

Chapter 3

Structuring Arguments

The Problem of Justifying Moral Propositions

In the last chapter, I stated that a crucial distinction for our purposes was that between a descriptive proposition and a moral proposition. Obviously any of the propositions that you or others advance in taking some sort of *ethical* stance on a professional matter are *moral* propositions. You are now more attuned to this distinction and should be able to see that propositions of the following sort are to be so classified:

‘Children *should* be educated, not trained, at school’.

‘It is totally *improper* for a medical practitioner to have sexual relationships with one of her patients’.

‘It is sometimes *right* for police officers to use their discretion in deciding whether to enforce the law’.

‘It is *more important* that social workers act as advocates for their clients than that they enforce petty bureaucratic rules’.

And so on. At this stage, you should be attuned to the presence of the clue words that suggest that you have moral propositions here. And, having noted that that is what they are, you will perhaps find that some such propositions of an ethical sort concerning professional life you agree with, that you disagree with others, are ‘in two minds’ concerning the merits of some others and find some too vague to know what to say unless they are clarified a bit. In short, you will already have some views on these matters, especially issues to do with your own chosen profession. But, for all you know, your views might be rubbish; they might be ill thought through, the result of shallow minded thinking ‘off the top of your head’. The only way you would know that they were not rubbish would be to have thought out some *reasons* for your views, to have a *rationale* in their support. In what follows, we begin to explore the sort of thing that might provide such a rationale.

I will begin that exploration by contrasting the present problem with that facing the support of a descriptive proposition. If a *descriptive* proposition is advanced, then, as most of you would realize, the issue is whether it is true or false, that is, *succeeds in describing reality* or not. And, suffice it for now to note, one’s hope would be that some process of, mostly, empirical enquiry would result in it being established if, say, it is true that most police take bribes, or if it is true that some undergraduate courses demand a higher level of literacy than 30 per cent of current students are capable of, or if it is true that 20 per cent of deaths in

hospitals are due to staff incompetence, or if most retirements of social workers are stress-related, or not.

Not that empirical enquiry is guaranteed of settling all descriptive propositions' truth-status. Some such propositions might be true, and some false, without anyone being able to establish them one way or the other. (Try: 'Ten minutes before the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon briefly thought of Josephine'.) In short, not all truths are capable of being known. Despite that, if such propositions are amenable to having their truth or falsity established at all, then, for most of them at least, we seem to have a halfway decent procedure for such investigation: empirical research – that is, observation, experiment and the like. (Actually it is not clear that some descriptive propositions are, even in principle, amenable to empirical research; try: 'God exists'. I will ignore this complication for now.)

But what of *moral* propositions? How on earth are they to be established (or rejected)?

First, note from the outset that such propositions do *not* seem to be able to be proved one way or the other by means of the sort of empirical research that one might usually undertake to investigate the truth/falsity status of descriptive propositions. This is not a mere matter of it being too difficult. As just pointed out, plenty of descriptive propositions that are presumably either true or false are nonetheless just too difficult to check out; and we will all go to our graves never having been able to find out which it was. (E.g. 'The historical person now called "Jesus Christ" had a particular liking for fig cakes'.) Nonetheless we feel that, even if it is impossible find out which it is, they *are* nonetheless *either* true or false. (Either he liked fig cakes or he didn't; and that would be so whether we knew about it or not.) But, flawed though it is, and though it is not guaranteed of success, empirical research is a generally available and appropriate way of going about investigating the truth or falsity of the vast bulk of descriptive propositions. With *moral* propositions though, such enquiry seems to be just inappropriate; that is, *in principle* inappropriate, not just difficult – it is just the wrong sort of way to go about establishing such propositions. You might not see this, so let's ask what sort of empirical research (as done by natural or social scientists) could be thought suitable to the task of settling whether something was right or wrong, good or bad, should or should not be done?

To illustrate, let's look at an example from the previous chapter. Consider: 'It is wrong to bribe someone to do something'. What sort of research could establish that?

Well, I suppose that one could do a survey of citizens in our society and let us suppose that the survey question asked: 'Is bribery right or wrong?' Suppose further that we found that three-quarters of respondents said that it was wrong. Would that settle things? Not obviously. If done competently, such a survey tells you whether or not our society's citizens morally condemn or condone bribery but that is *not* to learn whether it is *right* so much as to learn what fellow citizens' views on the matter are, whether *they think* it right. (We touched upon this sort of thing in the last chapter, you will recall.) You are getting *descriptive* information

about their views not moral guidance concerning the wrongness of bribery. You could disagree with others and judge society to be in moral error on this without being automatically wrong in your view simply because it is a minority view. (One might also note that the answer from the survey would presumably vary with time and place depending upon the society that one surveys.)

Alternatively, one might do research to find out what the usual consequences of bribery are for various people involved. But that wouldn't help decide about the rightness or wrongness of bribery unless we *already* had some values in terms of which to appraise such consequences as good ones or bad ones!

In short, it is not clear that either of these particular sorts of empirical research settles moral questions; if anything, it seems clear that they don't. So, what else could one do by way of empirical enquiry in order to find out whether or not the proposition that it is wrong to bribe someone to do something was one to be endorsed? Another common suggestion is to find out whether or not bribery is *legal*. But this looks to be confused; the question was *not* whether bribery is *legal* but the distinct issue of whether it is *morally right*. Unless you reject the very possibility of bad laws, rightness and legality are not to be conflated; they are different things – what is legal is a descriptive matter and what is right is a moral matter. If one is lucky enough to live in a good society then the law might happen to reflect what is right but, even so, the two *concepts* are distinct (we touched upon this in the last chapter and will consider things further in Chapter 9).

So, we are still left with the problem: what is one to do in appraising value propositions, can they be shown to be correct or not and if so, how could one do that?

The issue is hugely controversial within that domain of philosophy that concerns itself with thinking about the nature of ethics; but we simply do not have time to address these matters here in their own right (again, some further treatment will occur in Chapter 9). For present purposes, it will have to suffice to say that it is not at all clear that there is any way of showing a moral proposition to be true or to be false. Indeed, it is not at all clear if there is any objective or absolute right answer to be had at all concerning value propositions. This is even worse than the situation, touched on above, for the minority of descriptive propositions that are also not able to have their truth/falsity checked by empirical means (even in principle). Such claims as: 'God exists' might not be empirically checkable but, despite that, it is either true that God exists or false. There is some sort of fact of the matter that makes the claim true or false, even if we can't tell which it is. With moral propositions, it is not even clear that there is any sort of fact of the matter to be had. So, what can be done by a thinker concerned to have well supported ethical views on various professional matters?

Pending further immersion in moral philosophy, the best thing for now is not to worry about whether one's answers are right or wrong in any absolute, or objective, sense. For now, focus on getting your own views straight and as well supported as possible. This can be done while accepting that it may not be possible to further decide in any non-personalized way between two competing views, say those of

yours and those of a colleague of yours as to whether, say, bribery is sometimes legitimate or not. The best that we can hope for is having both of you having thought through your judgements on the issue as thoroughly and fair-mindedly as possible. That you differ in your final assessment is a matter that we will not be able to further arbitrate on. What we can arbitrate upon, however, is the clarity and argumentative rigour with which each of you come to your conclusions.

So, the upshot of what I am suggesting above is that, in the absence of anything like as obvious a way for settling moral questions as empirical enquiry is for settling most descriptive questions, the best that can be managed is a carefully worked out, critically appraised, *personal judgement* on the matter. Even if not objectively establishable as the truth, your judgement will hopefully be at least satisfactory in a subjective sense. That is your task. But how to do that? – with difficulty; but once you have some skills further developed, your capacity to think through complex issues will be considerably sharpened. The key skills are being able to craft and appraise arguments. In this chapter, we focus upon the former task and in subsequent chapters upon the latter.

Key Ideas

Empirical enquiry can't establish moral propositions. We assume for the moment that no moral proposition can be *established as true* in any objective sense. Our current focus is therefore on having your moral judgements as carefully thought out as possible with a view to them being satisfactory in a subjective sense. Doing this involves skill in argumentation.

Arguing about Values

My suggestion is that you think of the moral values that you have, and the value judgements that you make when employing them, as forming a network or web. The web is comprised of two sorts of things: first, more or less general moral principles; and second, particular judgements on particular topics, acts or situations. To illustrate the former, try: 'All stealing is wrong'. To illustrate the latter, try: 'Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet'. As this pair will indicate, particular value judgements can generally be seen as being an application of, or as being motivated by, the former, more general, principles (although you might not be self-consciously doing that at the time). So, if asked to *defend* one's condemnation of Jenny, one might appeal to the principle that all stealing is wrong (a rather simple and sweeping principle in this particular case and, as we will see later down the book, principles might be more hedged about than that; at the moment, we will keep things deliberately simple while key elements of argumentation are explained). Anyway, laid out a little more completely and formally as a structured argument in justification of that judgement, we get something roughly like this:

All stealing is wrong.
Jenny stole Jane's wallet.
So,
Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet.

I will pursue the mechanics of argumentation in a moment but, for now, I merely point out that there are two distinct sorts of role for the constituent propositions of the argument – supporting propositions and those being supported. Some, the *premises*, are acting as reasons in support of another, the *conclusion*. In this case, what we have is a general moral principle (that all stealing is wrong) being shown relevant to Jenny's action by way of a linking (or bridging, or connecting) descriptive premise (that Jenny stole Jane's wallet) and these are offered in support of the conclusion (that Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet). We have two premises with the first being a moral proposition and the second a descriptive proposition leading (hopefully) to our conclusion which is also a moral proposition.

Simple, even simplistic? – Yes, but little arguments like this form the elements of the complicated intermeshing dialogue that constitutes an in-depth discussion of our topics and justification of our stances upon them. When you are giving *reasons* for some moral proposition you are *arguing*. And when you respond in objection to some presented argument, then your response will *itself* be another argument. A dialogue of discussion of, and enquiry into, our professional ethical issues can be seen as an extended exercise in argumentation back and forth as the worth of some proposal is thoroughly probed. That whole enquiry is basically made up a web of linked arguments each of which is not a lot different in general layout to the little three-liner above. In Chapter 6, we will move on to the task of going beyond single arguments to crafting such a more extended web of reasoning.

Mind you, any such web has to start somewhere and my suggestion is that you take some intuitively attractive stance on the topic that concerns you and then begin to craft that web by starting off with a single argument that, in your view, advances a line of thinking that is a central or key line of support for that stance. Get it straight and you have the starting point for further development of your thinking. But, as I said earlier, before you can get it straight a number of sub-skills have to be in place and one of those skills is being able to lay out (or *structure*, as I will call it) an argument in the manner of the three-liner above. Much as with the last chapter's task of being able to reliably distinguish a descriptive proposition from a moral proposition, I have been surprised at how difficult some students seem to find this business of structuring an argument, so read carefully.

Key Ideas

Having a well thought-out ethical stance involves *argumentation* in which reasons are advanced for a view. Arguments are most clearly laid out in a structured form with supporting propositions (the premises) leading to the proposition being argued for (the conclusion).

Assertion and Argument

Before proceeding much further, it is probably worth pausing briefly to just spend a few moments confirming that you understand the distinction between (merely) asserting some view and arguing for it. Let us again use the subject matter of the little three-liner from above. Say that one said:

Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet.

As it stands, this is a *mere assertion*; one knows what the author thinks about Jenny's action's rightness but one doesn't know why. Contrast with this the following:

Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet *because* any stealing is wrong.

In this case we do have an *argument*; a (somewhat sketchily worded) rationale has been offered for judging that Jenny should not have stolen Jane's wallet. The support for the judgement follows the word 'because'. Contrast this with the three-liner of the previous section. Basically that three-liner is the same rationale; it was just laid out more carefully, clearly and completely. Most of the arguments that you will naturally come up with yourselves, and come across from others, will tend to be of the sketchy sort rather than the clearly laid out sort of our above three-liner. Your next task is being able to progress from such sketchiness and portray your and others' reasoning into such a clear structure (I will call it: '*structuring*' such initial 'feral' arguments; I call such initial arguments 'feral' to underline the point that these are wild, 'untamed' arguments that need some work).

Key Ideas

Arguing for a position is more than merely asserting it, it is reasoning in its support – providing an *argument* with the reasons constituting *premises* of such an argument. The position in question thus forms the *conclusion* of such an argument and has an explicit rationale rather than being merely stated without one. A key skill is taking a feral initial go at an argument and structuring it.

Structuring Arguments

As you will have realized by now, one of the skills which is central to the book's objectives is that of having you be able to argue in as *explicit and transparent* a way as possible. It is not much use congratulating yourself on having various views if they are unsupported. Yet it is not much use congratulating yourself on having reasons for believing, or doing, something if those 'reasons' are an obscure mess. Why? – because if they are a mess, then they are not in a form where you, or anyone else, can judge whether they are *good* reasons or not. And you should care about the quality of your reasoning if the topic is an important one. And surely, as noted earlier, any professionals worth their 'salt' would consider the sorts of questions raised in Chapter 1 to be important ones. (For what it is worth, which is quite a bit actually, the skills of reasoning transfer across to other issues as well; not just your professional life will benefit from you being able to reason well – although you may irritate sloppy-minded friends.)

To help you build up your reasoning skills, I suggest that you lay out your arguments in the rather artificially structured way of the above three-liner (it is not *always* three, but it is *commonly* two premises and a conclusion). I don't suggest that you are likely to do this sort of formal structuring in future, but doing it now as a training exercise assists you to get a more reliable intuitive 'feel' for argumentative clarity and quality. In effect, your future feral arguments will be less feral as a result of the training in structuring them that you are about to undergo.

The argumentation we will be focusing on will always (initially) concern moral matters like whether a proposed course of action is the right one or whether some proposition as to the correctness of some moral view is to be accepted. (I say 'initially' because, as you will later see, as the enquiry unfolds you might divert to be pursuing some matter of fact, or even a conceptual issue, as a sub-task; ignore this complication for now.) So, any argument directly on your moral problem will always involve *moral conclusions* that you are arguing for. And, there is no way that one can have an argument with a moral conclusion based on reasons, or supporting premises, that don't themselves contain a moral proposition. One can't extract a moral judgement as conclusion from premises that are merely morally-neutral descriptive propositions. So, for *all* of the arguments that you will be initially offering directly in moral judgement concerning our topics, the set of premises,

or reasons, advanced as support for your conclusions have to contain some sort of moral propositions as *moral premises*. So, a key task to be kept in mind when structuring a feral argument is to make sure that the resultant structure contains at least one moral premise. Let's try walking through this process of structuring a feral argument.

The first thing to get clear in a feral argument is where the conclusion is. Sometimes it is obvious but sometimes it isn't – even when the argument is your own! If the conclusion is not obvious then there are techniques that may help you to work out which part of a feral argument is expressing the conclusion and which parts are premises. The next sub-section introduces the first of these techniques, hunting for, and understanding, what I will call 'inference words'.

Key Ideas

Arguments directly supporting some stance on a professional ethical issue will always have a moral *conclusion*. Any such argument with a moral conclusion has to have a least one moral *premise*. A key skill in trying to understand any feral argument is to be able to identify what it is trying to prove – its conclusion.

Use of 'Inference' Words to find the Conclusion

Say that you have tried to go beyond some intuitive (or 'feral', as I will continue to dub it) line of reasoning and lay it out as a formal structure. As an illustration, let's make the abortion debate the topic of enquiry. Say that your initial feral argument was:

F1

Abortion is wrong because it is the killing of people.

This *is* an *argument* and not a mere assertion (note the bit after the word: 'because' – it starts to give supporting reasons). Much as we had clue words when we were discussing the moral-descriptive distinction in the last chapter, there is another bunch of words that it is worth remembering as giving a tip-off that, in this case, a move of reasoning, an *inference*, is present – I'll call them '*inference words*'. As with the last chapter's clue words, they are to be used with caution and intelligence, not blindly and automatically as a recipe. All of them have uses in our language apart from that of expressing a move of reasoning but they're still worth noting. We have one here, namely, 'because'.

'Because' usually signals that we have *just had a conclusion and that a premise is about to follow*. It sometimes gets placed elsewhere in a sentence than between the premise and the conclusion but if you get a good feel for the 'plain vanilla' versions discussed here, then you should be able to extend your understanding to

other sentence patterns. Some other words, or turns of phrase, that carry out the same job are: ‘as’, ‘given that’, ‘on the grounds that’ ... you get the idea. Some *other* inference words work in reverse and signal that one has *just had a premise and a conclusion is about to follow*. For instance, another way of expressing F1, but switched around, would be:

F1*

Abortion involves killing people *so* it is wrong.

Again, there is a bunch of words and turns of phrase that do the same job that ‘so’ does here. A partial list is: ‘thus’, ‘therefore’, ‘hence’, ‘it follows that’ ... and so on; again I hope you get the idea.

So, one piece of help that you often have in structuring an argument is looking for inference words. As noted, we have two (‘plain vanilla’) varieties:

1. Conclusion *because* (as etc.) Premise(s); and
2. Premise(s) *so* (therefore etc.) Conclusion.

Key Ideas

To help find the conclusion of a feral argument there will sometimes be *inference* words present; these are of two sorts:

1. Conclusion *because* (as etc.) Premise(s); and
2. Premise(s) *so* (therefore etc.) Conclusion

Although learning to hunt for inference words is useful in laying out an argument as a structure with clearly indicated premises and conclusion, sometimes an inference is occurring yet *no* inference word at all has been employed. One might have:

F1**

Abortion is wrong. It involves killing people.

Here we have two separate propositions (sentences in this case, but they could be clauses within a sentence – try replacing the first full-stop with a semi-colon) but, despite appearances, they are *not* two *mere assertions*. To see that they are not just two disjointed mere assertions one after the other but are connected (with the second proposition being (a partial) rationale for the first) there are a couple of techniques to assist. The first I will call ‘*inference word insertion*’; the second I will call ‘*the why?-because trick*’.

Inference Word Insertion

As the name suggests, with *inference word insertion*, one plays around with inserting inference words. Remember that we had two groups of them, one, if you like, the reverse direction of the other. I will use ‘because’ from one group and ‘so’ from the other. The idea is to shove one inference word and then the other (in turn) between the two propositions and see if either of them fits so that the resulting sentence ‘scans’. Does insertion of either of them help you to realize that one proposition is the conclusion and the other a premise? Let’s try ‘because’ (remember that this works in this way: conclusion *because* premise).

F1**a

Abortion is wrong *because* it involves killing people.

As I hope you will agree, this works; we can see the last bit as premise in support of the first bit as conclusion. Indeed, it is more or less the same as the original F1 (with just minor rewording). Tried around the other way, using ‘so’, it doesn’t work.

F1**b

Abortion is wrong *so* it involves killing people.

This just doesn’t jell as a move of reasoning. The upshot of this is that inserting inference words can help you to see not just whether an inference is going on or not but which proposition is conclusion and which is premise. When inserting inference words, I suggest that you use ‘so’ and ‘because’ on the grounds that your intuitions as to what these mean are probably more reliable than for other inference words.

Indeed, even if you *do* have an inference word but are unsure what it means, in particular, which direction it goes in (conclusion *word* premise, or premise *word* conclusion) you might want to insert the more intuitively familiar ‘so’ and ‘because’ to help you work out what is going on. So, say you had:

F1a

Abortion is wrong *in virtue of the fact that* it involves killing people.

You might at least realize that you have two propositions joined by the italicized inference phrase but not be confident as to just what that inference phrase means by way of picking out the conclusion. Your intuitions are probably better with ‘so’ and ‘because’ so insert them in turn in place of the italicized phrase and see which fits better. In this case, clearly ‘because’ ‘scans’ but ‘so’ doesn’t.

Key Ideas

If no inference word is present in the feral argument, try inserting inference words between that argument's propositions to see which sort fits, or 'flows'. If you have an inference word but are not quite sure how works, then try replacing it with 'so' and then with 'because' and see if that helps you work out which way the argument goes.

What of the other technique, the '*why? -because*' trick.

The 'Why?-Because' Trick

Let's try it on F1**.

F1**

Abortion is wrong. It involves killing people.

Here, we take each proposition in turn and ask of it '*why* (that proposition)?' and see if answering '*because* (the other proposition)' fits. If so, the '*why?*' proposition was conclusion and the '*because*' proposition, premise. In this case, if we asked: '*Why* is abortion wrong?' and answered: '*Because* it involves killing people', then that would fit. (Trying it the other way and asking: '*Why* does abortion involve killing people?' and answering: '*Because* it is wrong' just would not work.) So, by use of this trick we know that another way of writing F1** (without changing its meaning – just making it clearer that an inference is occurring) is as we did back in F1**a: 'Abortion is wrong *because* it involves killing people'. Again, the trick tells us not just that an inference is present but which *direction* it goes in.

This technique and that of clue word insertion are mainly of use when you are trying to understand the arguments of others but I have found students find them useful on occasion in working out what they themselves are saying! It is best, though, if you get yourself into the habit of arguing in a way that has appropriate inference words already written in *explicitly and deliberately*. That way you and whomsoever your argument is directed towards each have a better chance of avoiding confusion.

Key Ideas

Faced with two propositions, P1 and P2, and unsure of which is conclusion and which is premise, ask ‘Why P1? – because P2’ and ‘Why P2? – because P1’ and see which one makes sense. For whichever version ‘scans’, its ‘why’ proposition is the conclusion.

Those techniques explained, let’s return to considering F1.

Laying out a Structure

F1

Abortion is wrong because it is the killing of people.

Here, we do have an inference word (‘because’) and clearly some sort of sketchy rationale is being offered for saying that abortion is wrong but it is fairly incomplete as it stands. But, even with the bits we have explicitly on the page so far, we can lay things out a little bit more clearly. We now know which statement is the premise and which the conclusion, so let’s portray that in a structure. This gives us an initial structuring attempt as follows.

S1

Abortion is the killing of people.

So,

Abortion is wrong.

This is some improvement on F1 in that it displays clearly just what is supposed to be proving what – what is premise and what is conclusion. However, note the switch to ‘so’; this is because in our *structure* the conclusion comes last. But it is not much of an advance. It’s still a bit obscure and is missing a bit (getting a feral argument into decent shape as a tight structure usually requires a few drafts as you progressively fix faults). So, let’s try a clearer, *more completely explicit*, version.

Presumably, the absence of any other quantification means that one is speaking of *all* killing of people and *all* abortion, so that might as well be explicit (not that it will always be ‘all’ that’s written in – see the section: Clarifying Whole Propositions). Also, note that the conclusion is a moral proposition yet there is no moral value expressed in the premise; the latter is not a moral proposition. So, as discussed earlier, some sort of moral proposition (acting as a moral premise) should be in there but is missing. What might such a premise be? Note that, back in the feral argument, F1, nothing more was present that has not been captured in S1 – all the clauses/sentences of that feral have found a place in our structure. So, we have to ‘read between the lines’ a bit to find out the missing, or merely

implicit, value principle the case rests on. In this case, it seems obvious (especially once it is written in by someone else, like me!): – the author is opposed to killing people, thinks it wrong to do so. So, we might have a better go at structuring it as follows:

S1*

MP All killing of people is wrong.

CP All abortion is the killing of people.

So,

MC All abortion is wrong.

Working out Moral Premises That Are Difficult to Identify

Note that three things have occurred from S1 to S1*. The MP has been written in explicitly, quantification has been made explicit (the ‘all’s) and the propositions that make up the argument have been labelled as to type (‘MP’ for the moral premise, ‘CP’ for the conceptual premise and ‘MC’ for the moral conclusion – and note that we have a CP, not a DP; though unusual, it sometimes happens).

This might all look fairly simple and obvious but sometimes it simply will not occur to you straightaway what the missing MP is. As it is hugely important in these sorts of ethical enquiries to get straight what the values are that an argument is resting upon, you simply have to try harder to work out what the missing MP is. There are a couple of techniques that might help. Let’s go back to our initial, and incomplete, structuring of our feral.

S1

Abortion is the killing of people.

So,

Abortion is wrong.

Say that you get stuck at this point and can’t see what to write in as a moral premise. You realize that you are missing one but can’t immediately see what it might be (again, realize that this is a problem that will arise not just with the arguments of others but with your *own* arguments; in effect, you won’t know what you meant!).

Two approaches might help to find the missing MP.

The *first approach* is to say to yourself something like: ‘I know that the author (perhaps you) is morally opposed to abortion but what *other* moral commitment of hers is hinted at in the feral? What else is *implicitly* there concerning the author’s moral values – (either what she is morally against or what she is morally in favour of)? Trying that with S1, most of you would realize that the author is not just against abortion but subscribes to a more general moral opposition to killing people. (And, incidentally and controversially, we see from the CP that she conceives of abortion to be a special case of killing *people*, an instance of that more general principle.)

So obviously you are going to write in (as the MP) some sort of claim expressing moral opposition to killing people. When you write this in, write it in a way that obviously links up with or connects with the way some of the other claims are expressed. Have a look at the way that I did it in S1* and see how the MP meshes with the rest of the argument. It's a matter of the turn of phrase that I have chosen to express the (previously implicit) value explicitly as the MP. Later in the chapter, in the section: Checklist Item 4, we'll come back to this matter of having the bits and pieces of the argument mesh together.

Then again, you might stare at the initial (incomplete) structure and ask yourself what else the author values and simply fail to come up with anything. What then? Well, then you try the second technique. In fact, I would be inclined to use this technique anyway just as a check upon whatever you might have done more intuitively.

How does this *second approach* work? You will usually have another premise present. In this second approach, focus your attention on the premise that you *do* have. You haven't yet got the MP that you are hunting for but you will have, most commonly, a descriptive premise. The abortion argument we are using is unusual in that the other premise is a *conceptual* premise. (Arguments can even have two MPs and you have one explicitly present and are hunting out the other; but that is a rarity that I'd rather not muddy the waters with right now.) When you focus upon the descriptive premise or, in this case, CP, you focus on it *asking yourself questions* along the following lines.

The author (who may, remember, be you) is trying to advance an argument *against* abortion and tells us that it is a case of killing people. So what? *Why* would the author claim this as part of her case in trying to show that abortion is wrong? What is the relevance of this claim to that task? Well, presumably if the main point to be made about abortion, in support of the claim that it is *wrong*, is that abortion is the killing of people, then the author is presumably *against* the killing of people – otherwise, why bother mentioning it? So, I can write in as the moral premise something like: 'Killing people is wrong'. And that, of course, will give us the MP of S1*.

Key Ideas

There are two techniques for 'teasing out' missing moral premises: first, ask what other moral commitments the author has apart from the one listed as the MC; second, focus on what is said in the (non-moral) premise that you have and ask what makes it morally significant as a reason in support of the MC.

A Checklist for Checking Argument Structures for Tameless

Now, S1* seems nicely clear and connected and seems to have all of its bits and pieces explicitly present (most notably an MP). It is already what I will call a ‘tame’ structure as opposed to the ‘feral’, more intuitive, statement of the argument with which we began and, for that matter, as opposed to our first attempts at portraying the argument in a structured form (S1 in this case). Note again that, to help keep track of things, I have labelled the moral premise ‘MP’, the conceptual premise, ‘CP’, the moral conclusion, ‘MC’ (and, had we had one, I would have labelled the descriptive premise ‘DP’). It’s a fairly obvious shorthand and acts as a visual reminder of what sort of proposition any given line is taken to be. Although you have hopefully tracked along with the above discussion of our little abortion argument without getting lost and can see the final structure as hanging together fairly nicely, it is quite likely that, for some time, your efforts at structuring will not often be this successful. Your argument structures will be faulty in various ways. So, what might go amiss?

Well, you’ve seen my transformation of F1 into S1*; it seemed to go OK but, as I have noted, things will not always go that smoothly; what might go wrong? Lots, but a few errors are sufficiently common among those new to this level of reasoning rigour that they are worth remembering. My suggestion is that it’s worth *explicitly and self-consciously checking* through your arguments to make sure that you are avoiding these errors. Think of it in terms of a mental ‘checklist’ that you *methodically* work through, looking for various possible faults *one after the other*. With a bit of practice, mentally working through the checklist will become second nature. So, what’s on the list? Four things:

1. *Is the conclusion on target?*
2. *Does each line of the argument contain only one proposition and does each proposition occur in only one place in the argument?*
3. *Is each line of the argument correctly identified as to proposition type?*
4. *Do the various lines of the argument ‘mesh’ together to form one coherent piece of reasoning?*

By applying this checklist methodically, *one step after the other*, and *fixing* any problems that you detect, one after the other, as they are found, you have a good chance of producing a structure that fairly well lays out what the original feral argument was trying to say. If you just look at an argument and try to form an overall ‘Gestalt’ impression as to its satisfactoriness, then you are likely to overlook faults. I emphasize looking for (and fixing) faults one at a time in a tightly focused way because this helps you to see (and remediate) things that you would otherwise miss and ensures that you don’t omit anything when analysing the argument for various faults. Let me explain each of these ‘taming’ checklist items one by one.

Checklist Item 1: Is the Conclusion on Target?

One thing to get clear right from the start is whether the argument structure has its conclusion talking about what you meant it to be. Arguments have purposes; they are intended to address some issue of concern. An argument is *on* target if it does just that and *off* target if it addresses some other issue. If it is not on target, then it is immediately in trouble as it has a conclusion, no matter how well proved, that is simply *irrelevant* to the task at hand. In the case of F1 and the various versions of S1, the argument was meant to be one directly addressing the issue of the rightness or wrongness of abortion. As an initial argument in an enquiry you would expect it to be bearing directly on this topic with its conclusion and the rest of the argument to be laying out a case for or against abortion (in this case it was against). So, let's look at S1*, the best-stated version of the argument we had above, and check whether its conclusion is on target. In this case, it is pretty obvious that it is, so obvious that you might wonder why we bother doing this particular check. I will simply report to you that it is surprising how many people, especially when in the early stages of learning to reason more rigorously, simply wander off the track and start arguing about something else. They don't go *wildly* off track but it is still off track, not arguing about what they were meant to be arguing about. For instance, one professional ethical issue for teachers to wrestle with is trying to have a considered view as to who should be setting the broad aims, or goals, of a curriculum. I have found student-teachers to have a tendency to drift across from this topic to a distinct one, namely: who should be deciding the content of a curriculum *in order to achieve preset*, or given, aims or goals. The first question is the topic: 'Who should set the ends?'; the second question is the topic: 'Who should decide the means to achieve some given ends?'. An argument with the conclusion as to who should decide on the means is irrelevant to a topic concerning who should decide on the ends. Easy enough to see when I portray it, harder to avoid when *you* are trying to make sense of someone else's reasoning or trying to argue yourself. How to stop yourself making this error? – examine the argument focusing upon *just one thing*: is the conclusion on target?

As another illustration, this time using our abortion argument, say someone structured that argument as follows:

S1**

MP All abortion is wrong.

CP All abortion is the killing of people.

So,

MC All killing of people is wrong.

Have a look at this in comparison to S1* and you'll see that the only difference is that the MP and the MC have been switched around, the argument is, if you like, upside-down. Curiously, I have found this sort of inversion of the order of the lines to be not uncommon among beginners. If you just looked at this argument as

a whole and asked of it whether it was on target then you would probably answer that it was because the argument as a whole has lines in it mentioning abortion. But if, knowing that you are supposed to be presenting an argument *establishing* a stance upon abortion, that is, presenting an argument that *concludes* that abortion is wrong (in this case), then you would know that, for the argument to be on target, its conclusion has to be *a stance on abortion*. So, instead of looking at a whole argument you should look *just at MC*. And, looking at it, you would see that it doesn't mention abortion *at all* and realize that it is *not* on target.

In this case, S1** isn't even a proper portrayal of the feral F1; in forming the structure the author has not taken proper note of the inference word 'because'. The *feral's* conclusion was on target but things got distorted in transcribing it into a structure. At other times, it will not be that the MC in the structure is a misrepresentation of the conclusion of the feral; it might be a perfectly faithful rendition of the original feral. The problem might rather be that the conclusion of each of them is off target. We saw a case of this above where the author had failed to distinguish two distinct ideas and ended up talking about one when she was meant to be talking about the other (the means/end schooling stuff of a few paragraphs ago). I'll do one more illustration.

Say, for instance, that you are trying to work out whether it was *morally wrong or right* for a financial planner to deceive her client as to the commission being paid to her by some investment firms for signing clients up for their products. Concerning this topic, the following argument might be offered.

S2

MP Business Weekly surveys should always be believed.

DP According to one such survey, most financial planners who operate on commission mislead their clients as to the commissions they earn from various firms for favouring their financial products when rendering advice to clients.

So,

MC Most financial planners who operate on commission mislead their clients as to the commissions they earn from various firms for favouring their financial products when rendering advice to clients.

Even if successful, the most that this argument is doing is establishing a *descriptive* proposition (which has been *misidentified* as an *MC* – we will come back to this below when discussing checklist item 3) about how most financial planners on commission actually do behave. However, establishing how *widespread* some particular behaviour is is a different thing to establishing whether it is *morally right or wrong*. The author of this argument has a conclusion that is *off target*. It is not *wildly* so; it is not as if it is suddenly an argument about the weather, or the war, or the next election. The argument's conclusion looks as if it might be on target because it is, after all, talking about the disclosure relations between financial planners and clients. The trouble is it is talking about what they *are*, not what they

should be. Again, precisely focused ‘interrogation’ of the structure’s conclusion when carrying out checklist item 1 should detect the problem.

As with all of the checklist items, if you find a problem, fix it – rewrite the structure in a ‘Mark 2’ form that doesn’t have the hassle that you have identified. In the case of S1**, it would be a simple matter of turning it up the right way again. In the case of S2, it is so off-beam that it is probably a case of giving up on it as too muddled an attempt to try to cure by any simple refocusing of it to be ‘on target’.

To nail down this ‘fix the problem’ point, let’s try one more example of an off-target conclusion. Recall the discussion earlier on in the section about confusing the issue of who should decide educational aims with that of who should make detailed curricular decisions about means in service of such aims, or ends. So, say the topic we were interested in thinking about was:

‘Who should have the power to determine the broad aims that schools should be trying to achieve?’

In contribution to this, we get the following (off-target) feral.

F3

Teachers should decide their school’s subject curricula for the reason that they will work more willingly if what they are teaching is their own decision.

Say that, put as a structure (and filling in the missing MP), we get:

S3

MP It is important for all teachers to work as willingly as possible.

DP If all teachers decide their school’s subject curricula then they will work more willingly than if they don’t.

So,

MC All teachers should set their school’s subject curricula.

So, is MC on target? – no. Curricula are *means* in the service of aims which are *ends*. There might be all sorts of good reasons (and, just maybe, S3 gives one) for granting teachers power over *how to achieve* some body of aims but such reasons don’t automatically apply to the issue of granting teachers aims-*setting* power – the level and type of decision is different.

So, strictly the argument is off-target. Do we just discard it as a muddled diversion from the task at hand (much as we did with S2)? Maybe, but sometimes we can fiddle and reshape the argument’s thrust to get a sibling of it that *is* on target and is worth consideration.

Think about this one. The motivating value (in the MP) is about the importance of teachers working willingly at their tasks. Admittedly the author went off-track in talking about the role of *curricula* setting in maintaining such willingness but

mightn't *aims* setting be also causally relevant to teacher willingness? In effect, the MP principle was applied to one (off-topic) issue but might well be applicable to the one that is of interest to us as well.

Note that I'm not suggesting that the author of F3/S3 had anything like this in mind; she may just have been totally confused about the two levels of decision. But rather than simply chucking the whole thing in the bin as confused irrelevance to the issue at hand, why not see what can be usefully gained from the intuitive line followed, even if it was strictly off-target as the author offered it. I'll return to this later but, first, consider this argument:

S3a

MP It is important for all teachers to work as willingly as possible.

DP If all teachers collectively decide the broad aims governing their subject curricula, then they will work more willingly than if they don't.

So,

MC All teachers should collectively decide the broad aims governing their subject curricula.

Whatever the merits of this argument might turn out to be (and it is flawed in a way it shares with its sibling S3 – we'll come to this in the next chapter) it at least is an argument on the topic of broad aims decisions and, although not what our confused contributor had in mind, it might well be a useful on-target input to thinking on our topic.

Key Ideas (Checklist Item 1)

Ensure that your argument's *conclusion* is on target – talking about what you wanted it to. If it isn't, rewrite it so that it is. This might involve some subtlety of analysis.

Later down the track (in Chapter 5) I'll add a complication concerning this checklist item but this will do for now.

Checklist Item 2: Does Each Line of the Argument Contain Only One Proposition and Does Each Proposition Occur in Only One Place in the Argument?

One of the motivations for laying an argument out as a structure is so that you will have a clear picture of each of the bits and pieces that go to make up the argument as a whole. The idea is to have *each* of the argument's constituent propositions listed *by itself on its own line* in the structure and for it to be listed *only once*. Why bother with this? Well, first, laying them all out separately helps you to see their connections as part of a pattern of reasoning (or lack of it). Second, it helps you to identify and discard extraneous propositions that might have been in the feral but

which are really playing no role as part of the argument at all. Third, it helps you to detect redundant repetition and eliminate it. Fourth, when it comes time to criticize an argument, it makes life easier for the critic if each of the distinct propositions you are advancing as part of your case is distinctly identified and portrayed in your structure. So, doing this item well has lots of benefits for other, later, tasks.

Carrying out this checklist item is a matter of methodically looking at each of the lines in your initial structure, *one by one*, and checking that just one thing has been said. If you find a line containing two (or more) propositions, then break it up and add some lines so that each proposition has its own line. If, having done that, you look down the list and find a proposition present more than once, then eliminate the repetition. If such multiple listing all occurs in premise lines then the task is fairly simple. If you have the same proposition listed as a premise and as a conclusion line, then you have a hard think on your hands as to which is the proper role for the proposition in that argument; I would be looking back at the feral argument, playing around with inference words, thinking about what conclusion would have to be were it to be on target and so on.

In the remainder of this sub-section I wish to illustrate this checklist item and, in particular, to draw attention to two common ways in which people fail to portray an argument's propositions once only and only one per line.

One Proposition per Line

First, I will talk a little bit more about having just one proposition in each line and, in particular, about one common student error. I will describe this error as having a *compressed argument* occurring in a line. To begin with, let us revisit S1*:

S1*

MP All killing of people is wrong.

CP All abortion is the killing of people.

So,

MC All abortion is wrong.

Take a look at S1*, we have split up the argument as a whole into its separate parts. What are those parts? – basically what one is trying to prove (the conclusion) and what one offers in its proof (the premises). These separate roles for separate propositions are made explicit in the layout of tame structures. That, after all, is part of the point of having things laid out like that. Note also that each premise contains just *one* proposition; that's why we have more than one premise, so that those various distinct propositions (being advanced as components of the joint case for the conclusion) can be portrayed separately and understood (and may be criticized later) in their own right. Some of the propositions are more complex than others (see the relationship proposition in the CP or the rather involved DP of S2 as examples) but look at them and *only one thing* is said in each. So far, so familiar.

One common error among those new to structuring is to not just state the conclusion as the conclusion but to re-state one of the premises in the conclusion line as well. So what one gets in the conclusion line is not just the conclusion proposition but a premise proposition as well. Looking at it, it reads as a sort of abbreviated summary of the argument as a whole rather than *just* the conclusion – hence ‘*compressed* argument’ as a tag. Another way of putting it is that you have something like a little feral argument occurring in just the conclusion line. As an illustration try the following first go at structuring our feral abortion argument:

~S1**
 CP Abortion kills people.
 So,
 MC Abortion is wrong because it kills people.

What is wrong with ~S1**? The conclusion-proper is *just* the bit up to the word ‘because’ and what follows is a repeat of the premise again. You should pick up that this is occurring because of the inference-word ‘because’, a word that commonly says ‘Here comes a reason’ – like it does in *this* sentence. So, instead of having just one proposition in MC we have two: ‘Abortion is wrong’ and ‘Abortion kills people’. Only the first of these should be there because only the first of these is stating the *conclusion*. (I don’t know why students do this but my suspicion is that they feel compelled to use the conclusion line as a sort of a mini-summary of the whole argument; that is *not* its role however.)

The same sort of thing can occur in a premise – that is, one can have a compressed argument occurring in a premise line. As an illustration, try the following as a first go at structuring our feral abortion argument:

~S1***
 MP Killing people is wrong therefore abortion shouldn’t be permitted.
 So,
 MC No one should have an abortion.

This attempt at taming has more than one flaw but, for present purposes, our interest is with the fact that the premise contains *more than just* a premise-role proposition (the premise-proper is just the bit before the word ‘therefore’). It is a compressed argument with the conclusion proposition repeated in MP as well. This preview of the conclusion is heralded by the word ‘therefore’ and, as it happens, it is not expressed in the same terminology as it is in the conclusion-proper. I have done this in this example because one of the ways of not realizing what is going on (in this case a preview of the conclusion occurring in a premise line) is that, although it is the same idea being expressed twice, it is expressed in ways involving it being *worded differently*. If the very same turn of phrase had been used in the conclusion and in the part of the premise following the word ‘therefore’, it would jump out of the page at you a little bit more obviously and the problem would be more

apparent. So one piece of advice, that I'll return to in checklist item 4 below, is to *use the same turn of phrase every time you are expressing the same idea*. It may not look stylistically pretty but that way you'll be helped to follow what is going on in the argument and to see problems such as these.

If you find a compressed argument in any given line, then work out which bit should stay where it is and leave it there. So, in $\sim S1^{***}$, the first bit of the MP would stay where it is (and in $\sim S1^{**}$, the first bit of MC would stay where it is). Then move the proposition that shouldn't be on that line to its proper place in the argument; so, the last bit of the MP in $\sim S1^{***}$ would move to become an MC (note that it follows the word 'therefore'). Of course when you try to do that you would note that you *already* had a conclusion and, if you had your wits about you, you would realize that what you already had as conclusion said the same thing as the last bit of MP. So, as you want any proposition only to occur once, you would simply scrap the last bit of the MP. As for $\sim S1^{**}$, the last bit of the MC would move up into the premises (note that it follows the word 'because'). Having done that, when you later came to check your premises to ensure that each proposition only occurs once, you would realize that you already had that claim up in the premises and, again, you would scrap it.

Although a common fault, having a compressed argument happening in a line is not the only way of failing to have each line having just one proposition. One can have two things going on in a line without them constituting a little feral argument and again, when this happens, they are best split up and separately listed. Consider this argument:

S3

MP Competence and concern for the client's well-being are two criteria necessary for anyone being a good counsellor.

DP Horace is neither competent nor concerned for the well-being of his clients.

So,

MC Horace is not a good counsellor.

The MP contains two claims: that one necessary criterion for being a good counsellor is competence and that another necessary criterion for being a good counsellor is caring for the well-being of one's clients. The MP should be split up to become two MPs, one for each necessary criterion claim. Similarly, the DP contains two pieces of supposed information about Horace: that he is incompetent and that he is unconcerned for the well-being of his clients. Best to split them up and have two DPs. (We will revisit this and complicate matters a bit in Chapter 8 – as a bit of a preview, it may be best to conceive of S3 as not one argument but *two* independent cases for MC all mixed up together.)

No Repeated Propositions

In the above section, our focus was on checking that each line contained just one proposition; in this one, I am assuming that we have split up any compressed arguments or other cases of multiple propositions in one line and the task is now to ensure that each proposition is only listed once. How we do this is to scan down the list of propositions forming the argument structure and step by step for each of them, ask: ‘Is this said anywhere else (*perhaps in other words*)?’.

Under this heading, I would like to single out for particular attention one specific way of having one line’s proposition repeated elsewhere. The error I have in mind here is usually called: ‘a *circular argument*’. The repetition in question has the proposition forming the MC repeated somewhere up as a premise. Consider this argument:

~S1****

MP No person should ever carry out an abortion.

CP All abortion is the killing of people.

So,

MC All abortion is always wrong.

This might seem fine to you at a casual glance but *look methodically at it* and ask if any line contains a proposition that is repeated elsewhere. So, look at MP and ask if it is repeated in CP – no, it isn’t so, so far so good. Next you would look at MP again and ask yourself if it is repeated in MC. It is not immediately obvious whether this is so or not. Each line seems to be against abortion but is worded differently. What you would have to do here is have a close think about what is meant in each of these lines. Doing that would, I think, bring you to agree that they are saying the same thing (or close to it but the difference is too subtle to fuss with at this stage), just in different words. Although not apparent at first glance, we have a proposition repeated.

Although we had a problem with MP being repeated, we should then go on to check the CP in that same line-against-line way I just went through (CP with MP and then with MC). And then the same for the MC; sometimes this is repetitious of checks already carried out from the other end so to speak but it ensures that you have indeed covered the ground. You might think that there is no chance of the CP being repeated; after all, it is a *conceptual* premise and no conceptual premise can say the same as any proposition of any other type (in this case the two other propositions are moral-type). The trouble is that people sometimes mislabel propositions and call something, in this case, ‘CP’ when it is in fact a proposition of another sort (not that there’s this problem in this particular case). Anyway, *check them all against each other*. And, even though you have found a problem in this case with MP there might be another problem focused on CP. I will return to this business of mislabelled propositions below.

When you have an argument that has the conclusion repeated as one of the premises, it is, as noted, commonly called ‘circular’ by logicians. Why? – because the reasoning moves in a circle ending up (in the conclusion) with what it began with (as a premise). Have a look at our above structure. Once you realize that the MP and the MC say the same thing, then you can see that the argument is just going around in circles. A premise is supposed to be part of a rationale, a reason for accepting some other proposition (the conclusion) and it is hardly going to do that job very well if it is a rewrite of the conclusion. This might sound like such an implausibly silly bungle that it is hardly worth drawing to your attention but I have found it to be a fairly frequent error. I think that what traps people is expressing the same proposition with two different sentence forms and not realizing that they *are* just two ways of saying the *same* thing. Had the argument said:

MP All abortion is always wrong.

So,

MC All abortion is always wrong.

then it would be blatantly obvious that it is a useless piece of reasoning as a case for saying why all abortion is always wrong. Even if we made it less stark by adding in the CP that we had before, it would still be pretty obviously a useless argument. All that potentially tricks us in $\sim S1^{****}$ is the form of words.

So, what should be done in the face of a circular argument? Our rule is to have no repetition of a proposition in the lines of an argument so, either we scrap MP or we scrap MC but which one? Remember that, by the time we get to this checklist item, we have already carried out some earlier ones. (There is a point to doing the checklist in order.) In particular, in the first checklist item we checked whether the conclusion was on target, was talking about what it was supposed to be talking about. So, presumably, we have satisfied ourselves that the conclusion is OK. That leaves MP as the proposition to be discarded. Mind you, this is a pretty sad result because what we were trying to do with the argument was back up MC by appealing to some deeper value principle in support of it. Now we will simply have a blank line. How can you fill in a new MP so that you do not have a circular argument? Go back to the sub-section: Laying Out a Structure and you’ll find some techniques.

Before I close on this section, I wish to block a possible misconception about circular arguments. I’ve said that a circular argument is an argument in which the MC proposition is repeated as a premise. What about this argument?

MP All hospitals should ensure that their patients have confidence in the competence of staff members.

DP If hospitals ensure that staff members do not engage in disagreements in the hearing of patients, then patients will have confidence in the competence of staff members.

So,

MC All hospitals should ensure that their staff members do not engage in disagreements in the hearing of patients.

You might look at this argument when checking for a circular argument and become suspicious of what you take to be repetitious turns of phrase when you look at the sort of thing said in the first bit of the DP (up to the comma) and in the MC. Admittedly, it's the DP and the MC, rather than the more usual focus on the MP and the MC, that are potentially causing the problem but it might still catch your eye. As it happens, there isn't a problem. Look closely at the DP and it is not as if the first bit is a proposition in its own right. It is a mere fragment of a more complex if-then relational proposition asserting a causal link between witnessed disagreements and loss of confidence. In any event, as already noted, even as a fragment it is a fragment of a *descriptive* proposition. If it was going to be a repetition of the proposition of MC then it would have to be a *moral* proposition. A close examination should assure you that it isn't. So, in short, beware of too quickly and too sloppily claiming a circular argument to be present just on the basis of some similar looking turns of phrase – *analyse* things.

As a final reminder on circular arguments, remember not to think of the so-labelled MP as the only source of possible repetition of the conclusion MC. Some other premise might well be *mislabelled* (see next checklist item) and be actually a moral proposition and thus be a candidate for possibly saying the same thing as the MC.

Although I have focused upon potential circular arguments in which the MC is repeated somewhere in the premises, this is just a particularly troublesome case of proposition repetition. You might merely get a proposition repeated in more than one premise. It might not matter all that much but even fairly harmless repetition is cluttered and may interfere with you seeing the 'flow' of argumentation going on. So, *check* and weed out any such repetition.

Key Ideas (Checklist Item 2)

Every line should contain *just one* proposition (check especially for so-called 'compressed arguments') *and* no proposition should occur more than once (check especially for so-called 'circular arguments').

Checklist Item 3: Is Each Line of the Argument Correctly Identified as to Proposition Type?

Once you have all of the bits and pieces of the argument laid out with each appearing on only one line and with only one proposition in any given line, you are a position to check that you have each line's proposition properly categorized. This might be quite a brief check as, in getting this far, you have had to think about these matters to some extent. It is still worth spending time to focus on this in its own right, however, because misconstruing and mislabelling the *type* of proposition in the given line is surprisingly common among beginning reasoners. The task is important because, in a little while, we will be wanting to consider mounting criticisms against an argument and one sort of criticism is criticizing the premises. Criticizing a moral proposition is a very different thing to criticizing a descriptive proposition and different again to criticizing a conceptual proposition. Misunderstand the nature of the target of your criticism and your criticism will be inappropriate.

So, if you look back at Chapter 2, we had three basic proposition types (descriptive, moral and conceptual) and then two extra types built out of them (mixed and ambiguous).

Recall that mixed propositions were ones where we had more than one proposition going on in a sentence and the two (or more) propositions that were bundled together were of different types (a descriptive proposition entangled with a moral one or whatever). Given the methodical care with which you will, hopefully, have carried out checklist item 2, any mixed proposition that was there in the feral or in an early version of the structure will presumably have been split up into its component bits and those component bits each allocated a line. So, in effect, mixed propositions should be out of the story by now.

Ambiguous propositions might still be there, sitting on a line, but presumably, as you will have a label ('MP', 'DP' or whatever) for the proposition, you will have resolved which way it was to have been taken so, presumably, the ambiguity has been resolved. It is not as if you will have a line with the label 'AP' (for ambiguous premise).

The upshot of this is that the only labels you will see as you move down the list of *premise* lines are 'DP', 'MP' and 'CP'. In the types of argument we will be (primarily) considering, your conclusion will be some sort of moral proposition about what is right or wrong, or should or should not be done, or is more or less important than something else. (I say 'primarily' because, as I will explore in Chapter 5, there are other sorts of arguments that crop up in discussions of professional ethical issues. I won't talk about these now because I don't want to muddy the waters at this early stage.) And, if your conclusion is a moral proposition, there will also have to be a moral proposition as one of the premises. This is because you can't pluck a moral conclusion out at the end of an argument unless you have fed another moral proposition in at the start as a premise. So, what

you would expect to see in each of your argument structures is the conclusion labelled ‘MC’ and one (or more) of the premises labelled ‘MP’.

As for the other sorts of proposition that might be present, as I have just noted, all that is left is the possibility of a descriptive premise and/or a conceptual premise. Although there will always have to be an MP if there is an MC, what else is present in the premises depends upon the particular argument. *Very* commonly, your structure will contain a descriptive premise (as well as a moral premise and a moral conclusion). Sometimes, however, there won’t be a descriptive premise, there will be conceptual premise instead (we saw an instance of this in an abortion argument above). Or there might be a medley of propositions of different types and more than one of some types. Finally, in some cases the argument might *just* have one premise, an MP. Very much the most common pattern for arguments in professional ethics is one MP, one DP and the MC but it is not the only possibility. In the next section, I will talk a bit more about structure patterns that are common in professional ethical discussions.

All of that said, whatever you have listed and labelled in the structure that you are looking at, you should have all of those individual propositions correctly understood and *correctly* labelled to reflect that understanding. So, the task here is to see if you are indeed identifying, and labelling, each line correctly. How would you know? – As you might guess by now, by *methodically checking* your structure, line by line. So, if you had a premise line *labelled* ‘MP’, you would ask yourself: ‘Is this *really* a moral proposition at all?’. How would you tell? – by employing the techniques spoken of in the last chapter (hunting for moral clue words and so on). If it is correctly labelled, then, fine, on you go to the next line; if it is incorrectly labelled, then you change the labels so that it is correctly labelled. And so on down the list of propositions constituting the argument. As a result of this scrutiny and the changes it might lead to, you might end up with an argument that requires some rethinking. For instance, as the vast preponderance of your conclusions will be moral propositions, your premises will have to contain a moral premise and you might have thought that you had one and then discover that it was misidentified and now you are left without any proper MP at all. In such a case, you have to try to work out what the missing MP is (the sub-section: Laying out a Structure went into this).

Key Ideas (Checklist Item 3)

Methodically analyse each line in your argument structure to ascertain whether your first go at classifying/labelling it is correct or not. If necessary, re-label it.

Checklist Item 4: Do the Various Lines of the Argument ‘Mesh’ Together to Form One Coherent Piece of Reasoning?

Remember that the role of taming (and thus of this checklist) is to get the argument into good enough shape to portray your, or others’, ideas clearly and, in particular, to be to be coherently enough put to be worth subjecting to serious critical scrutiny. As a preliminary to a good hard think about the quality of an argument’s reasoning (which we will come to in a later chapter) it is an idea to just *roughly* check that it hangs together as a piece of reasoning at an ‘at first glance’ level. Is there a connection of ideas from line to line? Can you see it as one fairly coherent case rather than a jumble of independent propositions vaguely on the same topic? That is what I mean by an argument ‘meshing’. The task here is to do a preliminary screening prior to more rigorous examination of the worth of its reasoning. It is hardly worth carrying out a more sophisticated critical examination if the argument is not even to ‘first base’ as a piece of connected reasoning.

As exemplification of what I have in mind by an argument which ‘meshes’, let’s return to S1*.

S1*

MP All killing of people is wrong.

CP All abortion is the killing of people.

So,

MC All abortion is wrong.

We have one value judgement given in the conclusion which is based on another, broader, moral stance, that outlined in the MP; the conclusion has as its key concept: ‘abortion’ and the MP: ‘the killing of people’. How does S1* get from one idea to the other? That is the role of the CP. It acts to connect, or *mesh together*, the propositions forming the MP and the conclusion. So have a look at S1* again, this time focusing on the CP. Note how it acts to join the MP and the conclusion together by asserting that what is talked of in the conclusion (abortion) is a case in point of what’s talked of in the MP (killing people). You are helped to see that this is so by S1* doing what I spoke of earlier – that is, using the same words for the same idea as much as one can. In this case, you can see ‘killing people’ as a common idea in the two premises (and which acts to connect them) and ‘abortion’ as a common idea in the CP and the conclusion (and acts to connect them).

Let’s try another example, one that is a little bit more complicated and which doesn’t quite mesh. Consider:

S4

MP Telling lies to avoid frightening someone is always right.

DP Informing seriously ill patients of their illness will usually frighten them.

So,

MC Telling lies to seriously ill patients about their condition is usually right.

S4 is not wildly disconnected but tidying it up a bit would assist you to later appraise it. Looking at DP, we get the turn of phrase: ‘of their illness’ and in MC, we get the turn of phrase: ‘about their condition’. This is no big deal and seems to be a case of the same idea being got at by two forms of words but it is an easy tidy up and, as I said, you make life easier for yourself by having the language aligning as much as possible. I would tidy this one up as:

S4*

MP Telling lies to avoid frightening someone is always right.

DP Informing seriously ill patients about their condition will usually frighten them.

So,

MC Telling lies to seriously ill patients about their condition is usually right.

First thing to re-emphasize is how I have again written this so that, as much as possible, I am using the same turn of phrase each time I express the same idea. It makes the sentences a bit clumsy at times but it is a great help in seeing how one proposition connects with another. You might still have qualms here in that I have used ‘always’ in the MP but ‘usually’ in the other two lines. Fussing about whether this is how you want things to be or not is a later task that we will come to in the next chapter. For now, don’t fuss about it when doing this checklist item. Such words expressing how *much* of something or how *many* (usually called ‘*quantifiers*’ – as in quantity) don’t have to be the same everywhere in an argument for the argument to be OK and attending to them at the moment under the heading of ‘mesh’ is not profitable. So don’t fuss about aligning such words (others are ‘all’, ‘only’, ‘most’ and so forth) up and down the argument that this stage. I’ll revisit the issue of quantifiers in the section: Clarifying Whole Propositions and in Chapter 4.

In the case of S4*, you can see that the MP advances a quite general moral principle that telling a certain sort of lie (‘fright-avoiding’) is always right. The DP gives an instance of something (informing ...) that would be covered by this principle about right action and so, in the MC, the argument concludes that an opposite to it is right. Note that there is talk of telling lies in one place and informing in the other. Despite this, these more or less connect up if one allows for one being a negative of the other (telling lies is *mis*-informing). So, the argument does have its bits and pieces connecting up, or ‘meshing’, as I call it.

So, for this checklist item, you are looking for *linkage* among the bits and pieces of the argument so that you get one flowing case and helping yourself to see such a linkage by *aligning the language* (except, at this stage, for quantifiers).

Also, check for disconnected bits and pieces that *mesh nowhere*. If you have a proposition that doesn't connect with *anything* else, then that is an instant non-mesh problem. For instance, say that we were checking out the following structure for mesh:

S4a

MP Telling lies to avoid frightening someone is always right.

DP1 Informing seriously ill patients of their illness will usually frighten them.

DP2 Informing seriously ill patients of their illness is against the wishes of some close relatives.

So,

MC Telling lies to seriously ill patients about their condition is usually right.

What is different in this argument compared to S4 is the extra DP, DP2. If you check for connectedness, then the last bit, about the relatives, connects to nothing else. DP2 is the only place we hear about that. So, having found this problem we fix it up. In this case, I would remove the offending premise as not part of this line of reasoning and mentally park it as possibly a second, independent, ground for lying to seriously ill patients about their illness.

S1* and S4 both exemplify one of the two broad generic patterns that our arguments about what is right or wrong, or should or should not be done, commonly take. I will call this first pattern of argument: '*set inclusion arguments*'.

Set Inclusion Arguments

There are variations among the arguments that fit this broad pattern but, for most ones that you will come across in applied ethics, the general idea is something like the following.

In the MP, we have some fairly general moral principle advanced then, in the DP, we have some more particular situation, type of situation, or person's action connected to what the general proposition is about, in virtue of the former being a sub-set of, or an instance of, the sort of thing being talked about in the latter. Finally, in the MC, we have a proposition stating the author's view as to the result of applying that general moral principle to that more particular case. Laid out as a structure schema, we get:

MP A fairly general moral principle outlined.

D/CPA more particular situation (etc.) brought under the umbrella of that principle.

So,

MC A judgement about that more particular situation (etc.) made.

Have a reread of S1* and of S4* and you should be able to follow what's happening in those arguments in the above terms – although S4* is a bit tricky. Note how the bits and pieces of the arguments hang together and note how you are assisted in

realizing that those bits and pieces hang together by *realizing* that the argument is a set inclusion argument and *deliberately looking for* a pattern of connections that aligns with the schema just outlined above.

I said above that there were *two* common generic patterns of argument that occurred in discussions trying to establish some moral proposition as conclusion. As we've just seen, the first I have called: '*set inclusion arguments*'. The second sort I will call: '*means/end*' arguments.

Means/End Arguments

I call them this because, looking at such arguments, you'll find that the MP lists some sort of outcome, or end, to be achieved (or avoided, it depends on the particular argument). Then the DP (it's *usually* a descriptive premise but, as we have seen earlier, other claim types can do this as well) connects some action as a means to achieving that end, or a means to avoiding the end, or whatever (again, details vary as to just what sort of connection it is). Finally, the MC says something about that 'means' action (that it be carried out, that it be avoided, or whatever – again the details vary). So, these arguments follow a schema as follows:

MP 'End' proposition.
 DP 'Means/End' link proposition.
 So,
 MC 'Means' proposition.

To illustrate, consider the following argument:

S5
 MP It is important for school-leavers to be employable.
 DP If schools devote their energies to making school-leavers employable then this is a way of increasing the employability of school-leavers.
 So,
 MC Schools should devote their energies to making school-leavers employable.

This argument's MP sets out an end, having school-leavers employable, which is considered important. Then, in the DP, we are told a way of increasing the achievement of that end, namely having schools devote their energies to achieving it. Finally, the conclusion advocates schools doing just that, namely adopting that means (for achieving that end). Note how the bits and pieces of the argument hang together and note how you're assisted in realizing that those bits and pieces hang together by *realizing* that the argument is a means/end argument and *deliberately looking for* a pattern of connections that aligns with the schema outlined above.

Let's try another argument that exemplifies this second common pattern of reasoning. Say someone were to advance this argument, this time in *favour* of abortion, as follows:

F6

Abortion should be allowed as forbidding it will lead to lowering the status of women.

Structuring it, with a little bit of tidying, say that we got:

S6

MP It is very important that the status of women is not lowered.

DP Forbidding abortion will cause lowering of the status of women.

So,

MC One should not forbid abortion.

At the cost of some clumsiness of wording, the merit of S6 is again that one can see how the bits and pieces of the argument fit together. On the assumption that ‘allowing’ and ‘not forbidding’ are the same idea, I could have used ‘allow’ in the conclusion (‘one should *allow* abortion’) much as it was in the feral F6, but then it would not have so obviously meshed with the DP terminology. (Of course, I could have achieved much the same level of terminological linkage by wording things in ‘allow’ talk in each place; it doesn’t much matter which way you jump.) The reasoning quality of S6 is not perfect (we’ll come to examining such matters later – it commits one of the common errors we will look at in Chapter 4) but at least the argument isn’t a disjointed mess; it hangs together well enough to be worth thinking further about and that’s all we’re attempting to achieve in getting an argument to at least be in mesh.

I said that I chose F2 as illustrative of our second common pattern of argument concerning what it is right and wrong to do or think. I’d like to spend a moment going back over these two types of pattern.

Look back at F1 and its tame version S1* and recall that it is a case of relating things by *set inclusion*. Abortion was argued against by asserting that it was included in a set of events, the killing of people, that the arguer thought bad. In effect, what was happening was the arguer saying: ‘I’m against killing people and abortion is just a case in point so I’m against abortion’. S4, on the other hand, is a version of a ‘*means/end*’ argument. What is said is: ‘I’m morally against (the end of) lowering the status of women and forbidding abortions is a means to that (bad) end so I’m against that means, against forbidding abortions’. Of course one can have good ends and favoured means featuring as well in other variations of the same broad pattern, much as one could have set inclusion styles of argument with the MP citing a set of good, not bad, states of affairs. These broad types of common argument are worth remembering, as having them in your mind helps you in trying to get your own structures meshing.

Key Ideas (Checklist Item 4)

Getting things in *mesh* is a matter of getting all of the key component ideas connecting up in the right way. Any idea anywhere should connect to the same idea in at least one other place. Keeping in mind that most arguments that you will come across, or generate, on professional ethical topics will be either some form of *set-inclusion* argument or some form of *means/end* argument, it is a good idea to think about any candidate argument in terms of whether it fits one or the other broad pattern. Doing this will help you look for connections in the right places.

So much for some thoughts on meshing; it is the hardest thing to get right when taming arguments.

Summary Remarks on the Checklist

So there is the taming checklist. Once you have your initial intuitive feral argument laid out into an initial structure, *methodically* carrying out those four checklist items, *one after the other in turn*, is a hugely powerful way of ending up with a halfway-decent tame structure. The checklist is not so much *difficult* to apply as it is *laborious* and requiring *care* but the labour bears dividends. When it is *your* argument that is being tamed, then it is a benefit for you in getting a better understanding of what you're trying to say and thus of later discovering possible weak points in your thinking. And the same goes for others trying to grapple with your ideas. When it is someone else's feral argument that you're trying to lay out in a structure and render tame, one worry that you might have is that, when you find a problem with their structure and fix it up, you might feel you are distorting the original. This is quite possibly so but I don't think you should be deterred by that from fixing it up. One way of thinking of it is that you have become co-author, concerned to get the argument from its present unsatisfactory state into a better version. And why not do that? After all, if the original argument, even when initially structured, is a mess then it is not a viable contribution to the enquiry in its present state. Yet, unsatisfactory though it currently is, some version or other of that original feral intuition might well be a viable contribution – even if it is not quite what the original author meant. Throwing the original totally in the bin because it's a mess might be to lose a potentially valuable contribution when all it needed was a bit of a tidy up and rewrite. I can't see why an author wouldn't welcome such 'distortion' of their ideas to get a better version.

Clarifying Key Ideas and Whole Propositions

Apart from having arguments tame, another task is that of having the various bits and pieces present in the argument clearly understood. We have done this in part in

the section: A Checklist for Checking Argument Structures for Tameness above but, even if we have done the checklist properly and fixed up any errors, it might *still* not be quite clear what is being said. Such obscurities should be clarified. Unless they are, the argument is not much of a contribution to the enquiry. In particular, much as was remarked in the section: A Checklist for Checking Argument Structures for Tameness, it will be rather difficult for anyone to critically react to an argument key parts of which are unclear. Obscurities tend to come in two sorts. The first concerns an individual word or turn of phrase (especially important if it expresses some key idea in the argument). The second is where the obscurity is not so much with any particular word, or turn of phrase, so much as with the whole sentence. I'll speak about each of these in turn.

Clarifying Key Ideas

The above argument concerning abortion is a classic of this type. What does the author have in mind as counting as an abortion? Would the administering a 'morning after' pill (which prevents implantation) count as inducing an abortion? And, an issue of notorious controversy, what counts as a person? – anything that is a genetic member of the human species? even if it is a two-celled organism (as a conceptus initially is)? *All* of your structures will contain key ideas, some of which will need a little bit of pinning down in order for it to be clear what is said. Sometimes it's just a matter of choosing another, equally brief, word or phrase to substitute for the dubious one in question. However my suggestion is that you do not bother always doing this clarification *within* the structure as it would make it read very clumsily a lot of the time because it would *not* be equally brief. Rather, do it in a couple of explanatory sentences in an accompanying paragraph. In effect, this is your '*working definition*' of that idea; you are laying down how you are wishing to be understood by your use of, say, 'person'. It is, though, only a working definition, an *initial* attempt at pinning an idea down, enough to be going on with for now in clarifying some argument so we can get on with our more important intellectual work of appraising its worth. It might well be that, later on in the continuing enquiry into your topic, you have to revisit the just-established understanding of the concept and further clarify matters or change things somewhat. That doesn't matter; a working definition is only an *initial* clarified understanding of what you are saying that you are advancing, one that allows you to press on for now with your intellectual work. Nonetheless, the working definition that you have set up is one that stands until an explicit and deliberate later revision is carried out (if there is one).

So far my main emphasis has been upon you clarifying your *own* arguments and certainly the task of crafting your own arguments as well as possible is a key focus of this book. However, as I've noted earlier, sometimes what you are trying to make sense of is *someone else's* argument. Sometimes, when someone else's argument is unclear, you can simply ask the arguer to clarify things. Sometimes though, that is impossible. It might be, for instance, an argument contained in

some document that you are reading. In such a case, you can hardly make use of the argument as a contribution to your own thinking on your topic until you have a better idea of what it means. Sometimes, with a bit of thought, you are fairly confident of some interpretation you are making of some key idea and sometimes you are less confident. Either way, some sort of interpretation has to be implemented by you for you to be able to make any use of the argument at all. Perhaps it is not quite what the author meant (and perhaps the author was muddled and didn't mean anything very clear in the first place) but if your main interest in the argument is as *a contribution to your own thinking* then, provided you make it clear that this is your interpretation of it, then set up your own working definition and press on. Remember that, however some idea gets pinned down in a working definition, that is what it is to be understood as meaning in every place it occurs in the enquiry (and no matter by which participants) unless explicit revision occurs. Sliding around with having various construals of some term or phrase in play in the one enquiry (especially if no one notices that this is happening) makes the whole exercise a waste of time. *Clarify things!* It is rarely wasted time (unless, of course, it is already dead obvious what is meant).

In Chapter 5 I'll be revisiting this discussion of working definitions in the context of talking about criticizing conceptual premises but those complications can be left to one side for now.

Key Ideas

If individual terms or phrases in an argument are unclear in meaning, then set up a working definition to establish how they are to be taken in the current enquiry.

Clarifying Whole Propositions

Sometimes it's not so much some individual word like 'person' that is unclear and demanding of a working definition. Sometimes it's more the obscurity of a *whole proposition*, one forming a premise or conclusion in an argument structure. For instance, say a premise in some argument was:

'Teachers are educational experts'.

Apart from it being unclear (and thus deserving of a working definition) what is to count as 'an educational expert', there is *another* obscurity here, one to do with the *structure of the whole sentence*. Have a look at 'teachers'; what is meant by 'teachers' might be clear enough but does the sentence express the proposition:

‘All teachers are educational experts’, or
 ‘Only teachers are educational experts’ or
 ‘All and only teachers are educational experts’, or:
 ‘Most teachers are educational experts’ or what?

How this gets clarified has considerable effect upon the role which it can play in an argument and upon your chances of criticizing it successfully. The italicized words are usually called ‘*quantifiers*’. My first suggestion is that you explicitly insert such quantifiers where they are absent so that the scope of what is talked about in the proposition is clearer to readers/hearers (and sometimes to yourself). We touched on this in the section: Laying Out a Structure.

Other obscurities concerning what proposition is being put by a particular whole sentence can be because of the way in which the sentence has been constructed but the ways in which such lack of clarity can arise are legion (too many to itemize here) and I can only suggest that you very carefully examine each line in your argument, asking yourself: ‘*Is it perfectly clear and unambiguous what proposition is being advanced by this sentence?*’. If it isn’t, and it is *your* argument then rewrite it so that it does say clearly what you want to say. If it is *someone else’s* argument, then you have to make some clearer interpretation of it, much as spoken of above in the previous sub-section.

Key Ideas

Sometimes murkiness is at the level of whole propositions (particularly because of missing quantifiers); make sure that what is said is not open to misinterpretation.

Summary Remarks and Prelude to Following Chapters

So, my suggestion to you is that you lay out feral arguments as structures and then proceed to *tame* those structures in a *very methodical checklist-style* manner, moving one by one, explicitly and carefully, through the items listed and explained above and modifying the structure as you go if you find flaws. Then, look at each line of your tame structure in turn and ensure that it is *clear* just what proposition is being advanced there. Hopefully, at the end of that process you will fairly reliably have arguments that are well enough expressed to be considered worthy candidate contributions to your thinking on your topic and the thinking of others who are engaging with your ideas. Of course, having your arguments tame and clear is, as I have said, a preliminary matter – an unavoidable preliminary matter, but only a prelude to the more important task of trying to ascertain whether the tame and clear argument is worthy of acceptance. And you will not know how worthy it is until you have tried to criticize it.

Sometimes the business of argumentation is presented as if the participants are in some sort of adversarial contest and the task is to win the debate. There are indeed situations where argument is a tool of *persuasion* but that is not the case when one is trying to sort out a defensible position on some ethical matter of professional interest. After all, one might *win* a dispute *even though* one had *bad* reasons for one's stance. All that is required is rhetorical skill and/or that one's dialogical opponent is too dim-witted to realize the flaws in one's reasoning. In such a case, winning is an empty victory. One would be left believing in some professional ethical stance that is, perhaps, flawed yet, just because one could overawe one's opponents, the flaw is undetected. Better, I suggest, that one considers the critic of one's argument, not as an opponent to be beaten but as a colleague who might do one the service of detecting flaws in one's thinking (a 'critical friend' as it is sometimes put). And, if any such flaw is undetected, why on earth would this be a matter to be resisted? Why desire to cling to a flawed view just because the flaws are pointed out by someone else?

In short, my suggestion is that, when thinking about professional ethical issues, one should consider all views and arguments as fair-mindedly and thoroughly as possible and, if that means accepting a criticism that seems sound and abandoning one's initial view, then so be it; surely to move away from a mistaken view is progress! And if the criticism itself is faulty then that is also something to be 'teased out' (as we will explore in Chapter 6) but you won't know whether it is really faulty or not unless you have had the integrity to express it in its strongest and clearest form first.

So, my first message here is that the primary task in professional ethics is to work out the *best answer* that one can. Thus, criticism of your views should be welcomed because it might help you to improve them.

So far, so good; but what if there isn't a critic 'falling readily to hand' to give your arguments a critical 'going over'? If you are unprofessional and dumb enough to be in 'debate winning' mode, then that is terrific. No challenger, then no challenge, and you win by default. But if you are in 'best answer' seeking mode, such complacency is dangerous – your views might simply be wrong. The solution is *self-criticism*.

To do this, you have to put yourself in the mind of a critic and try to work out how your pet argument might be disagreed with. One of the intellectual 'skills *cum* habits of thought' which I am attempting to foster is that of fair-minded consideration of objections to your own views. As helpful critics do not always fall readily to hand, part of this is being able to self-criticize, being able to put yourself in the mind of a critic and imagine how, say, your pet premise might be disagreed with or the reasoning of your argument might be illogical. Clearly, in mounting criticisms against yourself, you will want the best and most plausible critical arguments possible; for, if you settle for anything less, you will not have properly critically probed your position and thus run a larger risk of acting in a way which, had you given it more careful analysis, you might have deemed unwarranted.

So, getting an argument tame and clear is but a preliminary matter and the real task is *appraising* arguments fair-mindedly and thoroughly; in the next chapters, we'll proceed on to considering such critical scrutiny of arguments.