

Making principled arguments

A. Goal of the lesson

Students find out how to use the concept of “principled arguments” to brainstorm new arguments.

B. Activities

Opening to Lesson

Exercise 1 (10 minutes)

Use Amartya Sen’s “Parable of the Flute” to spark a discussion:

“Ann, Bob, and Carla, are quarreling over the fate of a flute (p. 12, *The Idea of Justice*). Ann claims the flute on the basis that she is the only one who can play it, Bob claims it because he has no other toys to play with whereas the others do, and Carla’s claim is based on the fact that she made the flute in the first place. Who should get the flute?”

Ask students on their opinions. Start a discussion. Once students have made 3-5 arguments, ask if anyone can comprehend the arguments that other people are making and believe them to be reasonable. Move to the concept phase.

Concept and brainstorm (10 minutes)

“Principled” arguments are arguments that are not about contesting what will happen, but about arguing whether what will happen is *justified*.

Take a motion in the class, and try to think of arguments based on the concept that are just explained. If students have difficulties, use the following intuition pumps:

- What will lead to the best outcomes? And how do you define which outcome is best? (utilitarian)
- What are people’s duties or obligations here? Where do these come from? (deontological ethics)
- What would be a virtuous thing to do? How far should you go in following this virtue? (virtue ethics)

Try to group the responses after a discussion into these three categories: utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics.

Principle versus non-principle arguments (25 minutes)

Give students the task to come up with arguments that do not rely on a “principle” about the motion.

Ask them to discuss in a comparative sense the difference between the arguments. How can you make one type of argument more persuasive towards one another? What are ways to make a principled argument sound persuasive?

Exercise: have students try to build the best possible principled argument for the motion in groups, and present a few before the class. Offer opportunity for peer feedback.

Transfer

Ask: What were the main principled approaches? What was the definition of a “principled argument”? What made some arguments persuasive, and others not?

C. Preparation

It is helpful to read up on basic ethics if you have no prior knowledge. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is a good beginners' guide, but presumes you have had some ethical background. Michael Sandel's "Justice" book and Harvard course are other good sources for both teachers and students

