

Reconstructing Arguments

Argument reconstruction is where we take a written argument, and re-write it to make the logic of the argument as obvious as possible. I have broken down this task into six steps:

- Step 1. Identify premises and conclusions.*
- Step 2. Regiment the language.*
- Step 3. Make explicit suppressed premises.*
- Step 4. Group premises with their conclusions.*
- Step 5. Make the deductive form apparent (where applicable).*
- Step 6. Above all, be fair and charitable in interpreting the argument*

I shall explain these steps in turn.

Let's consider the following passage to illustrate the process:

Each particular thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. Obviously, then, the whole process of human thought, what we call Reason, is equally without worth if it is the result of unreasoned causes. Hence every theory of the universe which makes the human mind a result of irrational forces is...nonsense. (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*)

Step One

1. **Identify Premises and Conclusions.** Underline the Main Conclusion of a passage, and identify any sub-conclusions. Then, note which sentence(s) support(s) the Main Conclusion. Do the same for each sub-conclusion. Note that a sub-conclusion will *also* be a premise for some other conclusion (assuming it is not just tangential).

Our Example (Changes to the passage are in red; also, I use '(Pn)' for the *n*th premise, and '(Cn)' for the *n*th conclusion):

(P1) Each particular thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. Obviously, then, (P2/C1) the whole process of human thought, what we call Reason, is equally without worth if it is the result of unreasoned causes. (C2) Hence every theory of the universe which makes the human mind a result of irrational forces is...nonsense. (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*)

Step Two

2. **Regiment the Language.** Copy down the premises and conclusions, keeping the literal wording of the passage EXCEPT to make the following revisions:

- a. Eliminate unnecessary verbiage (repetition, hedges, tangents, etc.)
- b. Make the language uniform (e.g., given a particular concept, use the same word to express that concept throughout).

The Same Example Continued:

(P1) ~~A~~ thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. ~~(P2/C1) So,~~ the whole process of human thought is ~~valueless~~ if it is the result of ~~irrational~~ causes. ~~(C2) So, a theory which makes the whole process of human~~ ~~thought~~ a result of irrational forces is ~~false~~.

- Deleted:** Each particular
- Deleted:** Obviously, then,
- Deleted:** , what we call Reason,
- Deleted:** equally without worth
- Deleted:** unreasoned
- Deleted:** Hence
- Deleted:** every
- Deleted:** of the universe
- Deleted:** mind
- Deleted:** ...nonsense

Step Three

3. **Make Explicit Suppressed Premises** Charity is crucial here; see 6. You should add to the list of premises *only if* it is obvious that the author was implicitly assuming it—or if it clearly improves the argument.

The Same Example Continued Further:

(P1) A thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. ~~(P2) If (P1), then the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.~~ ~~(C1) So, the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.~~ ~~(P3) If (C1), then a theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false.~~ (C2) So, a theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false.

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Step Four

4. **Group Premises with Their Conclusions.** List together a conclusion with its premises: Don't "interrupt" a conclusion's list of premises with other stuff, even if the passage does that.

In more detail: First list all *and only* the premises that support the first conclusion. Then write down the conclusion. Next (if applicable) list the additional premises which support the second conclusion. Continue in this way until you reach the Main Conclusion.

That Same Example Again:

(P1) A thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

(P2) If (P1), then the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

(C1) So, the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

(P3) If (C1), then a theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false.

(C2) So, every theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false.

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Step Five

5. **Make the Deductive Form Apparent**, when applicable. Optional: Indicate next to a conclusion what form the argument has (e.g., “MP” for *modus ponens*, “HS” for hypothetical syllogism, etc.). You can also indicate here which premise(s) figure into the argument-form. Even if the argument does not have one of the “famous forms,” you can still indicate next to the conclusion that it follows deductively. This is done by writing, e.g., “from 3, 4” if the conclusion deductively follows from the sentences you numbered as 3 and 4.

Yet Again with That Example:

(P1) A thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

(P2) If (P1), then the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

(C1) So, the whole process of human thought is valueless if it is the result of irrational causes.

[(P1), (P2), MP]

(P3) If (C1), then a theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false.

(C2) So, every theory which makes the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces is false. [(C1), (P3), MP]

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Step Six

6. **Above all, be fair and charitable in interpreting an argument.** Do not make the language uniform at the cost of distorting the author's intentions or making the argument less plausible. The same rule applies when attributing suppressed premises.

This means:

- a. Your revisions do not make the argument of a different *type* than what the author intends. (See the handout on the Five Argument Types.)
- b. Your revisions clearly make the premises more supportive of the conclusion. That is, if we grant the revised premises, the conclusion is clearly more likely than with the unrevised premises.
- c. Your revisions do not make the argument any more controversial overall.

The Example, One More Time:

(P1) If a thought is the result of irrational causes, then it is worthless.

(P2) If (P1), then if the whole process of human thought is the result of irrational causes, then it is worthless.

(C1) So, if the whole process of human thought is the result of irrational causes, then it is worthless.

(P3) ~~The whole process of human thought is not worthless.~~

(C2) So, ~~it is false that~~ the whole process of human thought a result of irrational forces. [(C1), (P3), ~~MT~~]

Here, I revised (P3) significantly, and changed the last inference to *Modus Tollens*. This is because the new (P3) is plausible, whereas the old (P3) was a bit convoluted. It is also more likely that the author had the new (P3) in mind when making the argument.

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Deleted: is false

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Another Example.

Step 1: Identify premises and conclusions.

(P1) The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it; the only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. (P2/C1) In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that any thing is desirable, is that people do actually desire it...

(P3/C2) No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, (C3) we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good. (J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*)

Step 2: Regiment the language.

(P1) The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it. (C1/P2) So, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people desire it... (C2/P3) So, the only proof that the general happiness is desirable is that people desire it. (C3) So, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable.

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- Deleted:** actually
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- Deleted:** : and so of the other sources of our experience
- Deleted:** In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence
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- Deleted:** , except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness
- Deleted:** This, however, being a fact,
- Deleted:** not only all
- Deleted:** which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require,
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Step 3: Make explicit suppressed premises.

(P1) The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it. (C1) So, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people desire it. (C2) So, the only proof that the general happiness is desirable is that people desire it. (P2) People desire the general happiness. (C3) So, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable.

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Step 4: Group premises with their conclusions.

(P1) The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it.
(C1) So, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people desire it.
(C2) So, the only proof that the general happiness is desirable is that people desire it.
(P2) People indeed desire the general happiness.
(C3) So, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable.

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Step 5: Make the deductive form apparent (where applicable).

(P1) The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it.
(C1) So, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people desire it.
[By analogy, (P1)]
(C2) So, the only proof that the general happiness is desirable is that people desire it.
[from (C1)]
(P2) People desire the general happiness.
(C3) So, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable. [from (C2), (P2)]

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Step 6: Above all, be fair and charitable in interpreting the argument

(P1) The only proof that an object is visible is that people see it; the only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it.

(C1) So, the only proof that anything is desirable is that people desire it.

[By analogy, (P1)]

(C2) So, if people desire the general happiness, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable. [from (C1)]

(P2) People desire the general happiness.

(C3) So, we have the only proof that the general happiness is desirable. [(C2), (P2), MP]

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There's no real need to revise the argument any further after step 5. However, I have reworked the inference to (C3) as a case of *Modus Ponens*, just to make clearer that the claim really does follow from (C2) and (P2). Along with this, I rephrased (C2), so that it is explicitly in the form of a conditional.