Moral Statement

A moral statement is a statement asserting that an action is right or wrong (moral or immoral) or that something, like a person or motive, is good or bad.

The following are examples of moral statements:
- You should do what you would like others to do to you.
- Shooting someone just for bumping into you is morally impermissible.
- Lying to get what you want is wrong.
- It is morally good to give to charity.

Normative vs. Descriptive
- A normative claim is a claim about what ought to be the case (e.g. you should not punch babies, you ought not to torture for fun).
- A descriptive claim is a claim about what is the case (e.g. the sky is blue, people need to eat to survive).
- Moral statements are normative claims, not descriptive ones.

Moral statements can be quite general, like a principle (e.g. you ought not to hurt others), or very particular (e.g. you should not kick Billy for making fun of you).

Moral Arguments

A moral argument is an argument (i.e. has premises and a conclusion) in which the conclusion is a moral statement.

Generally, moral arguments include (either explicitly or implicitly) both moral and non-moral statements in their premises.

The following are examples of moral arguments:

1. You should do no harm to others.
2. Stabbing someone with a jagged knife will harm another.
3. Therefore, you should not stab someone with a jagged knife.

1. If you are trying to protect someone’s feelings, then it is morally permissible to lie.
2. You are trying to protect someone’s (e.g. your mother’s) feelings this time.
3. Therefore, it is morally permissible to lie this time.

Because moral arguments often involve both moral and non-moral claims, we need to be clear about whether we are agreeing or disagreeing with which of these claims; how we resolve differences depend in part on what kind of claim is being made (e.g. we can resolve a disagreement about some fact of the matter by doing empirical research, but may not be able to do the same for a disagreement about some moral principle).

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1 Much of the information here (primarily the definitions of key terms) is from Lewis Vaughn’s *The Power of Critical Thinking*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2009).
Is/Ought Distinction

- As noted earlier, there is a difference between normative (ought) and descriptive (is) claims.
- In the 18th Century, philosopher David Hume noted that there is a gap between what is the case and what ought to be the case, such that it seems we cannot draw any conclusions about what ought to be the case solely from what is the case.
- For instance, just because there are murderers in the world (descriptive claim), it does not mean that we should become murderers (normative claim).
- The following is an example of what Hume thought was an unwarranted move from is to ought:
  1. Torturing people causes immense pain and produces little benefit (descriptive claim).
  2. Therefore, you should not torture people (normative conclusion).
- Often, there are implicit moral premises that, if made explicit, may help us avoid this problem:
  1. Torturing people causes immense pain and produces little benefit (descriptive claim).
  2. You should not do anything that causes immense pain but produces little benefit (implicit moral premise).
  3. Therefore, you should not torture people (normative conclusion).