

Berkeley's Criticism of Abstract Ideas: Argument Reconstruction

Purpose: The purpose of this document is provide students with (1) a step-by-step process for reconstructing arguments and (2) a worked example of argument reconstruction. The worked example is one of Berkeley's argument that abstract ideas cannot be formed; this argument appears in an unpublished manuscript of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Knowledge*. Ideally, this document ought to be used in conjunction with the assignment in which students reconstruct one of Hume's or Berkeley's published arguments against abstract ideas. My reconstruction of the text is inspired by [Jesseph, 2010]'s interpretation of Berkeley.

Reconstructing Arguments

Reconstructing an argument involves six steps:

1. Copy all the assumptions and conclusions. Label
 - (a) Which assertions are assumptions and which are conclusions.
 - (b) Of which premises each conclusion is purportedly a consequence
2. Copy the author's definitions of all technical terms. If the author does not define key terms, copy any passages in which the author explains or gives examples of key terms.
3. Rewrite all definitions, assumptions, and conclusions in your own words.
4. Add plausible premises to render the argument valid. Similarly, explain critical terms that the author seems to have left undefined.
5. Provide textual evidence that supports your hypothesis that the author likely endorsed the premises and definitions you have added.
6. If appropriate, repeat the above five steps if the author provides arguments with conclusions that are identical to the premises of the argument that you have just reconstructed.

Berkeley's Impossibility Argument

In an unpublished manuscript of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Knowledge*, Berkeley argues:

It is, I think, a receiv'd axiom that an impossibility cannot be conceiv'd. For what created intelligence will pretend to conceive, that which God cannot cause to be? Now it is on all hands agreed, that nothing abstract or general can be made really to exist, whence it should seem to follow, that it cannot have so much as an ideal existence in the understanding.

Reconstructing Berkeley's Argument

Step 1

- *Premise 1:* “an impossibility cannot be conceiv'd”
- *Premise 2:* “nothing abstract or general can be made really to exist”
- *Conclusion:* “it [nothing abstract or general] cannot have so much as an ideal existence in the understanding.” (By premises 1 and 2).

Step 2

Although there are several important terms in Berkeley's argument (in particular, “abstract”, “impossibility”, “ideal existence in the understanding”), I will not copy his definitions of all technical terms because doing so would make this document very long. For example, Berkeley distinguishes between two types of abstraction in the first nine sections of the *Principles*, and a full reconstruction would distinguish the two types of abstraction.

Step 3

Below, I have rewritten Berkeley's definitions, assumptions, and conclusions in my own words.

- *Premise 1':* If an idea can be formed, then it is possible for the object represented by the idea to exist.
- *Premise 2':* It is impossible for the objects represented by abstract ideas to exist.
- *Conclusion':* No abstract idea can be formed (from P1' and P2').

Steps 4 and 5

The argument is obviously valid, and so it is unnecessary to add any premises. Further, because I have not added any premises, it is unnecessary to provide textual evidence that supports my hypothesis that Berkeley endorsed the premises I have added.

Step 6 - Repeat

Here, I investigate whether Berkeley defended the two premises of the above argument. Clearly, Berkeley believed both premises of the argument were generally accepted. He calls the first premise, “a receiv’d axiom” and says the second premise “is on all hands agreed.” Why does Berkeley think both principles are generally accepted? In the published version of the *Principles*, he cites passages from Locke that indicate that Locke endorsed the second premise. So Berkeley’s argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* of Locke’s theory. The attribution of premise 2 to Locke is supported by passages like the following:

... [the general idea of a triangle] is something imperfect, *that cannot exist*; an idea wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent ideas are put together (IV, 7, ix.)

However, Berkeley does defend both premises as well. I start with the second. Berkeley argues that different, individual abstract concepts cannot exist. For example, he argues that, if the abstract idea of a hand is colorless, then it cannot exist: “But then whatever Hand or Eye I imagine, it must have some particular Shape and Colour (I, 10).” In the same passage, he argues that the abstract idea of motion is impossible: “it is equally impossible for me to form the abstract Idea of Motion ... which is neither Swift nor Slow, Curvilinear nor Rectilinear.” These examples support the general thesis that no abstract idea can exist.

How should we reconstruct the argument in the examples? Here is a plausible reconstruction of the argument for the conclusion that the abstract idea of a triangle cannot be formed, which is similar to the two examples just mentioned.

Premise 3: The abstract idea of a triangle is (a) an image of a triangle, but (b) not scalene, isosceles, or equilateral.

Premise 4: Every image of a triangle is scalene, isosceles, or equilateral.

Definition: An idea is *logically inconsistent* if it possesses contradictory properties.

Conclusion 1: The abstract idea of a triangle is logically inconsistent (from P1, P2, and Definition).

Premise 5: If an idea is logically inconsistent, then the object represented by it cannot exist.

Conclusion 2: The object represented by the abstract idea of a triangle cannot exist (from P5 and C1).

Premise 1': If an idea can be formed, then it is possible for the object represented by the idea to exist.

Conclusion 3: The abstract idea of a triangle cannot be formed (from C2 and P1').

Notice conclusion 2 is an instance of Premise 2'. I interpret “logically inconsistent” to be a modern rephrasing of what Berkeley meant by “impossibility.” The primary textual evidence that I have that Berkeley endorsed Premise 3, which asserts that the abstract idea of a triangle is “an image of a triangle” is in the following passage:

so is it impossible for me to conceive in my Thoughts any sensible Thing or Object distinct from the Sensation or Perception of it.
[Berkeley, 1998], II, 5.

This passage also explains why Berkeley might have endorsed Premise 1. Namely, the passage indicates that Berkeley assumes that, if an idea can be formed, then it must be possible to perceive the object represented by the idea. However, an object can be perceived only if it exists. So he concludes that if an idea can be formed, then it must be possible for the object represented by the idea to exist.

References

George Berkeley. *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1998.

Douglas M. Jesseph. *Berkeley's philosophy of mathematics*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.