Philosophy 101

(3/22/11)

- **I've posted solutions to HW #3 (study these!).**

- **HW #4 is due on Thursday**
  - **Longer than usual (and on ch. 4)**

- **Quiz #4 is next Thursday**
  - **This will be *re-do* of the last quiz (on chs. 3&4)**
  - **I'll give you the higher of your two scores**

- **Starting today: Chapter 5**
  - **(Charitably) Reconstructing Arguments**
    - **Recognizing arguments *vs* non-arguments**
    - **Zooming in on arguments in a passage**
    - **Seeking the strongest argument expressed**

Reconstructing Arguments 1

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

- Many passages we read contain *no* arguments, or contain *mostly non*-argumentative material.

- News stories and other similar passages simply *report/state* a bunch of propositions. These are *descriptive* passages.

- Example (actual excerpt from 1989 Rochester newspaper):

Prosecutors have decided to retry Johnny Penry, a retarded man whose death sentence for a murder and rape was struck down last month by the Supreme Court. Without a retrial, the state would have to commute his sentence to life imprisonment. Penry, 33, was sentenced in 1980 for the slaying of Pamela Carpenter, 22.

The sentence was vacated by the high court, which said jurors should have been told that his history of mental impairment and child abuse might have warranted life in prison instead. Experts say Penry has the reasoning ability of a 7-year-old.[1]

Reconstructing Arguments 2

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

- Other passages are *rhetorical* in nature.

- These aren't *reports*, but they aren't arguments either.

- Example: *non*-descriptive, *non*-argumentative, *rhetorical* passage:

Your leftist editorials have often disgusted me, but the latest one on the flag-burning issue was particularly abhorrent. Even after your own survey showed your readers overwhelmingly against the decision, you come up with this ridiculous editorial. . . .

Somewhere we have to draw the line and President Bush has proposed doing just that.[2]

Reconstructing Arguments 3

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

- Descriptive and rhetorical writing can be very *good* writing.

- But, even very good descriptive/rhetorical writing need not aim to express any *arguments*.

- Famous example: The Declaration of Independence

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Reconstructing Arguments 4

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• Some descriptive passages can describe things in ways that may naturally "suggest" arguments — *without expressing any*:

Some of the crime statistics underlying the gun arguments are surprising. . . . Some of the statistics are merely appalling: we had roughly ten thousand handgun deaths last year. The British had forty. In 1978, there were 18,714 Americans murdered. Sixty-four percent were killed with handguns. In that same year, we had more killings with handguns by children ten years old and younger than the British had by killers of all ages. The Canadians had 579 homicides last year; we had more than twenty thousand.[3]

Reconstructing Arguments 5

Distinguishing arguments from non-arguments

• The example I gave before of a rhetorical passage was an incomplete excerpt from an actual letter to the editor. Let's look at the whole letter — are there arguments in here?

Your leftist editorials have often disgusted me, but the latest one on the flag-burning decision was particularly abhorrent. Even after your own survey showed your readers overwhelmingly against the decision, you come up with this ridiculous editorial.

Can't you see that flag burning is obscene—just as obscene as walking naked down Main Street at noon? Would you defend this as freedom of expression also? You probably would.

Somewhere we have to draw the line and President Bush has proposed doing just that. How can you castigate him for responding to the will of all patriotic Americans and, I am sure, to his own outrage at this decision?

Our office holders have an obligation to follow the will of the people and that is exactly what he is doing.[4]

Reconstructing Arguments 6

Identifying Conclusions of Arguments

• If you think you've got an argument expressed in a passage, you'll first need to *identify its conclusion*. Some guidelines:

• Ask yourself: *what's the main point of the passage*?

• Conclusions need not be controversial claims — they can be about any sort of topic.

• Longer passages may contain *multiple* arguments. It can be useful to *outline the structure* of a passage, if you think there are multiple conclusions being argued for in the passage.

• Look for *conclusion indicators* ("therefore", "hence", "thus").

• Try to *insert* a conclusion indicator, and see if the passage still reads smoothly (*as an argument for that claim*).

• Sometimes conclusions are *not explicitly stated, or* they are stated in an unclear or imprecise (or even *misleading!*) way.

Reconstructing Arguments 7

Identifying Premises of Arguments

• Ask yourself: *what are the author's reasons* for believing the conclusion (or *what reasons are they offering*)?

• If there are *multiple* arguments in the passage, be careful to *group premises with their associated conclusions*.

• Look for *premise indicators*. [Or, try to *insert* premise indicators, and see if the passage still reads smoothly.]

• Some premises are *implicit*, and must be articulated *by us*.

• Premises can be stated in obscure or unclear ways. Our reconstructions should make such premises *clear and precise*.

• Sometimes statements in a passage are *unnecessary premises*.

• Some stated premises may be *irrelevant* to the conclusion (we may *omit* these if it makes the argument stronger).

Reconstructing Arguments 8

General *vs* Specific Premises

- Premises can be either general or specific.
- Specific premises are claims about individual objects.
  - e.g., Socrates is a man.
- General premises involve "quantifying" over groups of objects. There are various types of "quantifiers":
  - Some, many, most, all, none, almost all, every, any.
- Often, specific and general premises are *combined* in arguments. We've seen examples from predicate logic.
- We will reconstruct general premises in *standard form*:
  - *All A*s are *B*s.
  - *Most A*s are *B*s.
  - *Some A*s are *B*s.

Reconstructing Arguments 9

General *vs* Specific Premises

- Here are some examples (to convert into *standard form*):
  - If something is a bird, then it can fly.
    - Form: All *A*s are *B*s.
  - The only people who got an "A" did it by bribing the prof.
    - Form: All *A*s are *B*s.
  - A person is a student only if that person is registered.
    - Form: All *A*s are *B*s.
  - Lying is always risky.
    - Form: All *A*s are *B*s.
  - In most cases, honesty is the best policy.
    - Form: Most *A*s are *B*s.

Reconstructing Arguments 10

Adding Implicit Premises

- We have three basic principles to help guide us in the addition of implicit premises (when it is clear that this is needed).
- **Faithfulness**:
  - (**PF**) Add implicit premises that are *consistent with the intention of the author* of the argument.
- **Charity**:
  - (**PCI**) Add implicit premises that are *reasonable to accept* rather than implicit premises that are obviously false.
- **Generalization**:
- (**PG**) When adding a generalization as an implicit premise, add a *true wide* generalization rather than a *true narrow* one, and add a *true narrow* generalization rather than a *false wide* one.

Reconstructing Arguments 11

Adding Implicit Premises

- We have three basic principles to help guide us in the addition of implicit premises (when it is clear that this is needed).
- **Faithfulness**:
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- (**PG**) When adding a generalization as an implicit premise, add a *true wide* generalization rather than a *true narrow* one, and add a *true narrow* generalization rather than a *false wide* one.

Reconstructing Arguments 12

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

Bar X. Am is a recent law-school graduate who has just been interviewed for a position in a law firm. The interviewer says, "Bar will be a successful lawyer. She's smart and articulate, and she likes to argue."

- As a first pass, we might try the following reconstruction:

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.

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4. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

- But, this reconstruction is *missing a generalization*.
- What generalization should we add here?

Reconstructing Arguments 13

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

- The first thing to try would be something like this:

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.
4. All people who are smart, articulate, and like to argue will be successful lawyers.

---

5. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

- At least the argument is *valid* now (assuming Bar is a person).
- But, the generalization we added is *too wide* to be plausible.
  - Why is it clear that this generalization is *false*?

Reconstructing Arguments 14

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

- This suggests the following amended reconstruction:

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.
4. Bar is a *lawyer*.
5. All *lawyers* who are smart, articulate, and like to argue will be successful lawyers.

---

6. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

- This *narrower* generalization is more reasonable/likely.
  - (**PG**) recommends *true narrow* over *false wide*.

Reconstructing Arguments 15

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

- Why not go *even narrower*?

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.
4. Bar is a *lawyer*.
5. Bar is a *woman*.
6. All *lawyers* who are *women and* are smart, articulate, and like to argue will be successful lawyers.

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7. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

- (**PG**) favors *true wide* over *true narrow*, unless there is a specific reason to think the author intended the narrower generalization.

Reconstructing Arguments 16

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example)

• The principle of charity urges us to find *the strongest argument in the vicinity*. Consider the following *non*-deductive alternative:

1. Bar is smart.
2. Bar is articulate.
3. Bar likes to argue.
4. Bar is a lawyer.
5. *Most* lawyers who are smart, articulate, and like to argue will be successful lawyers.

---

6. Bar will be a successful lawyer.

• This ***may*** be a *stronger argument* than the deductive rendition. This "most" generalization is *more plausible*, to be sure…

Reconstructing Arguments 17

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example #2)

• Two common mistakes here:
  • (a) leaving out a requisite general premise
  • (b) leaving the quantifier off a general premise
• Example:
  • Michael must be tall. After all, he's a professional basketball player.
• Mistake (a) would lead to this *incomplete reconstruction*:

1. Michael is a professional basketball player.

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2. Michael is tall.

Reconstructing Arguments 18

Adding Implicit Generalizations (Example #2)

• Mistake (b) would lead to this *incomplete reconstruction*:

1. Michael is a professional basketball player.
2. Professional basketball players are tall.

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3. Michael is tall.

• This is *still incomplete*, since (2) is *missing a quantifier*.

• Which quantifier should we add here?
  • All? Most? or some other quantifier?
  • Remember, we want the *strongest, plausibly true claim*…