

How to Analyse Arguments

Here is an argument:

No elephant is a reptile. Since Jumbo is an elephant, Jumbo can't be a reptile.

It is often convenient to write out arguments like this in the following way, listing the premises, and then writing the conclusion underneath, separated by a line:

No elephant is a reptile.

Jumbo is an elephant.

Jumbo is not a reptile.

The advantage of this format is that it makes it completely clear what the conclusion of the argument is, and what the premises are. Try to put this argument into this form:

Fido didn't come in by the cat-flap: it's tiny, and Fido is big and fat.

Now consider this pair of arguments:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Socrates is mortal.

Socrates is mortal

Anything which is mortal will eventually die.

Socrates will eventually die.

Notice that the *conclusion* of the left-hand argument is the same as one of the *premises* of the right-hand argument. You might want to 'chain-up' these two arguments to make one super-argument. Multi-step arguments like this are hard to present clearly. The best way of doing it is to number the statements, and use marginal comments to explain the (supposed) evidential relations between them, like this:

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|-----|---|-------------|
| (1) | All men are mortal. | (Premise) |
| (2) | Socrates is a man. | (Premise) |
| (3) | Socrates is mortal. | (From 1, 2) |
| (4) | Anything which is mortal will eventually die. | (Premise) |
| (5) | Socrates will eventually die. | (From 3, 4) |

Here is another 'multi-step' argument. Can you write it out in this numbered format?

If it had been the butler that murdered the chef, there would have been blood on the umbrella. But there was no blood on the umbrella. It was either the butler or the vicar that murdered the chef. Since it can't have been the butler, it must have been the vicar.

Here are some more arguments to try:

Smoking is bad for your health. Sara knows this, and yet still she smokes like a chimney. Sarah also don't exercise much. Sarah must not care about health. Her parents must be negligent.

Mabel is often mean to me, so either she loves me or she hates me. I've done nothing to make her dislike me, so she loves me.

Twas brillig. And moreover, since the slithy tothes did gyre and gimble in the wabe, it follows that the borogoves were all mimsy. From this I conclude that the mome raths outgrabe.

Let's now look at some 'real world' arguments.

By Bill Wallace – From the 'Discussion Forum' on Richard Dawkins' website.

The Faithful say that God knows absolutely everything, and that there are no limits to what he can do. [However,] if God knows everything, then nobody could construct a box so that God doesn't know what it contains, whereas if there were no limits to what God can do, then he could construct a box so that nobody knows what it contains.

From the opening of David Marsland, 'Character, Liberty and Social Structure', in Dennis O'Keefe (ed.) Economy and Virtue (IEA). NB This is highly abbreviated

Even among protagonists of a free market society, there are some who claim that markets are 'morally neutral'. This allegation constitutes a dangerous concession to the enemies of freedom ... In fact the judgement is comprehensively mistaken. Markets are not morally neutral. They both presuppose and generate virtue. ... Moral action presupposes choice. Virtue entails an opportunity for vice forgone. ... Thus morality is possible only in conditions of liberty. Without personal autonomy, I can do neither good nor evil. ... The free market is an essential component of the social structure of liberty, and ipso facto, given my argument above about the relations between morality and freedom, an indispensable component of the social structure of virtue. ... Markets are thus neither morally negative ... nor even... morally neutral. They are, on the contrary, resoundingly and constitutively positive in their moral implications and effects. ... markets are one of the several indispensable preconditions of liberty, and as such are preconditions to any genuinely moral action. In the medium term, if not in the short term, no market, no freedom, no virtue. QED.