Moral Reasoning

People who take right and wrong seriously make judgments using “moral reasoning.” Moral reasoning is the thought-process of making moral judgments based on moral principles.

Moral Reasoning is Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is making sound judgments about what is true or false, good or bad, or right or wrong.

Thinking critically in any subject requires 3 things:
1. recognizing relevant facts;
2. applying principles or laws of the field;
3. and using valid reasoning.

Three Parts of Moral Reasoning:

Moral Judgments

Moral Principles

Facts

Moral Judgments

Moral judgments have a specific function in language, and can be recognized by their specific form.

- The function of a moral judgment is to express evaluations for guiding choices. Moral judgments express guidance for choosing what to do, or not to do.

- The form of a moral judgment is a declarative sentence with a subject and a term of moral evaluation. (A declarative sentence says something about something, or someone, and is either true or false.)

The subject of a moral judgment refers to an individual or particular group, usually identified by NAME, or by a PRONOUN, and sometimes by a DESCRIPTION.

The term of moral evaluation is usually something like:
“right” or “wrong” “good” or “bad,” or “evil” “should” or “shouldn’t” “ought” or “ought not”

Examples of Moral Judgments:

Steven was wrong to take Chris’s knife. The practice of slavery in America was inexcusable.
Elliot ought to return the lost wallet to its owner. Sarah is a good person.
Pirates are evil. (argh!) The President should not lie to the American People.

Moral Principles

Moral principles also have different function in language, and can also be recognized by their form.

- The function of a moral principle is to provide support in reasoning for moral judgments.
- The form of a moral principle is declarative, with a GENERAL subject and term of moral evaluation.
Moral Principles (continued)

A moral principle differs from a moral judgment in the subject of the statement. Where judgments are about individuals, or about particular groups, principles are generalizations. Principles are about ways of acting (telling the truth, keeping promises, etc.), or about ways of being (kindness, dishonesty, etc.).

Examples of Moral Principles:

- Taking something that does not belong to you is wrong.
- The practice of slavery is inexcusable.
- People ought to return lost valuables to their owners.
- Kindness is a quality of a good person.
- Piracy is evil.
- Lying to the American people is wrong.

It should be easy to see how the six principles listed here resemble the six judgments listed above; except that the judgments were particular, or individual, while the principles are general.

Two Structures of Moral Reasoning

A “structure” of reasoning is known as an argument. An argument typically presents a generalization, and leads to a conclusion. In moral reasoning, the generalization is a moral principle, and the conclusion is a moral judgment, about a individual or group (particular).

1. **Direct Moral Reasoning** is the simplest structure; it begins with a moral principle, and is followed immediately by a moral judgment. For example,

   1. Cheating on income taxes is wrong. (principle, generalization)
   2. So, I shouldn’t cheat on my income taxes. (judgment, particular)

2. **Indirect Moral Reasoning** is more complicated, because it includes a factual statement—a factual statement does not contain a term of moral evaluation.

   1. Taking something that does not belong to you is wrong. (principle, generalization)
   2. Steven took Chris’s knife. (fact, particular)
   3. So, Steven was wrong to take Chris’s knife. (judgment, particular)

If the factual statement is untrue, then the moral judgment is not correct. If you do not believe the factual statement, then you do not believe the moral judgment.

The validity of a structure of indirect moral reasoning can be seen from its form.

The principle expresses a generalization. The factual statement qualifies an individual or group as an instance of the generalization. The judgment applies the principle’s evaluative term to the individual.

1. All As are B. (principle – true in general)
2. C qualifies as an A. (fact – qualifies an individual)
3. Therefore, C is B. (judgment – evaluates the qualified individual)