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PROCEDURE FOR RECONSTRUCTING EXPLICIT ARGUMENTS FROM TEXTS

Before you begin, make sure the passage of interest contains at least one explicit argument.

a. For the text to include an *explicit* argument, it must give fairly explicit reasons why something is true. It must include discourse that can without force be framed as "premise/conclusion" discourse. (Poetry, plays, and so forth sometimes present implicit arguments.)

b. A text may move back and forth between explicit argumentation and other sorts of discourse such as narratives, illustrations, and statements of the views of others.

1. Identify the argument you want to deal with: fix on a *conclusion* (a statement the author is trying to prove).

a. If you are trying to reconstruct the overall argument of a text, then you'll want to identify the overall conclusion; if not, pick the conclusion of interest.

i. Conclusion-indicator terms such as "therefore", "thus", "so", etc., may help you identify conclusions, including the overall conclusion. But conclusions will not always be marked by one of these terms.

ii. While conclusion-indicator terms typically indicate that some sort of inference is being drawn, they don't tell you whether the inference is to the overall conclusion of the passage you're focused on, or instead to the conclusion of a sub-argument.

iii. Sometimes conclusions are not explicitly stated: the author may be expecting the reader to be able to draw them. In that case, ask yourself what *point* the author is making. For the overall conclusion, ask what the overall point is. (Even when the conclusion is explicitly stated, it may help you confirm your identification of it to ask what point the author is making.)

b. For clarity, write out as a complete sentence the conclusion you're fixing on.

c. Clarify the conclusion as appropriate. For instance, has the author said things that require the conclusion to be qualified in some way? Is there any ambiguity about quantification? The conclusion will have terms in it that appear also in the premises, and it's essential that these terms have the same meaning throughout the argument.

2. Identify the argument's *premises* (the author's support for the conclusion).

a. Work backwards from the conclusion:

i. Begin by identifying the immediate premises, i.e., the premises that support the conclusion without first supporting other claims.

ii. Then look for subordinate premises, premises that support the immediate premises. Here you are in effect taking the immediate premises as conclusions, and searching for sub-arguments supporting them.

iii. Premise-indicator terms such as "since", "for", etc., may help you identify premises. If such terms are lacking, you'll need to determine which assertions in the text are *intended* to support the conclusion.

iv. Sometimes not all of the premises will be explicitly stated. Perhaps the author believes a premise is so obvious it doesn't need to be stated, or perhaps the author hasn't noticed that a non-obvious – and quite possibly controversial – premise is essential to the argument.

b. For clarity, write each premise on a separate line (you might make a numbered list of premises), either below or above the conclusion.

c. Consider what the premises are supposed to *mean* and clarify them as appropriate. Be sure that the terms that link premises with one another and with the conclusion are used throughout with the same meanings (there should be consistency not only with regard to *words*, but also *meanings*).

3. Determine the argument's *logical form* (what links the premises to one another and to the conclusion?)

a. There are several general types of valid deductive logical forms, including (i) *categorical (Aristotelian) syllogisms* and (ii) *propositional forms* (another important type, involving *predicate forms*, is studied in PHIL 220). Valid propositional forms include modus ponens, modus tollens, hypothetical syllogisms, disjunctive syllogisms, and dilemmas. Many valid deductive arguments *combine* basic valid forms.

b. Non-deductive argument forms include generalizations, analogies, and arguments to the best explanation (many of which are arguments about causes). While such an argument may not meet the strict standard of logical validity, it must still provide a good reason for accepting its conclusion.

c. An argument can always be put into a valid form by adding the premise, "If [all of the premises] are true, then [the conclusion] is true," thereby making the argument fit the form modus ponens.

i. This can even be done with non-deductive arguments such as generalizations, analogies, and arguments to the best explanation.

ii. This leaves still to be answered the important question of why the added if-then statement is true. But (as long as the if-then statement is plausible and its terms have the same meanings they have elsewhere in the argument) it provides a starting framework for evaluating the argument, since if the conclusion is to be rejected, then at least one premise (either one of the original premises or the new if-then premise) must be rejected.

PROCEDURE FOR EVALUATING RECONSTRUCTED ARGUMENTS

Before you begin, make sure the argument is set out with conclusion and premises separately identified. If this has not been done, then do it yourself, following the above procedure for reconstructing arguments.

1. Is the argument valid? If not, is it a well-formed non-deductive argument?

Be sure that the terms that link premises with one another and with the conclusion are used throughout with the same meanings (there should be consistency not only with regard to *words*, but also *meanings*). If this isn't done, the argument may at first glance appear valid, but not actually be valid.

2. Are the premises true?

3. Will the premises be more evident to the intended audience than is the conclusion?

4. Are there any fallacies not yet identified?

Some fallacies may already have been identified – e.g., "affirming the consequent" or "denying the antecedent" may have been identified at step (1) of this procedure; "begging the question" may have been identified at step (3). Consider whether there are further fallacies. For instance: Is the argument a "straw man" argument that caricatures another person's view? Is it an "ad hominem" argument? And so forth.

5. Is the argument helpful or illuminating or interesting?

It may be helpful or illuminating or interesting even if fails to satisfy any of the desiderata above.

PROCEDURE FOR CONSTRUCTING YOUR OWN ARGUMENTS

Throughout, keep in mind points made above regarding reconstructing and evaluating arguments.

1. Develop the conclusion you want to defend.

2. Begin to develop your immediate premises; state them provisionally.

3. Refine the immediate premises and conclusion so they exhibit an acceptable logical form.

You may need to reword premises and conclusion to establish the linkages required by acceptable logical form. Be sure you have consistency with regard to both *words* and *meanings*.

4. Develop sub-arguments to support your immediate premises where appropriate.