

## Arguments: A Quick Primer

*This is just a brief introduction to arguments—more like a crib sheet of central basic concepts in logic and argumentation. If you would like to study arguments in more detail, I recommend taking a Critical Thinking or Logic class. In the meantime, you can also check out [this brief Khan Academy course](#).*

When philosophers talk of arguments, they do not mean a conflict or discussion. Instead, an argument is a set of reasons offered in favor of a claim. The reasons are called *premises*, and the final claim is called the *conclusion*. We will be focusing here on *deductive* arguments: arguments that are supposed to fully establish the conclusion once you grant the premises (in contrast with inductive arguments, where the premises only make the conclusion more likely but do not guarantee it).

For example, consider the following argument:

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|--|-----------------|
| (1) The Bible has predicted many historical events that have come to pass. | [premise]       |
| (2) Therefore, whatever the Bible says is true.                            | [from (1)]      |
| (3) The Bible says that God exists.  | [premise]       |
| (4) Therefore, God exists.   | [from (2), (3)] |

(1) and (3) are **premises**, statements asserted without a proof (but which we hope are plausible!).

(2) is an **intermediary conclusion**, a conclusion that follows from an earlier premise, and which, taken together with other premises, supports the argument's conclusion—in this case, (4).

An argument is **valid** *if and only if* it is *absolutely impossible* for its premises to be true and its conclusion false. Notice that the argument above is **invalid**.

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|--|-----------------|
| (1) The Bible has predicted many historical events that have come to pass. | [premise]       |
| (2) Therefore, whatever the Bible says is true.                            | [from (1)]      |
| (3) The Bible says that God exists.  | [premise]       |
| (4) Therefore, God exists.   | [from (2), (3)] |

Premise (2) does not follow *logically* from premise (1). We can imagine logically possible scenarios where (1) is true and (2) is false: for example, perhaps the Bible has correctly predicted many historical events that have come to pass, but also made many predictions that did not come to pass.

Note that, by contrast, the argument that consists of (2)–(4) *is* valid. If (2) and (3) are true, it is logically *impossible* for (4) to be false. We can't imagine a situation where (2) and (3) are true and (4) is false.

Of course, just because an argument is valid doesn't mean it's a good one. An argument can be valid and rely on clearly false premises.

- (1) All philosophers are criminals.
- (2) All criminals are short.
- (3) Therefore, all philosophers are short.

Moreover, an argument can be valid and have clearly true premises but be completely uninformative.

- (1) All squares have four sides.
- (2) So, all squares have four sides.

When writing a deductive argument, the ideal to aim at is *soundness*. A deductive argument is sound just in case:

1. All the premises are true
2. The argument is valid: If all the premises are true, the conclusion is true (to put it another way: there is no way for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false)

Your goal when writing a paper will be to develop sound arguments. In philosophy (and in life), there aren't that many claims that everyone accepts to be true: for this reason, your goal is to argue from plausible premises, even if they are not known to be true.

Your goal in argument reconstruction will be to reconstruct arguments so that they are valid, that is, so that, if the premises are true, the conclusion also has to be true. The idea behind reconstructing arguments so that they are valid is that this focuses attention on the author's assumptions. Once you have a valid argument with a conclusion you reject, you also have to reject one of the premises. This makes it easier to figure out points of disagreement.

We will take more about argument reconstruction later in the semester. For now, I want you to get clear on how to identify what is being argued for. This is an important skill: quite often, people obscure what they are arguing for as a way of getting you to agree (because you agree with the general gist of what they are saying).

Recall that the conclusion is what the author is arguing for. Their goal is to persuade you of the conclusion. When it is unclear what the conclusion is, the central question to ask yourself is: what is this person trying to get me to believe? Other useful tools are:

- Use the 'because' test: read one statement after the other but insert the word 'because' between the two statements. See what makes more sense. The conclusion comes before 'because', never after.
  - o For example, "*Evermore* was a disappointment because the songs were generic." Sounds much better than "The songs in *Evermore* were generic because it was a disappointment.", indicating that "*Evermore* was a disappointment" is the conclusion, and "The songs in *Evermore* were generic" the reason for that claim.
  - o This is also a good test for identifying what are premises that arrive late on in the argument, and reasons given for those premises.
- Notice words that signal a conclusion: so, therefore, in conclusion, for this reason, it follows that...