**Argument Reconstruction Handout**

***Attached are step-by-step instructions of how to reconstruct an argument from the reading, with an example, excerpted from a UNC Writing Center Handout <***[***http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/philosophy/***](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/philosophy/)***. For Step 6, there are rules about the logic by which an argument is structured. This skill also requires basic knowledge about how to read arguments in a philosophically rigorous way, using rules of logic, for which you should refer to the Vaughn and Woodhouse readings (available on the course website).***

**Argument Reconstruction, UNC Writing Handout**

To reconstruct an argument, you’ll need to present it in a way that someone unfamiliar with the material will understand. Often, this requires you to say a lot more than the philosopher whose work you are writing about did! There are two main ways to reconstruct an argument: in regular prose or as a formal series of numbered steps. Unless your professor or TA has told you otherwise, you should probably use regular prose. In either case, keep these points in mind:

* Keep your ideas separate from the author’s. Your purpose is to make the author’s argument clear, not to tell what you think of it.
* Be charitable. Give the best version of the argument you can, even if you don’t agree with the conclusion.
* Define important terms.
* Organize your ideas so that the reader can proceed logically from premises to conclusion, step by step.
* Explain each premise.

**Let’s walk through an argument reconstruction.** Here is a passage by 18th-century British philosopher David Hume:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: *Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact, but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.* (David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature).

**Step 1:** Reread the passage a few times, stopping to look up any unfamiliar words—”disapprobation,” maybe. Be sure you understand the important terms, like “vicious.” (By “vicious,” Hume seems to mean “wicked, depraved, or immoral,” which probably isn’t the way you use the word in everyday speech.)

**Step 2:** Identify the conclusion. Sometimes your teacher will identify it for you, but even if she didn’t, you can find it. (Caution: It won’t always be the first or the last sentence in the passage; it may not even be explicitly stated.) In this case, Hume’s conclusion is something like this: The viciousness of an action is a feeling of disapprobation in the person who considers it, not a property of the action itself.

**Step 3:** Identify the premises. Consider the conclusion and ask yourself what the author needs to do to prove it. Hume’s conclusion here seems to have two parts:

* When we call an action vicious, we mean that our “nature” causes us to feel blame when we contemplate that action.
* There is nothing else that we could mean when we call an action “vicious.”

**Step 4:** Identify the evidence. Hume considers an example, murder, and points out that when we consider why we say that murder is vicious, two things happen:

* We realize that when we contemplate murder, we feel “a sentiment of disapprobation” in ourselves.
* No matter how hard we look, we don’t see any other “matter of fact” that could be called “vice”—all we see “in the object” (the murder) are “certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts.”

**Step 5:** Identify unspoken assumptions. Hume assumes that murder is a representative case of “viciousness.” He also assumes that if there were “viciousness” in the “object” (the murder), we would be able to “see” it—it isn’t somehow hidden from us. Depending on how important you think these assumptions are, you may want to make them explicit in your reconstruction.

**Step 6:** Sketch out a formal reconstruction of the argument as a series of steps.\*

1. If we examine a vicious action like murder, we see passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts.
2. We don’t see anything else.
3. So we don’t see any property or “matter of fact” called “viciousness.”
4. Assumption: What we don’t see is not there.
5. When we examine our feelings about murder, we see a “sentiment of disapprobation.”
6. Unstated premise: This feeling of disapprobation is the only thing all the acts we think are vicious have in common, and we feel it whenever we confront a vicious act—that is, all and only vicious acts produce the feeling of disapprobation.
7. Conclusion: So the viciousness of a bad action is a feeling of disapprobation in the person who considers it, not a factual property of the action itself.

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