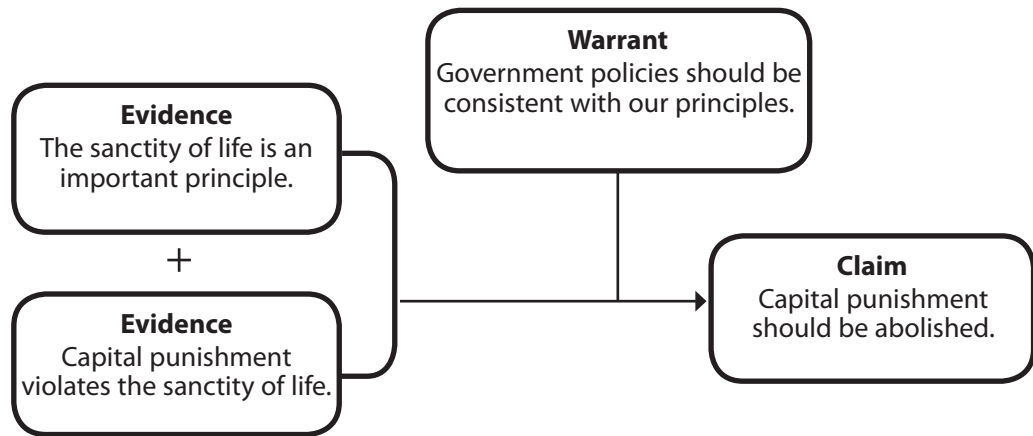




One of the difficulties with the previous example is that people do not accept the principle of the sanctity of human life in all situations. For instance, most societies are willing to set aside this principle in matters of self-, family, or societal defense. In other words, most societies agree that taking a human life in self-defense, in defense of one's family, or in defense of one's nation is justified. As a result, some debaters might revise the argument slightly by modifying the principle selected and, as a result, the rest of the argument. This modified argument would, of course, need to argue that capital punishment is not needed for societal defense.

The adequacy of an argument from principle depends on several assumptions. First, the argument presumes that the articulated principle is sound in general or at least in the context in which it is being applied. Frequently persons who use an argument by principle claim that the principle applies universally. For example, some claim that the sanctity of human life is absolute and universal—that no cases exist when the intentional taking of human life is justified. In other cases, arguers might define a specific context in which the principle is applicable. A debater might be unwilling to defend the sanctity of life as an absolute and universal principle and might acknowledge certain instances where the principle should be set aside. He might therefore refine the principle by arguing that the sanctity of life should apply in situations that do not involve self-defense or defense of one's family or community.

A second assumption of the argument from principle is that the action being defended applies unambiguously to the principle. A debater would have little difficulty demonstrating that capital punishment applies clearly to the principle of sanctity of human life as capital punishment obviously ends a human life; however, she would have to construct a more elaborate argument to show that capital punishment applies to the principle against taking a life except in self-defense. In this case, she would need to argue that capital punishment is not necessary for a society to defend itself against potential murderers. She could argue that capital punishment is not necessary for self-defense for a variety of reasons. For instance, she might suggest that life imprisonment without parole, instead of capital punishment, is a sufficient means of societal self-defense. Whether the principle involves the sanctity of human life in general or the sanctity of human life except in cases of self-defense, the debater needs to establish that capital punishment is unequivocally related to the principle.