

Sample Passages #2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 — Reconstructions

April 7, 2011

2. The second passage reads as follows:

Letter to the editor: "In regard to your editorial, 'Crime bill wastes billions,' let me set you straight. Your paper opposes mandatory life sentences for criminals convicted of three violent crimes, and you whine about how criminals' rights might be violated. Yet you also want to infringe on a citizen's right to keep an bear arms. You say you oppose life sentences for three-time losers because judges couldn't show any leniency toward the criminals no matter how trivial the crime. What is your definition of trivial, busting an innocent child's skull with a hammer?"
North State Record

1. The editorial "Crime Bill Wastes Billions" contains the following argument, \mathcal{A} :

- 1*. If the crime bill is passed, then anyone who commits three violent crimes will be imprisoned for life, no matter how trivial the three crimes they committed were.
 - 2*. If anyone who commits three violent crimes will be imprisoned for life, no matter how trivial the three crimes they committed were, then criminals' rights will be systematically violated.
 - 3*. Therefore, if the crime bill is passed, then this will lead to criminals' rights being systematically violated. 1*, 2*
 - 4*. All bills which, if passed, would lead to criminals' rights being systematically violated should not be passed.
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- 5*. The crime bill should not be passed. 3*, 4*

- 2. The editor (*i.e.*, the author of \mathcal{A}) also believes that some kind of gun-control bill should be passed.
 - 3. All gun-control laws would lead to systematic violation of citizens' rights to keep and bear arms.
 - 4. Therefore, the editor endorses some bills which would lead to systematic violation of citizens' rights to keep and bear arms, but the editor does not endorse the crime bill because (according to his premise 3*) it would lead to systematic violation of criminals' rights. (I), 1-3
 - 5. If (4), then the editor has inconsistent beliefs.
 - 6. Therefore, the editor has inconsistent beliefs. (I), 4, 5
 - 7. If the editor has inconsistent beliefs, then we should not be convinced by his argument \mathcal{A} against the crime bill. (I)
 - 8. All violent crimes are highly *non*-trivial. (I)
 - 9. If all violent crimes are highly *non*-trivial, then no criminal who is convicted of three violent crimes would have their rights violated by being (automatically) imprisoned for life. (I)
 - 10. Therefore, Premise 2* of argument \mathcal{A} is false. (I), 8, 9
 - 11. If an argument \mathcal{A} has a false premise, then we shouldn't be convinced by \mathcal{A} . (I)
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12. We should not be convinced by the editor's argument \mathcal{A} against the crime bill. (I), {6, 7} and {10, 11}

Notice how I have taken the conclusion of this argument to be about the *argument* \mathcal{A} made in the editorial, and *not* about the crime bill itself. I did this because nothing the author of this passage says directly addresses the issue of whether the crime bill should be passed or not. All the author talks about is why we should not be convinced by the editor's argument \mathcal{A} *against* the crime bill. This is a very important point. One will often encounter arguments of this kind in real life.

This passage contains *two* independent arguments for its conclusion (12). The first argument (premises 2-7) is what you might call an argument "from the inconsistency of the author." This is a very poor kind of argument. It assumes — premise (7) — that no person with inconsistent beliefs can produce any good arguments. This is clearly false. *Even if* the editor were inconsistent in his beliefs (which has *not* been established in this case, since premises (4) and (5) also seem to be probably false), it does *not* follow that his particular argument \mathcal{A} is not a good argument. I have included this first argument in my reconstruction only to illustrate a point about how *not* to criticize an argument (a charitable reconstruction would ignore this personal attack, in favor of the argument from premises 7-11, see below). *You should never criticize an argument by attacking its author.* Such *Ad Hominem* attacks are *not* relevant to the quality of particular arguments that people endorse.

The second argument (premises 8-11) is more to the point. At least this argument aims to show that the editor's argument \mathcal{A} contains a false premise. If this could be established, then it *would* provide good reason *not* to be

convinced by \mathcal{A} . Here, the real controversy seems to be focused on premise (8). Surely, some violent crimes are worse than others. So, I am a bit worried about premise (8), which seems to presuppose that “all violent crimes are created equal.” On the other hand, “violent crime” is a technical term which is, presumably, defined in the crime bill itself. So, in order to make an informed judgment about the truth of (8), we would need to hear more about how “violent crime” is defined in the crime bill. For this reason, I will suspend judgment on the rational strength of the argument from premises 8–11, until I know more about the crime bill, and precisely how it characterizes “violent crime.”¹

4. Passage #4 reads as follows:

The issue is not whether flag burning is offensive or even wrong. Rock music, vulgar language and punk hairstyles are offensive to many. And, infidelity, deceit, and lying are wrong. But, it is not the business of government to imprison people for offensiveness or wrongdoing of these sorts. A flag is a piece of cloth. To destroy it (assuming it's your own) harms no one. There are thousands of others and new ones are produced each day. True, that a piece of cloth has great symbolic value. But, that is precisely why publicly burning it can dramatize a point ... Chief Justice Rehnquist argues that prohibiting this mode of expression still leaves people with plenty of others. That's true. But, it misses the point. One needn't prohibit all means of expression before one has compromised freedom. If I lock you in a room, it will be of little consolation that you can talk on the phone ... We are genuinely free only when we can hold both the views we want and (so long as we harm no one thereby) express them as we choose.

My reconstruction of the argument in this passage is as follows:

1. If a person expresses themselves by burning their own U.S. flag, then no person would (in *any* case) be harmed by this form of expression. (E)
2. A U.S. citizen has some freedom of expression only if he or she is allowed by the U.S. government to hold the views they want, and to express (*any* of) them as they choose, provided that such expressions do not harm anyone. (E)
3. All people should have some freedom of expression. (I)
4. All U.S. citizens should be allowed by the U.S. government to express themselves by burning their own U.S. flags. (I), 1–3

This reconstruction is a bit stronger than the one we came-up with in class (since I use the locution “*some* freedom of expression” rather than “freedom of expression,” in (2) and (3)). The only really controversial premise seems to be (1). Presumably, those who oppose flag-burning would argue that — at least in *some* cases — burning your own U.S. flag *would* harm someone. What sense of the word “harm” needs to be assumed in order for this argument to be sound? Is this sense of “harm” the same sense that people who *oppose* (4) have in mind? Try to resolve this *ambiguity*.

5. Passage #5 reads as follows:

Students who come to school under the influence of drugs are disruptive and they interfere with the education of other students. Students have a right to a quality education, and the school board must not permit some students to interfere with the education of others. So, we should test students to see if they are using drugs and the drug users should not be permitted to attend school.

My reconstruction of the argument in this passage is as follows:

1. Using drugs causes students to be disruptive to the educational process. (E)
2. If (1), then the school board can prevent (or, at least, lessen) the amount of disruption to the educational process (caused by students) by testing students for drugs, and barring those students who test positive for drugs from attending school. (I)
3. The school board should do anything it can to prevent (or, at least, lessen) the amount of disruption to the educational process (caused by students), provided that the school board does not (systematically) violate the rights of students by doing so. (E)
4. Testing students for drugs, and barring those students who test positive for drugs from attending school would not (systematically) violate students' rights.
5. The school board should test students for drugs, and bar those students who test positive for drugs from attending school. (E), 1–4

Premise (2) seems reasonable. *If* using drugs *were* causing students to be disruptive, then such a “testing and removal” program probably would prevent (or, at least, lessen) the amount of disruption caused by students. Moreover, premise

¹If, for example, “violent crimes” were restricted to certain kinds of brutal homicide, then premise (8) would probably be quite reasonable.

(3) sounds okay to me as well. It is one of the functions of a school board to minimize disruption to the educational process caused by students (in ways that do *not* systematically violate students' rights). So, the controversial premises must be (1) and (4). Is (1) true? I think (1) is plausible (at least, if we're talking about certain *kinds* and *amounts* of drugs being used). However, it is worth thinking about whether using drugs is a *cause* of disruptive behavior, or a mere *symptom* of some deeper problems which cause students to use drugs *and* to be disruptive (the relevant analogy here would be to treating a symptom of a disease rather than treating the root cause of the disease). In any event, I would say that premise (4) is the most controversial premise. In a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling, justice Sandra Day O'Connor argued (in a minority opinion) that this kind of "testing and removal" program would be in (systematic) violation of students' constitutional rights. She gives some good reasons for thinking so.²

6. Passage #6 reads as follows:

If you pick up a pocket watch and look at the mechanism, you will immediately come to think that someone designed the watch. The universe and all its parts also fit together like a well-crafted machine.

My reconstruction of the argument in this passage is as follows:

1. The universe is a highly complex structure whose parts fit together like a well-crafted machine. (E)
2. Any highly complex structure whose parts fit together like a well-crafted machine (*e.g.*, a pocket watch) must have been designed and created by a sentient being. (I)
3. The only sentient being powerful enough to design and create the universe is God. (I)

4. God (*viz.*, the designer and creator of the universe) exists. (I), 1-3

This is a simplistic rendition of what is known in the philosophical literature as *the design argument for the existence of God*. Premises (1) and (3) seem reasonable to me. So, it must be premise (2) that's the controversial one. Many (but not all) contemporary evolutionary biologists would deny (2). See Elliott Sober's recent book *Philosophy of Biology* for some compelling reasons to think that premise (2) is false. On the other hand, see William Paley's classic 1802 book *Natural Theology* (where the design argument first appeared) for reasons to think that premise (2) is true.

7. Passage #7 reads as follows:

Sound logic is not always desirable. It is, in fact, the most dangerous of all things, if one starts with a false premise. In such a case, the more logically one reasons, the farther one gets from the truth. The only hope there is for a healthy conclusion or good thought, if a premise is false, is to make a slip somewhere in the reasoning process. (Fulton Sheen, *Old Errors in New Labels*, New York, 1931, page 287)

My reconstruction of the argument in this passage is as follows:

1. All valid arguments with (all) false premises are arguments with false conclusions. (E)
2. If (1) is true, then, if one wants to be able to deduce true conclusions from false premises, then one must reason *invalidly*. (I)

3. If one wants to be able to deduce true conclusions from false premises, then one must reason *invalidly*. (E), 1, 2

Premise (2) is clearly true. So, the controversial premise here must be (1). And, in fact, (1) is *demonstrably* false. The following argument is a counterexample to (1):

1. All professional athletes are males.
2. Bob Dylan is a professional athlete.

3. Bob Dylan is a male.

This *valid* argument has all false premises and a true conclusion. So, it is possible to deduce true conclusions from false premises, by reasoning *validly* (*i.e.*, by using what the author calls "sound logic"). This shows that (1) is false (indeed, this example also demonstrates that the *conclusion* (3) is false, as well!).

²This (and all other) U.S. Supreme Court rulings are available on the internet. To find the ruling I'm referring to here, search on the keywords "Oregon drug testing student" in the following search engine: <http://www.usscplus.com:80/online/fulltext.htm>.