

Assessing arguments

Unstated assumptions

- Often, not every step in the argument is made explicit
- Assumptions must be identified & evaluated

“Allowing parents to choose the sex of their children would have serious social costs: a higher proportion of men unable to find female partners, and – since most crime is committed by men – an increase in crime rates”

- What is the unstated assumption?
- Is it justified?
- How can we establish whether it's justified?
- Does it undermine the strength of the argument?

Unstated assumptions 2: Unpicking the argument

“For victims of rape, appearing in court is a terrible experience. If the defendant pleads guilty, the victim does not have to appear in court. So sentences should be lighter for those who plead guilty.”

- Conclusion:** -sentences should be lighter for those who plead guilty
- Reason 1:** -court appearances distress victims
- Reason 2:** -guilty pleas mean victims needn't attend court
- Assumption:** -lighter sentences would mean more guilty pleas

Analogies & comparisons

“We shouldn’t praise people who are clever, any more than we would praise someone for being born one or other sex, or being tall or having brown eyes...”

Analogy: the property of cleverness is the same as height, sex, etc.

Consistency: what is true of height, sex, eye colour should be true of cleverness. If x is like y in every respect, then everything that’s true of x should be true of y. But – not all analogies are good analogies.... Is this one a good one?

NB: In arguments based on analogy, we are usually expected to accept the premise, on which the analogy is based. Are we happy to accept the premise that we should not praise someone for their physical attributes?

Task

Descartes argues that animals are like machines such as clocks, whereas humans are entirely different.

Create your own argument, including at least one analogy. You can base it on something from the curriculum, or any other topic. Think of your conclusion first, and then build up the argument...

example

People behave far more rudely to each other when driving than when they are not behind the wheel. Sounding the horn, or waving a fist at someone who pulls out in front of you is fairly normal for drivers. But these same people would never dream of shouting at someone who got in their way in a supermarket, or who accidentally block their way when getting on the bus. Therefore cars are dehumanising.