclusion is the statement that will be either affirmed or denied based on the premises made in the argument. Your conclusion statement would be a prescriptive statement about what ought to be.

There are two types of logical arguments: deductive and inductive. In a reasoned argument, the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises if the premises are true and the reasoning process is valid. For example, all killing of unarmed people is morally wrong. Capital punishment involves the killing of unarmed people. Therefore, capital punishment is morally wrong. While the argument may be sound, not everyone will agree with the first premise. In an inductive argument, the conclusion probably follows from the premises, and to make the argument more robust and complete, we seek to remove questions of doubt and ambiguity. For example, Murder rates are not significantly lower in states that have capital punishment. Therefore, capital punishment is probably not an effective deterrent against murder. In this argument, some words could prevent us from understanding it and thus call into question the basis of the conclusion. We usually use inductive arguments in ethics, as they are typically more robust than the other two.

Rhetoric is described as the art of persuasion or communication. Many politicians use rhetoric in speeches to promote only their side of the argument. The problem with using rhetoric in moral arguments is that it does not allow for consideration of information from the opposing side. When forming moral views, we want to show that we understand both sides of the argument before reaching our conclusion. Critical moral thinkers will have the keen sense to consider opposing sides, interpret the information, and reach a logical conclusion. Only arguing from one side shows the use of unhealthy defense mechanisms in our arguments.

[Avoid Fallacies](#)

Like defense mechanisms, fallacies occur when we are unsure of the argument we are attempting to make. While there are many different fallacies, the ones made most often in inductive arguments are called informal fallacies. Sometimes fallacies may be practical for a moment, but insightful people will begin to question their validity. Identifying others' fallacies or recognizing

our errors will make us less likely to fall victim to them or use them in an argument. We will look at several fallacies and consider which fallacy you are likely to fall victim to or use when making a moral argument.

Common Fallacies

- **Fallacy of Equivocation:** This occurs when the same word is used in two different ways, changing the meaning and course of the argument. For example, I stand by the president because he stands on things. In the first part, the word stand is used to refer to your support for the president, but in the second part, it is used to describe what that person is doing. What has been created is a confusing statement because the use of the word has changed how it is being used.
- **Appeal to Force:** This occurs when we use force to coerce another person into accepting our position. This can happen physically, psychologically, or legally. For example: If you disagree with me in class, I will fail you. Or I can't believe you are giving me a ticket; don't you know I pay your salary. It may be used by people in power who want it expressed, and by people trying to gain control through the use of threatening force.
- **Abusive Fallacy:** also known as Ad Hominem. This fallacy occurs when we disagree with someone's conclusion and, instead of addressing their argument, attack their character. This can, in some cases, be slurs made about the person. For example, if you heard what she said about abortion, do you all really believe she is some narrow-minded anti-choice fanatic? The attack can be about anything related to the person, from their ethnic background, social status, etc. It is used to demean the person while trying to help your argument, but critical thinking should be seen as nothing more than a shameless tactic.
- **Appeal to Authority:** Is made when we try to get people to agree with the conclusion solely based on someone's name or because of their position. They use their position as the basis

for the acceptance of the argument. For example: Because I am the professor, you have to agree with what I say. It can also be known as Inappropriate Authority, which is more common among celebrities who argue they know what they are talking about because they are famous.

- **Popular Appeal:** This fallacy can go by several names: Popular Appeal, Bandwagon, Plain Folks, and happens when statements like “everyone” or “no one” make up the argument. For example, Everyone is voting for this candidate, so don’t waste your vote. Or, Bill Gates says, “I am just like you because I know what it is like right now to struggle with bills also.” We may see this used by politicians during campaigns to make themselves more identifiable to voters.
- **Hasty Generalization:** This happens when an assumption is made about a whole group based on a small sample that is inadequate. For example, the professor has a student on a sports team who fails and believes that all the people on that team are bad students. Sometimes we have seen this used to stereotype a whole group of people based on what a small number of people from the same group have done. For example, following 9/11, many people made a hasty generalization by stating that all Muslims are terrorists. That statement is derogatory and incredibly hurtful to the group it is directed towards.
- **Ignorance:** This is when it is argued that our conclusion is false simply because the other person has not seen that happen. It could be that the person believes that because they have not seen or been part of something like that, it therefore does not exist. For example, I don’t believe that your argument on the existence of UFOs is correct because I have never seen one. Simply because someone has not seen a UFO is not enough to negate the person's argument.

- **Begging the Question:** Can also be called a “circular argument” because the premise and the conclusion state the same thing without any other evidence. For example, Krispy Kreme doughnuts are delicious because they taste great, and the conclusion and the premise state the same thing, and no evidence has been provided to back the statements with facts.
- **Appeal to Tradition:** Occurs when we argue that something is moral or immoral because of tradition. This fallacy was used in 1857 during arguments before the Supreme Court when it was stated: “The Negro, has never been recognized as a person in this country, and therefore slavery should remain legal.”¹ An argument based solely on tradition is not a valid one.
- **Slippery Slope:** This fallacy happens when a chain reaction usually ends up in some dire consequence at the end, without enough evidence to support that assumption. For example: If we start to ban books, it won’t be long before they ban other rights, and then we will end up living in a Communist state. Sometimes during political campaigns, politicians may use this fallacy to describe what will happen if we vote for the other candidate.
- **Non-Sequitur:** The statement either contradicts itself or does not make sense. For example, I do well playing Madden on the Xbox; I would be a great NFL quarterback. Those two statements do not go together and really cannot be compared.
- **Either/Or:** It occurs when it looks like you are given two choices, but one is so bad that there is only one choice. Parents may employ this fallacy on many occasions. For example, you have two choices: either eat your vegetables now, or I will put them on your cereal in the morning. While two choices are given, the fallacy occurs because the second choice is so bad that no one will choose it; in reality, the person ends up with only one option to choose from.

¹ This argument was used in the case of Dred Scott v. Sanford in 1857

- **Red Herring:** This fallacy again has been used by politicians or those evading to answer a question. The Red Herring occurs when the arguer goes off on a tangent, raising a side issue without returning to the original discussion. For example: During a debate, the candidate was asked about their views on education, and they responded by discussing the need to plant more trees in forests. They have used another topic to distract from the original conversation.
- **Strawman:** This fallacy is very close to Abusive, but instead of attacking the person's character, you misrepresent what the person has said. For example: Did you hear what John said about the importance of education? Can you believe he wants to get rid of all our military? The person responding has misstated what John said, either to gain credit for themselves or to make us think negatively about John.
- **Appeal to Pity:** College students often use this fallacy because the arguer is trying to get people to agree with their conclusion by making them feel sorry for someone. Lawyers may even use this in a courtroom. For example, you see the bloody clothes and hear the victim's screams, and you have no choice but to find the criminal guilty.
- **False Cause:** It happens when it is assumed that because B follows A, A caused B to happen. For example, I ate Lucky Charms for breakfast; I failed an exam; therefore, eating Lucky Charms causes you to fail exams. Very closely related to a Non-sequitur, the statements have no connection with each other and do not make sense.

In Ethics, the ability to make sound arguments is very important, and hopefully, the items learned will help you, as you know, to defend your positions.