

Chapter 5

Subjecting Arguments to Criticism: Premise Criticism

Introductory Remarks

Clearly, whatever the topic is, you want the arguments upon which you might base your judgements to be as sound as possible. Partly, as we saw in the last chapter, this is a matter of them being logically tight, or valid. But, as noted earlier, it is also a matter of the argument's starting points, or premises, being sound. No argument is much support for its conclusion if its premises are to be rejected. Such an argument would be 'built upon sand'. To illustrate, say we had the following, logically impeccable, argument.

MP All killers should be hanged.

DP Kathleen is a killer.

So,

MC Kathleen should be hanged.

Despite it being logically valid, it would provide a very poor case for its conclusion if you rejected the MP as unacceptable (what if, although someone had killed, it was in self defence, should that person then be hanged?) or rejected the DP as false (what if you know that Kathleen had an alibi for the time in question?). If either premise is unacceptable, then the argument fails to support the conclusion claim even though that claim (that Kathleen should be hanged) certainly *logically follows* from the two premises.

So, how can one tell when arguments have poor premises? The quick answer is: 'with difficulty'. For some premises, it can be quite an elaborate affair trying to appraise their soundness but you can only do the best job you can, in the time available, according to how important the issue is to you.

One good way of seeing how good a premise is, is to try *challenging* that premise. Try mounting a criticism against it and see if it can withstand that criticism. So, what is it to mount a criticism against a *premise*? In essence, it is to craft *another* argument, one *targeted at the premise* in question. In the sorts of arguments which we will be examining, and considering creating, there will commonly be two sorts of premise – descriptive and moral (although some will feature a conceptual premise – we saw a case of this in Chapter 3 with S1*).

As I mentioned in the last chapter, I am lumping these premise types together to contrast premise criticism and logic criticism, but it turns out that, within the

generic task of premise criticism, the sort of thing that one might appeal to in criticizing a DP is different to that appealed to in criticizing an MP and different again for a CP. As will emerge below, this is due to the distinct nature of these propositional *types*.

Despite these differences, there is a similarity in the broad ‘architecture’ of premise criticism and I will outline that below.

To illustrate, let’s try criticizing the premises of this argument:

5-A1

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

CP To instil any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person’s freedom of thought on that matter.

DP All of St Crispin’s religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

So,

MC None of St Crispin’s religious education curriculum should be taught to those students.

As you might guess, I crafted this argument so that it had a premise of each of our main types (something that is unusual). I have also made sure that it is logical (try an invalidity test: there is no way that one could deny the conclusion, yet accept the premises, without contradiction).

I will work through criticizing each of these distinct types of premise in turn beginning with criticism of the *descriptive* premise as my guess is that you are more familiar with the task of criticizing descriptive propositions than criticizing either of our other two types. I will also use discussion of this type of premise to illustrate the common ‘architecture’ of *any* premise criticism.

Key Ideas

Arguments can fail through having flawed logic and/or flawed premises. A key way of appraising the worth of arguments’ premises is by subjecting them to criticism. Although the broad approach to premise criticism is common across the three premise types, the detail of what is mounted as a critical argument varies with those types.

So, how might one criticize the DP of 5-A1?

Descriptive Premise Criticism

To mount a criticism of DP is to *argue* that *it* is false. This means that the *conclusion* of the *critic’s* argument will be some sort of opposite of the claim made by DP.

(As usual, if you are crafting such an argument you are probably wise to portray it ferally first, put it into initial structured form and then methodically make it tame and clear and logical.) So, in this case, the opposing claim has to be something like claiming that the curriculum does *not* instil religious belief (or not all of it does, or ...). What could one have in mind here by way of a critical argument?

Well, you would have a better idea were this not to be a somewhat contrived ‘made-up’ example and you knew something about St Crispin’s but try this: say that the truth were that they have *changed* their curriculum recently and although it used to be successful by way of indoctrination of religious belief into students, the new curriculum isn’t. So, in effect, one would be suggesting that the author’s information about what the school was doing is out of date.

Or, as a separate line of complaint, one might simply deny that any instilling, as opposed to *attempted* instilling, of belief actually results. In short, one might accuse the curriculum of more ineffectiveness than the author seems to believe.

Or, as the claim is that *all* of the curriculum instils belief (at least in some students) one might deny this as too sweeping by saying that *only some* of the curriculum has that effect, that it is a ‘mixed bag’.

As I said, just what sort of criticism, if any, one would mount against DP would depend on one’s understanding of the facts of the matter and thus which aspect of DP one considered open to dispute. Let’s assume that our main hesitations are along the lines of the ‘mixed-bag’ point last mentioned. Given this, I might criticize DP as follows:

Some of the St Crispin’s religious education curriculum does *not* instil religious belief in any of its students *because* it merely portrays the history of the Christian religion.

Laying this feral argument out as a tame and logical structure (and inserting a missing premise) we get:

5-CA1

CDP1 Some of the St Crispin’s religious education curriculum merely portrays the history of the Christian religion to students.

CDP2 To merely portray the history of some religion to students does not result in that religion being instilled in any of the students.

So,

CDC *Not all* of St Crispin’s religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

Have a look at this argument and you should see that it gives reasons for concluding that the DP of 5-A1 is false.

As is familiar by now I trust, with descriptive premises the author is trying to give a true description of the world. For many of the assertions that you will be making, there will be a suitable research literature to consult. But has that

literature been properly accessed and understood? It is not uncommon for there to be conflicting, or seemingly conflicting, suggestions from the literature on some issue, especially if the phenomenon is complex. There is quite a skill to the sort of research literacy that can tap into and apply such literature to some issue of interest. The author simply might have got it wrong and descriptive premise criticism is an opportunity to probe her claim – perhaps by more sophisticated deployment of the relevant research literature.

For instance, many of the arguments that crop up in discussions of problems in professional ethics are what I called means/ends arguments. In such arguments the descriptive premise linking the MP and the conclusion is usually some sort of cause/effect claim. The cause/effect link might be overstated. Try this as such a premise in some argument:

DP1 If one is cheated by a business then one does not return.

Plausibly, this is simply false and could be objected to by pointing to studies establishing less sweeping claims in which some customers, even though cheated, nonetheless return.

Key Ideas

In criticizing a descriptive premise, one *argues* that the author has ‘got her facts wrong’. This involves crafting a critical argument the *conclusion* of which contradicts the target argument’s *DP*.

The Common ‘Architecture’ of Premise Criticism

I said above that I would use the scenario of criticism of the *descriptive* premise to illustrate the common ‘architecture’ of the process of criticizing *any* type of premise.

The *major thing to note* is that the conclusion of the critic’s argument (in the above case, CDC – for ‘critic’s descriptive conclusion’) is a form of contradiction of the premise that is the target of criticism (in this case, the DP of 5-A1). If CDC is true, then DP is false. This ‘CDC contradicts DP’, or, more generally, having *the critic’s argument’s conclusion contradicting the ‘target’ premise in the criticized argument* is the key feature of premise criticism of any sort. That point satisfied, the rest of the critic’s argument (its premises) provides support for that denial.

Of course, having mounted a critical argument, one wants the critic’s argument, like any other, to be tame and logical and clear. But it is not even worth checking that it has all of these good features unless it is *properly targeted*. If its conclusion is not ‘on target’ in the sense of denying the target premise, then it isn’t even ‘getting to first base’ by way of doing the task that it is supposed to be doing.

Any argument advanced as an exercise in *premise criticism* had better be doing just that – premise criticism!

On this point, if you think back to the ‘taming checklist’ of Chapter 3 (*Checklist Item 1: Is the Conclusion on Target?*), I said that I would revisit this first of the checklist items later in the book. This is one such later place. The critic’s arguments, like any others, should be made tame, logical and clear. Recall that this was to be an *automatic* tidy up of them as contributions to an enquiry. So, as soon as one had laid one’s feral criticism out as a tentative initial structure, one was to be carrying out the checklist check of its tameness. The first item on that checklist is: ‘Is the conclusion on target?’. What counts as the conclusion of the *critic’s* argument being *on target* is that its conclusion contradicts the target premise (in the above case, CDC contradicting DP of 5-A1). Perhaps I’m over-labouring this point but note it well; it is commonly lost sight of (and I will revisit it below).

To help avoid going down a mis-targeted side path, I suggest that you determine the conclusion of the critic’s argument first and check that it is indeed ‘on target’ before going any further; only then craft your supporting case for that critical conclusion.

Key Ideas

Don’t forget: the *conclusion* of the critic’s ‘premise criticism’ argument must contradict the challenged, or *target*, *premise* of the argument being subjected to premise criticism. To help ensure this, write down the conclusion of the critic’s argument first and check that it does indeed deny the premise that it is supposed to.

So much for the general architecture of premise criticism. Let’s see what such criticism looks like when its target is one or other of our other two premise types.

Conceptual Premise Criticism

Challenging a conceptual premise has the same general architecture as challenging a descriptive premise but the sort of thing going on in the challenge is different because of the different *type* of premise being criticized. As that target premise is a *conceptual*-type proposition, its denial (the critic’s argument’s conclusion) will also have to be conceptual-type. (A proposition of one type can’t contradict a proposition of another.)

So, compared to our above challenge to our DP, this time we won’t be disputing the author’s factual claims. Rather, we will challenge her conception of the *connection between ideas*. What do I mean by this? It is not easy to explain briefly but here goes.

Basically, when one starts to challenge a conceptual premise, one is engaging in an exercise usually called: ‘conceptual analysis’, an activity at the heart of what is usually called: ‘analytic philosophy’. Becoming skilled at this is no mean feat and is one of the objectives of most undergraduate philosophy majors. You probably won’t have time within your professional degree programme to build up this competence to a high level. However, you can at least be attuned to the fact that sometimes it is a conceptual premise, an assumption about the relations among ideas, that is causing the problem and be familiar with at least some of the skills used in criticizing such premises.

Let’s look at our sample argument again.

5-A1

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

CP To instil any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person’s freedom of thought on that matter.

DP All of St Crispin’s religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

So,

MC None of St Crispin’s religious education curriculum should be taught to those students.

Look at this particular CP and you’ll see that the author is, in effect, claiming that the *idea* of instilling a belief into someone is the opposite *idea* to that of letting a person freely adopt their own beliefs. (In much the same way as the idea of being a bachelor is, in part, an opposing idea to that of being married. I say ‘in part’ because part of the idea, for instance, ‘being adult’, is a shared, not an opposing, element.)

To challenge CP of 5-A1 would be to suggest that somehow a person can still have freedom of thought about, say, whether something like the Christian god exists or is just a myth *even though* he has had instilled into his mind the belief that such an entity *does* exist. On the face of it, CP sounds unchallengeable. How is it even *conceivable* that one could be ‘programmed’ with a belief yet still have free choice as to whether to believe it or not? And, indeed, it might well be simply unchallengeable. Not every (or even any) premise in a given argument is always plausibly disputable. (Were ‘all bachelors are unmarried’ to be a conceptual premise in some argument or other, then it would presumably be indisputable.)

The present case is an interesting one however. It all depends on what precisely is *meant* by ‘freedom of thought’ concerning a belief and by ‘instilling’ a belief. I’d like to spend a little time on this as what we are calling ‘conceptual premises’ are sometimes the focus of much complex and important philosophical discussion, not just in professional ethical controversies, and getting them right can involve an unusual attention to understanding the concepts in play.

I said back in Chapter 3 that, once one has a tame structure in place, one should take pains to ensure that what has been said is *clear*. To that end, one might end

up with some sort of clarificatory comments ('working definitions' as I called them) as an aside to the main flow of argument. We didn't actually do this in the case of 5-A1. Say that we had done so and that what was offered was as follows: 'by "instilling a belief" what I mean is causing someone to come to hold a belief without rationally persuading them of its truth and by "freedom of thought concerning a belief" I mean being able to accept or reject that belief without being swayed by any non-rational influence concerning it'.

On the face of it, instilling a belief and having freedom of thought about that belief are thus opposed ideas and CP indeed looks unchallengeable. Maybe not, though. The working definitions are not quite as clear as they might be on one matter – *time*. Mightn't I have belief in God instilled in me as a child and then, later, have other inputs to my thinking that negate that influence such that I *end up* exercising freedom of thought on the issue? In short, could I have theism instilled at one time but come to freely endorse atheism later? If so, if both can occur, then to instil belief on some matter into someone at *one point in time* does not (*automatically*) interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter at every *later* point in time.

So, given that the author's clarifications made no reference to time limitations, the following argument in criticism of CP might be raised:

5-CA2

CDP1 It is psychologically possible for one to have a belief instilled in one and then to have countervailing (non-rational) influences of sufficient strength operate so as to 'cancel out' that influence.

CCP1 If the non-rational influences upon one's belief formation are equally balanced then one has freedom of thought with respect to adoption of that belief.

So,

CCC A belief on some matter can be instilled into someone at one point in time without that (automatically) interfering with that person's freedom of thought on that matter at some later point in time.

As it happens, the sort of discussion that might continue on concerning this particular conceptual issue is quite rich and complex but our discussion of the treatment of such extended enquiries is a matter for the next chapter, not this one. At this stage, I simply wish to have illustrated how a criticism of a conceptual premise might go and to have alerted you to the subtlety of the issues involved in many such disputes. Again, note the key relationship between 5-CA2 and 5-A1. The *conclusion* (CCC) of the critic's 5-CA2 contradicts the conceptual *premise* (CP) that was its 'target' claim within 5-A1.

Some philosophical discussion of ethical topics rotates around the acceptability of various conceptual premises in arguments and concerns possible revisions to our understanding of the concepts involved in the face of challenge. It is common for conceptual refinements to arise as a result of such, sometimes quite extended, discussion. The subject matter of our example is a case in point. What ends up as a

good conception of ‘freedom of thought’ and what its relationship is with inputs to someone’s thinking (perhaps particularly at an early age) is a vexed and complex issue and, although we won’t pursue the discussion here, it is an important one that arises in a number of professional ethical contexts.

We could spend more time on this but I will simply refer you to standard undergraduate philosophy texts if you want to develop the skills of conceptual analysis any further. Fortunately, although there are professional ethical problems where conceptual muddle is a major problem and conceptual analysis the key tool in resolving the problem, for much of the time careful attention to providing what we called ‘working definitions’ suffices for enquiry to be able to proceed profitably if the major foci for concern in an argument are its DP or MP – especially the latter.

Key Ideas

In *conceptual* premise criticism, the task is not to dispute the author’s grasp of the facts but to dispute her understanding of the relationships between ideas. The focus is not upon what the world is like but upon the interrelationship of the meanings of various key terms.

Moral Premise Criticism

Generally, this is the most important form of premise criticism for our purposes. I have found that students are fairly unfamiliar with the task of criticizing arguments’ moral premises and tend to want to concentrate on the *descriptive* premises. As far as I can ascertain, this is because engaging in disputes as to what the facts are is familiar ground and, for many issues in professional ethics, *safe and easy* ground in that there is a research literature ‘out there’ to draw upon in settling what the truth actually is. Mind you, *conceptual* premise criticism is, like moral premise criticism, an unfamiliar and difficult task. Although there is a philosophical literature ‘out there’ on many of the issues that arise in professional ethical dilemmas (for instance, in the abortion and euthanasia debates a key conceptual issue is what counts as a *person*) the literature is forbiddingly complex for non-philosophers. Fortunately, for most (not all, try the abortion debate just mentioned) issues in applied ethics, conceptual concerns don’t loom large. As noted earlier, with some careful attention to supplying what we called ‘working definitions’, things can be kept clear enough for the purpose of sorting through the particular problem at hand.

So, descriptive premise criticism is relatively familiar and conceptual premise criticism is not common. Accordingly, the key task in sorting out one’s position concerning most problems in professional ethics is not so much getting one’s facts straight and conceptual framework well sorted, it is getting one’s set of *moral*

values well enough worked out so that they can be confidently applied to the issue at hand.

Normally, you will have several moral principles (some clashing with others) that bear on an issue. Sorting out one's deeper moral priorities among these principles so that they are in good enough shape to guide decision on the issue at hand is no minor task. As a quick illustration, say that the issue in question is one of disclosing the content of a psychotherapist's consultation conversations. One might have several values that bear on this issue. One such value might be a commitment to the confidentiality of such conversations (a bit like our earlier case of police and informers but with some different elements). Another value might be a commitment to the elimination of serious crime. These values can clearly compete if, in the course of a professional consultation, there is disclosure of sexual abuse of a minor by the client. Sorting out one's priorities is a complex matter and one element in performing that task is raising and considering criticisms of various values when they are appealed to as moral premises in various arguments put forward on some topic.

Key Ideas

Professional ethical decisions rest upon one's values but those values are likely to be conflicting. Sorting out one's priorities among them involves critical appraisal of those values and a key element in that is moral premise criticism of values that occur as Moral Premises in one's arguments.

So, how might *moral premise criticism* go?

The 'Mechanics' of Moral Premise Criticism

In broad architecture, a criticism of moral premises is the same as any other sort of premise criticism. So, this means that the critic is to craft an argument that has, as its conclusion, some claim that contradicts the target MP. As an example of this, let's return to our example argument 5-A1:

5-A1

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

CP To instill any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter.

DP All of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instills religious belief in some of its students.

So,

MC None of St Crispin's religious education curriculum should be taught to those students.

One way of criticizing this MP would be as follows: Perhaps on some matters (some central moral or religious beliefs perhaps) some people should *not* have freedom of thought *because* it is too important that they end up with the *right* answer and, if left their own devices, some people would end up with the *wrong* answer. So, laying this feral argument out as a tame and logical structure, we get:

5-CA3

CMP On some matters, it is more important that as many people as possible have a particular belief than that the belief is arrived at as a result of freedom of thought.

CDP If everyone had freedom of thought on any matter, then more people than is avoidable would end up not having such beliefs on some such matters.

So,

CMC On some such matters, some people should not have freedom of thought.

It is worth noting a general feature of such *moral* premise criticism. Have a look at what is going on in 5-CA3. Note that, in the critic's moral premise (CMP), you have something *else* (people having some particular beliefs) *valued more* than the driving value of the original MP of 5-A1 (that is, unrestricted freedom of thought) – at least in some matters. The critic's own driving value is being articulated as CMP. Then, in the critic's CDP, we learn that, at least sometimes, the critic's value and the author's do *clash* (giving people freedom of thought wouldn't *always* result in the wanted beliefs).

In effect, what the critic is saying to the author of 5-A1 is: 'Look, the trouble with your unrestricted commitment to freedom of thought is that some people will sometimes choose to have the wrong thoughts and isn't that sometimes worse than some loss of freedom when the issue is an important one?'

Or, put more generally, the tactic is to say something like '*Your* value sometimes *clashes* with *this* value (CDP) and this value is *more* important (CMP)'.

'Partial Denials'

It is worth highlighting one feature of MP criticism, one that is exemplified above. Note the scale of the clash between MP and CMC. All that the critic is doing is, in effect, arguing that MP is too sweepingly general and that, in some situations, something other than freedom of thought (believing some important truths, in our example) is more important. What is offered in CMC is what I will call a 'partial denial' of MP; note that what is not said in CMC is some more extreme denial of MP like: 'No one should have freedom of thought on any matter'.

Generally speaking, such partial denials are good practice whether we have a dialogue between two actual people ('the author/speaker' and 'the critic') or you are engaging in self-criticism.

Consider a two-person dialogue. As we shall see in the next chapter, teasing out a well-thought-through case on some issue can be quite involved and it will usually help that process of thorough enquiry if 'the critic' doesn't effectively

say: ‘Your premise is totally wrong’ but offers some less extreme rejection by mounting a critical argument to the effect that the premise in question is wrong to *some* extent (part of the time, or for some people, or in some ways or situations, or whatever).

If you are in soliloquy and engaging in *self*-criticism, then arguing that you have got some premise *totally* wrong is hardly as plausible a way of having a productive rethink about things as would exploring a ‘partial denial’ in which you explore the possibility that you have got things a bit wrong.

So, the ‘rule of thumb’ is that ‘partial denials’ are usually the preferred way of challenging possibly unsatisfactory premises. That said, there will no doubt be situations (most likely dialogical ones unless you are seriously intellectually schizoid) where an *extreme* denial is exactly what you want to do. Even so, engaging in a ‘partial denial’ style of criticism might nonetheless be your best chance of having a productive dialogue in which ‘the author’ reconsiders her views instead of becoming overly defensive.

Although I have raised this issue within a section on *moral* criticism, the above discussion carries across to criticisms of our other two types of premise proposition as well.

Key Ideas

As with any premise criticism, the conclusion of the critic’s argument should be a form of denial of the target premise (in this case a moral premise). The general strategy of such a criticism is that the critic’s *moral* premise advances some other, more important (at least some of the time, for some people etc.) and rival value and the critic’s descriptive premise proposes that his value clashes with the author’s. Engaging in ‘partial denial’ of a target MP is generally advised (the same ‘rule of thumb’ applies to criticism of descriptive premises and conceptual premises).

Summary to Date

So far, I have said that there are only two things that can go wrong with the reasoning that someone offers in support of some judgement on an issue of professional ethical concern (or with any argument on anything, for that matter). One is that it has a logical fault – we discussed this in the last chapter. The other is that one (or more) of its premises is unsatisfactory. It is the second sort of possible fault that has been the concern of this chapter. If there is something unsatisfactory about a premise, then it should be able to be exposed by successful criticism. To criticize it is to mount an argument against it, an argument that has, as its conclusion, a claim that contradicts the target premise.

Remember that an argument might be vulnerable to criticism of more than one of its premises (or just one, or none) but even if they are *all* dubious (as with 5-A1) their criticism should occur separately otherwise things become a muddled mess.

Although the general ‘architecture’ of premise criticism is similar regardless of the premise type under challenge, the particular task of the critic’s argument varies with the type of premise. Arguments on professional ethical topics might contain premises of any of our three basic proposition types (descriptive, moral and conceptual). Given the distinct nature of propositions of these three types, arguments critical of one type will differ in key ways from those critical of other types. The sort of consideration one would be basing an argument criticizing a descriptive premise on would be different from the sort of thing a criticism of the conceptual premise would be based on and moral premise criticism would employ a different basis of dispute yet again.

Of the three types, I said that *moral premise criticism* was usually the most central task. In this case, the general tactic for the critic is to advance some other value which, at least sometimes (for some people etc.), is considered *more important* than the author’s MP (all of which gets expressed as the critic’s CMP) and which, to at least some extent, *clashes* with that MP (with that clash articulated as the critic’s CDP). In effect, the critic is challenging the soundness of the moral values that the author’s case rests upon by appealing to *rival* values. I also stressed the tactical merits of *partial*, as opposed to more extreme, denials of the target MP by the critic’s CMC.

In criticism of a *descriptive* premise, one is offering reasons for thinking that the author’s case rests upon a misunderstanding of the relevant facts. In criticism of a *conceptual* premise, one is arguing that the author misunderstands some key concept or relationship among concepts.

In all of this remember that although, for convenience, I talk of an ‘author’ and a ‘critic’, the situation might not be one of dialogue between two minds but one of *self-criticism* with you playing both roles. It is part of thinking thoroughly about some issue to ask things like: ‘I wonder if I have my facts straight’, or: ‘I wonder if the concepts I am using are well-enough understood’ or: ‘I wonder if the moral principles that I have some sort of commitment to will turn out to bear on this issue in more complicated and possibly conflicting ways than I now realize’. Exploring any of these matters leads to one or other of our tasks of premise criticism getting carried out.

So much for the basics of premise criticism. In what remains of this chapter, I wish to re-emphasize the avoidance of a common error, do a little bit of extension on the idea of premise criticism and talk about the other side of the coin of premise appraisal: premise *defence* as opposed to criticism.

Premise Criticism – a Common Error

At the risk of labouring a point, I would like to spend some more time on what is a common student fault (I'm not quite sure why). We touched upon this in the last chapter but it bears repetition.

Remember that premise criticism is one form of critically probing the *reasoning* given by an author in support of her judgement (with the latter appearing as the argument's conclusion). Recall also that I just reminded you that only two things can go wrong with an argument's reasoning. One is that it has faulty premises: in premise criticism, one is investigating whether one or other of the *premises* is faulty. But what about the *conclusion* – couldn't one criticize the conclusion *directly* by mounting an argument against it?

Well, one could and, as I have noted, students commonly do; but to do that is to *ignore totally* the *reasoning* offered by the author. It is as if one has said: 'Never mind what you've said, I'm not carrying out any scrutiny of the worth of your supporting reasoning, I'm just going to ignore it and advance my own argument for the opposing conclusion – just as if you had never spoken. You have mounted a "for" argument on the topic and I am going to mount an "against" argument on the topic'. In our example argument, I would *not* (under the heading of 'moral premise criticism') be at all fulfilling that task by challenging MC: 'None of St Crispin's religious education curriculum should be taught to students in whom it will instil religious belief', such that my critic's argument had, as its conclusion, CMC*: 'Some of St Crispin's religious education curriculum should be taught to some students in whom it will instil religious belief'.

What results if one stays focused constantly in this way on generating arguments that bear *directly* on the topic issue with their conclusion propositions is that the discussion/enquiry becomes cluttered with a bunch of arguments 'for' and 'against' some proposal but without *any appraisal* as to whether any of the arguments that have been generated are any *good*. Surely it's not enough to just keep generating an unappraised string of arguments on a topic; one should wish to know which arguments are worth taking any notice of. Such generation of mere breadth, instead of depth, of enquiry is a waste of time (except as a sort of preliminary 'brainstorming' exercise prior to more serious thought). Eventually, if an argument on the topic of interest is presented, you will have to spend some time working out the merits of that argument and that means, in part, considering whether its *premises* are open to plausible criticism. Once its fate gets sorted out after some (probably quite extended) examination and enquiry, you might indeed get on to other distinct arguments bearing directly on the original topic. My point is simply that you can't profitably have a series of arguments that bear directly on your topic under examination at once.

So, criticism of any given argument focuses on the *rationale* that that argument presents for its conclusion. I want now to point out that, if you are careful and methodical, this 'conclusion-denying' error simply should not ever arise.

Earlier, when we were talking about taming a structure by methodical checking using a checklist, the initial question was: ‘*Is the conclusion on target?*’

You should be able to avoid the above error of misdirected criticism of a given argument’s conclusion by paying proper attention to this checklist item as it applies to the *critic’s* argument. The target for the conclusion of a critic’s ‘*premise-criticism*’ argument is a *premise!* – so you would expect to see his conclusion being the denial of the target premise *not* the denial of the author’s argument’s conclusion. As doing just that (criticizing the conclusion rather than a premise) is the common student error under discussion, doing this checklist item properly should detect the problem if you have been unthinking enough to commit this error.

Key Ideas

Premise criticism is just that. The target of such criticism is some premise or other of an argument, *not* its conclusion. Exercise discipline and properly check your critical offering’s targeting before moving on.

Argument Failure and the Fate of the Conclusion

This section is a bit of an aside and doesn’t sit totally comfortably within this chapter but it seems around the right place to be introducing the issue. Say that you had decided that an argument had a faulty premise (or, for that matter, was ‘unpatchably’ illogical). To decide that is to decide that *that* argument *fails* in its task of *establishing* its conclusion satisfactorily.

It might well be that, although a given ‘supporting’ argument fails, and fails in any version that you can think of, there is some other, quite distinct, line of support that fares better. For instance, say that you had considered the following argument in support of the proposition that one should not ever tell lies.

MP We should always do what God commands.

DP God commands us to not ever tell lies.

So,

MC We should not ever tell lies.

Upon reflection upon some criticism of MP (say by an argument that deploys as its CMP the rival value: ‘No moral agent should lose any autonomy of moral decision-making by being subservient to the moral prescriptions of any other moral agent’), you find that you cannot endorse MP any more. (This stage would probably take a while to reach rather than happen after a criticism being simply expressed but we will ignore such complexities for now; such matters are the business of the next chapter.)

In effect then, as a case for MC, you judge the above argument to be a failure. But just because this argument has failed doesn't automatically mean that *no* case for saying that one should never tell lies, one of a more satisfactory sort, can't be advanced. You might be able to think up some quite different line of support for the same conclusion and that different case might fare better under critical scrutiny. (Such a case might be something along the lines of saying that one should not ever tell lies because the telling of lies helps to destroy social trust and social trust should be preserved as much as possible.)

However, unless there is indeed some *other*, quite distinct, argument that can be advanced that fares better, the conclusion would be *unsupported*. Mind you, even if one can think of no satisfactory argument for the conclusion, it does *not* mean that the conclusion is *wrong*. Just because some proposition is without adequate defence does not mean that there is anything wrong with it, it is just that you don't have *grounds* for thinking that there is anything right with it. There are many descriptive propositions, in particular, that are simply beyond our power to have any satisfactory grounds for belief in them.

As a possible illustration, and staying with religion for the moment, take the vexed issue of the existence, or otherwise, of God. Now, take the proposition 'God exists'. Assume for the moment something that you might wish to dispute with me, that is, that there is no successful argument in support of that proposition. That is, *any* argument one might advance would be either illogical or based upon premises open to successful criticism. Even if this were so, that would not mean that the proposition 'God exists' is false. It might be true even if we were to have no good reason to believe that it is.

Mind you, if a proposition were to be unsupported by any satisfactory argumentation as far as you could see, this should give you some 'pause for thought' about any temptation to accept it.

Key Ideas

Argument failure is not conclusion failure, just failure of that particular line of justification for accepting that conclusion. Sustained failure of *any* argument to satisfactorily support such a given conclusion should, however, be of concern.

A Common Critical Technique

One technique (*not* the only one) for mounting a challenge to a premise is to probe it with what are usually called *counter-examples*. What, then, is a counter-example? You are probably already familiar with the broad idea from past discussions about descriptive and moral propositions. Let me illustrate: As a descriptive proposition, try the following:

‘All British generals to date have been incompetent’.

This could be challenged by advancing the following as a counter-example to this generalization:

‘The Duke of Wellington was a British general and was not incompetent’.

(Of course, weaving this in as part of a properly structured critic’s argument would be a bit more elaborate than that.)

As a moral proposition, try the following:

‘All lying is wrong’.

This could be challenged by advancing the following as a counter-example to this generalization:

‘Lying to save an innocent person’s life is not wrong’.

In this case, I shall bother to portray the structured critical argument in full because much debate on professional ethical matters rotates around the acceptability of MPs as opposed to other types of premise. I suggest initial structuring of our above feral criticism as follows:

CMP It is more important to save an innocent person’s life than it is to tell the truth.

CDP Sometimes the only way to save an innocent person’s life is to lie.

So,

CMC Not all lying is wrong.

A couple of comments, note that this fits our earlier discussion of criticism of MPs. In the critic’s CMP we get another value advanced as more important than the one appealed to in the author’s MP. Then, in the critic’s CDP, it is pointed out that the two values clash. They do not clash all of the time (so it is not as if we conclude that lying is always wrong) but they do some of the time – hence our conclusion. It also complies with my earlier suggestion that it is usually a better tactic to mount a ‘partial denial’ criticism that disagrees a little bit with its target premise rather than rejects it out of hand.

So far, so obvious, I hope. The same tactic can be deployed in criticism of a conceptual premise; say such a premise was the following:

‘All members of the species *Homo Sapiens* are persons’.

This could be challenged by advancing the following as a counter-example to this generalization:

Those members of the species *Homo Sapiens* born with no cortical functioning are not persons’.

I trust that you get the general idea. If you look back to the section ‘Descriptive Premise Criticism’ you should be able to see that the style of criticism that we mounted there exemplifies this sort of raising of a counter-example.

Note that what is happening in such a form of criticism is that one is disagreeing *a little bit* with the target premise. It is an instance of what I earlier called ‘partial denial’; one is not mounting an extreme ‘right to the other end of the spectrum’ denial of the target premise. For instance, in the above challenge to a possible conceptual premise, the critic is not suggesting that *no* members of the species *Homo Sapiens* are persons just that *some* are not. As discussed earlier, such limited criticism, or ‘partial denial’, is usually a sensible thing in an enquiry if it is to progress profitably.

Key Ideas

One common tactic in critical challenge to a rather sweepingly general premise is to appeal to counter-examples. Such a challenge has the merit of constituting a partial denial, not an extreme rejection, of the original proposition.

Premise Defence

Although the opposite of premise *criticism*, I’m going to talk about premise *defence* in this chapter as it is the other basic skill involved in premise *appraisal* and sits here as well as anywhere.

What premise *defence* amounts to is adding on an extra bit of argumentation that has an existing premise as its *conclusion*. Once this is done, you would have a better idea of where an argument is coming from, of the deeper story that is driving the author. Each of our three basic proposition types might occur as premises in an argument and each type of premise (a CP, an MP, a DP) might be one that you wish to see receive some support or defence. How might this go? Let’s return to our sample argument and try defending each of its premises in turn.

5-A1

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

CP To instil any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter.

DP All of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

So,

MC None of St Crispin's religious education curriculum should be taught to those students.

Descriptive Premise Defence

A feral defence of the above DP might go as follows: it is true that all of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students because a survey was carried out on its students and this was the result of the survey. Laid out as a structured argument we might have the following:

5-DA1

DP1 All surveys correctly report the nature of the phenomena that they are investigating.

DP2 A survey of St Crispin's students indicated that all of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

So,

DP All of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

What has happened in this argument is that we have been given some grounds for holding the proposition DP to be true. In effect, an appeal has been made to the relevant research literature and that is a common line of support for descriptive propositions occurring in discussions of professional ethical issues. Note also that this case crucially rests upon a fairly sweeping assumption about the reliability of surveys (in DP1). This might, as the enquiry continues to unfold, prove to be a concern with the satisfactoriness of this defence.

Conceptual Premise Defence

A feral defence of the above CP might go as follows: to have freedom of thought on some matter is for one's views on that matter to be ones that one has arrived at as a result of one's own thinking and if a belief is instilled into a person then that person has arrived at it as a result of that process of instilling as opposed to it being the result of their own thinking; so, to instil any belief on some matter into someone is to interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter. Structured, we get:

5-DA1'

CP1 To have freedom of thought on some matter is for one's views on that matter to be ones that one has arrived at as a result of one's own thinking.

CP2 If a belief is instilled into a person then it is not the result of their own thinking.

So,

CP To instil any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter.

What has happened in this particular argument is that we have had each of the key ideas, or concepts, in the original CP ('instilling belief' and 'freedom of thought') unpacked in meaning a little bit by appeal to a third concept 'a view being arrived at as a result of one's own thinking' in a way that supports the opposition of ideas expressed in the original CP. (Mind you, the plot will thicken as soon as one ponders a little bit upon what counts as a belief being a result of one's own thinking.)

Moral Premise Defence

A feral defence of the above MP might go as follows: humanity should maximize its capacity to challenge any of its ideas so everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter because, if they didn't, then humanity would not be maximizing its capacity to challenge any of its ideas. Laid out as a structured argument we might have the following:

5-DA1''

MP1 Humanity should maximize its capacity to challenge any of its ideas.

DP1 Unless everyone has freedom of thought on any matter, humanity will not be maximizing its capacity to challenge any of its ideas.

So,

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

What has happened in this argument is that we have had the original commitment to quite sweeping freedom of thought supported by appealing to something that that freedom of thought is good for (it exemplifies what we called earlier 'a means/ends argument').

Argument 'Chains'

One way of thinking about what has occurred above when we have defended one or other of the premises of an argument is to employ the metaphor of a chain. As you realize, chains have links and different lengths of chain might have different numbers of links. Think of an individual argument such as 5-A1 as forming a single link. When one of its premises, say, DP, is defended (by deployment of 5-DA1) the two arguments can be seen as joining in the manner of two links of a chain. The connection in this case is DP. DP plays two roles. In 5-DA1, it is the conclusion, or

end point, of the argument; in 5-A1 it is one of the premises, or starting points, of the argument. In effect, it is the overlapping element, a proposition present in each component argument although playing a different role in each. One could portray the argument and the defence of one of its premises as one longer, more elaborate, structure: a chained argument of two links:

DP1 All surveys correctly report the nature of the phenomena that they are investigating.

DP2 A survey of St Crispin's students indicated that all of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

So,

DP All of St Crispin's religious education curriculum instils religious belief in some of its students.

and,

MP Everyone should have freedom of thought on any matter.

CP To instil any belief on any matter into anyone is to interfere with that person's freedom of thought on that matter.

So,

MC None of St Crispin's religious education curriculum should be taught to those students.

I had to change the order of the premises in 5-A1 to lay the whole chain out in a neat linear way but, as you should remember, this makes no difference to the logical power of those premises to entail their conclusion – it is just a stylistic thing which way round DP, MP and CP are listed. Of course, were we to wish to portray the defence of more than one of our premise propositions, we could not do it as a nice neat linear chain as above and the metaphor breaks down a little bit. Still, it is not a bad way of thinking about things for any given premise that is being defended.

Key Ideas

To *defend*, or support, a premise is to craft another argument which has, as its conclusion, the premise to be defended.

Summary Remarks

In this chapter we have focused upon premises, the starting points of arguments, the component elements of the rationale given for a given argument's conclusion. The suggestion is that it is not enough for an argument to be logical, an argument's worth as a case for its conclusion is only as good as the worth of its premises.

Accordingly, one task in appraising an argument as a contribution to an enquiry is to appraise its premises.

One good way to begin to appraise a premise, especially if it is a premise in an argument that you favour, is to try criticizing it. To criticize a premise is to argue against it. The premises of an argument can be of any of our proposition types. These types are different and require different sorts of considerations to be appealed to in arguing against them.

Another possible move in the appraisal of a premise is to explore its *defence*, to argue *for* it.

In effect, this chapter is basically the last in which I introduce you to basic skills of reasoning at the individual argument level (although in Chapter 7 I do introduce a number of complications at the level of individual arguments). But enquiring thoroughly into a professional ethical issue will involve *more* than a scattering of individual arguments or even of those arguments and a criticism or a defence of one or other of their premises. Rather, there will be a web of such argumentation with the individual arguments constituting that web connected together in thoughtful and deliberate ways so that an enquiry builds complexity, depth and thoroughness. It is the task of the next chapter to introduce to you this sort of thoughtful and deliberate, in-depth, enquiry.