

ARGUMENT RECONSTRUCTION EXERCISE – MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

For the first step of this assignment, you must choose an argument – any argument – from the reading you are presenting. (Having trouble recognizing an argument? Look for cues like “therefore,” “it follows that,” etc.)

Your task in this assignment is to *reconstruct* and *defend* the argument. (Since you will need to defend the argument whether or not you ultimately think it works, it is advisable choose one that is not obviously mistaken.) An argument reconstruction means the restatement of the premises of the argument, in a form that makes the argument *logically valid*. (An argument is logically valid if it is impossible for the premises to be true while the conclusion be false.) A defense of the argument means that you argue for each and every one of the premises — either on independent grounds, or show that they follow from other, already established premises.

Since this assignment is similar to a well-specified physical exercise, it also has a characteristic form that it should take. Here is a paragraph by paragraph breakdown of this form. (Of course, the precise form will depend a great deal on the argument in question. Sometimes the argument has just two simple premises and a conclusion, and that’s it; sometimes it has more. You may have as many premises as you need, although more than 7 or 8 will make your argument very tedious.)

First paragraph: Introductory paragraph; brief context of the discussion and stating the author’s position.

Second paragraph: reconstructing the argument. This usually looks something like this:

- (1) _____ [Premise to be defended]
- (2) _____ [Premise to be defended]
- (3) _____ [Follows from 1 & 2]
- (4) _____ [Premise to be defended]
- (5) _____ [Follows from 3 & 4]
- (6) _____ [Premise to be defended]
- (7) Therefore, _____ [Follows from 5 & 6; the original thesis the author wanted to show. This is your conclusion.]

A few notes:

- Again, the number of premises depends on the argument in question. Make sure you don’t have premises that don’t do anything (if they can be taken out without making the argument invalid, you don’t need them!), and that you have all the premises that you need for the argument to work.
- The logical structure (which premise depends on which other ones) also depends on the argument in question. Sometimes this structure is rather difficult to figure out, but as you do it, you will see that the argument starts making more sense.
- More often than not, the argument in the text is an enthymeme, i.e., the author does not explicitly state some of the premises. One of your most important task in this assignment is to find and state the missing premise(s) so that the argument be valid. Why do authors

leave out premises? It may be because the missing premise is self-evident or obvious; it also may be because the missing premise would be rather difficult to defend. To determine which is which, is sometimes hard but can help a great deal in understanding what's going on. Your main goal in this step is to provide an argument, on the author's behalf, which at least *prima facie* looks like an argument, the steps are valid, and the conclusion is what the author originally proposed to show.

- Please, use a numbered list. It may not be regarded as elegant formatting in some fields, but here it makes things so much easier to see.

Paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6, however many you need: defending the argument.

You need to defend (on behalf of the author) every single premise in the argument, as reconstructed in step 1. There are two basic kinds of premises: first, what we call an “independent premise,” and second, a premise that follows from other, already established premises.

- In the first case, you must give an independent defense. It may be that the premise is obviously true; in that case, you need to say that, and also need to say why it is obviously true. It may also be that the premise is not obviously true; in that case, you need to do your best to make it plausible. You can use the author's defense of the premise if they have one; if not, then you should mention that and provide your own. Again, in this assignment you need to defend the argument, whether or not you ultimately think it works.
- In the second case, you must state from which other premises your premise follows. You must make sure that your premise does indeed follow, i.e., it cannot be the case that the already established premises are true while your new premise is false.
- Obviously, the ultimate conclusion of your argument should fall in the second category; it should follow from already established premises.

Conclusion. Restate the main claim, and say why anyone would care about it (perhaps by pointing out some of its implications).

DUE: On the day of your presentation, before class. You can either bring it to class in hard copy, or email it to me beforehand. You will be able to re-do this assignment once after receiving comments on the initial version.