Reconstructing Arguments:
An Exercise Involving Berkeley on Abstract Ideas

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Phil. 373
January 23rd, 2017

- I will take you step-by-step through a reconstruction of (one of) Berkeley's arguments.
- You will **reconstruct** one of Berkeley's arguments against the existence of abstract ideas.

Arguments

Question: What's an argument?

Definition: An argument is a sequence of assertions in which every claim is either a premise or justified by some set of premises.

Good Arguments

What makes an argument "good?"

- An argument is valid if whenever its premises are true, so is the conclusion. It's sound if it's valid and its premises are true.
    - Valid arguments, therefore, resemble informal mathematical proofs.
- Philosophers try to interpret historical texts so that the author's arguments are valid (or as close to valid as possible).
    - Doing so is part of being a **charitable** reader, and it allows us to focus on and debate the truth of the premises of arguments.

Reconstructing an argument

1. Copy all the assumptions and conclusions. Label
   1. Which assertions are assumptions and which are conclusions.
   2. 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 on Infinity

Berkeley on the Infinite

In his **Treatise**, Berkeley claims:

> Besides, the Mind of Man being Finite, when it treats of Things which partake of Infinity, it is not to be wondered at, if it run into Absurdities and Contradictions; out of which it is impossible it should ever extricate it self, it being of the nature of Infinite not to be comprehended by that which is Finite.

Step 1: Label Premises and Conclusions

- **Premise 1:** "the Mind of Man [is] Finite."
- **Premise 2:** "the nature of [the] Infinite [cannot] be comprehended by that which is Finite."
- **Conclusion:** " [when it treats of Things which partake of Infinity] it is impossible [that the Mind of Man] should ever extricate it self [from Absurdities and Contradictions]" (by Premises 1 and 2).

Step 2: Define Technical Terms

If I investigated this argument in detail, I'd show you passages in which Berkeley discusses what the following terms mean:

- "mind"
- "comprehended"
- "infinite" (though Berkeley typically only discusses "infinitely divisible" and "infinitesimal")

Step 3: Rewrite the argument in your own words

- **Premise 1*:** The minds of all people are finite.
- **Premise 2*:** Infinity cannot be comprehended by any finite mind.
- **Conclusion':** Infinity cannot be comprehended by any person's mind.

Step 4: Add Implicit Premises

Note: This argument is valid, and so it's not necessary to add any implicit premises to add.

Step 6: Repeat

If I were working on a paper, I'd try to find passages in which Berkeley *argues* for Premises 1 and 2 (i.e., where those premises are conclusions derived from other claims).

For the purposes of this class, I want you to practice a bit.