Reconstructing Arguments – Introduction to Moral Philosophy

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Reconstructing Arguments

Sometimes we will take a piece of text in which an argument appears and state it in a more formal manner with the premises and conclusion clearly distinguished and implicit premises added. This is called "reconstructing an argument". Here's an example.

Original text: "Just wanted to let you know that I can't walk the dog because I'm not at home"

Reconstructed argument:

1. I'm not at home.
2. If I'm not at home I can't walk the dog.
–
C. I can't walk the dog.

In general, I recommend reconstructing arguments in three steps.

Step 1 is to identify the conclusion of the argument.

For example, take the text "Just wanted to let you know that I can't walk the dog because I'm not at home". The conclusion is "I can't walk the dog."

Step 2 is to identify premises that the author explicitly stated.

For example, take the text "Just wanted to let you know that I can't walk the dog because I'm not at home".

One premise that is explicitly stated is "I'm not at home."

Step 3 is to identify premises that the author hasn't explicitly stated, but that are necessary for the conclusion to validly follow. For example, so far our argument looks like this:

1. I'm not at home
–
C. I can't walk the dog.

In order for the conclusion to validly follow, we need to add a premise, to yield:

1. I'm not at home
2. I can't walk the dog if I'm not at home.
–
C. I can't walk the dog.

Here are some examples for you to try:

Example 1. The flowers will die because you haven't watered them.

Example 2. I was up late last night and unfortunately I don't have access to coffee so I'll feel tired this afternoon.

Sometimes an author won't use consistent wording. If you keep their wording and don't add implicit premises, then you'll end up with an invalid argument.

For example, suppose the person writes: "Some people don't have the right to have kids because they'll harm them and no one who'll harm kids should have them."

The following reconstruction is invalid because of inconsistent wording:

1. Some people who have kids will harm them.
2. No one who will harm kids should have kids.
–
3. Some people don't have the right to have kids.

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One option is to switch the author's wording so that their wording is consistent.

For example, suppose the person writes: "Some people don't have the right to have kids because they'll harm them and no one who'll harm kids should have them."

This could be switched to:

1. Some people who have kids will harm them.
2. No one who will harm kids should have kids.
–
C. Some people shouldn't have kids.

Another better option

Another option is to add an additional premise that allows the conclusion to validly follow.

For example, suppose the person writes: "Some people don't have the right to have kids because they'll harm them and no one who'll harm kids should have them."

A premise could be added to yield:

1. Some people who have kids will harm them.
2. No one who will harm kids should have kids.
3. If one shouldn't have kids, then one doesn't have the right to have them.
–
C. Some people don't have the right to have kids.

Another tip is to not use more premises than you need for the conclusion to validly follow.

For example, in the following argument, the third premise is unnecessary and can be deleted.

1. People who will harm kids shouldn't have them.
2. Some people will harm kids.
3. Harming kids is bad.
–
C. Some people shouldn't have kids.

Each of the arguments below has problems. How can they be fixed?

First argument:
1. Abortion is the killing of a fetus.
2. It is wrong to kill innocent persons.
–
3. Abortion is wrong.

Second argument:
1. I have two cats.
2. Cats never live past 100.
3. The only pets I have are cats.
–
4. The only pets I have will not live past 100.

Reconstruct the following argument from Wertheimer: "On one hand, we do not want to say that all aversive or unpleasant experiences constitute harms. A may offend B if he uses his cell phone during a movie, but A does not harm B."