Arguments & Essays I

The general most important rule in reading philosophy:

Read actively, not passively!

Before you start reading, think a little about what your own view on the subject is. When you are reading you should be constantly thinking (and, if you are making notes, noting):

What is the argument here?

Do I agree with the premises?

Is the argument valid?

When the premises seem true, and the argument seems valid, but the conclusion is shocking, how should I react? Should I nevertheless believe the conclusion? Or should I take it to show that one of the premises is in fact false (which one?) or that the argument is fallacious (in which way?)?

Taking an active stance is crucial for two reasons:

(i) When it comes to writing an essay, you'll find that you've already done much of the work. You will already have views about which arguments work and which don't. Now all (!) you will need to do is to structure these views into an essay.

(ii) It is only by engaging that you will come to understand philosophical arguments in the first place. Authors will try to make clear the form of their arguments using what Fisher calls 'inference indicators' (sometimes called 'discourse markers'): words like *since*, *therefore*, *because*, *I conclude*, etc. But often these will be missing. Often, moreover, certain premises will not be mentioned: perhaps the author thinks that they are too obvious to be worth stating; perhaps they are trying to hide them; perhaps they simply haven't realized that they are relying on them. In circumstances in which the structure of the argument is not clearly spelled out, you will only be able to figure out what it is by trying to reconstruct it from what is there. And this involves thinking about what a good argument for this conclusion would be. You will have to ask what Fisher calls 'the Assertibility Question' (p. 22):

What argument or evidence would justify me in asserting the conclusion?

Having answered that, you can look to see whether there is reason to think that this is the argument that the author is employing. Reading in this way involves abiding by what is perhaps the second most important rule:

Read charitably!

Don't get so obsessed with refuting an author that you fail to understand what they are actually saying.

THE STRUCTURE OF AN ARGUMENT AND INFERENCE INDICATORS

Arguments, in the sense in which we are interested in them, consist of a *conclusion*, and a set of consideration that aim to justify that conclusion: the *premises*. It is not always clear when a set of propositions is being offered as an argument. Consider this:

> The Isle of Man is a small island lying very close to England. It is unlikely that it will ever become independent.

That doesn't look like an argument; more like two independent assertions. But reverse the order of the sentences and it seems more like one:

> It is unlikely that the Isle of Man will ever become independent. It is a small island lying very close to England.

To make it really clear that it is an argument we need to change the punctuation, or better still, add some inference indicators:

> It is unlikely that the Isle of Man will ever become independent: it is a small island lying very close to England.

> It is unlikely that the Isle of Man will ever become independent, *since* it is a small island lying very close to England.

> The Isle of Man is a small island lying very close to England, *so* it is unlikely that it will ever become independent.

Note the use of *since* is to mark the premise (compare *because, for*); *so*, in contrast serves here to mark the conclusion (compare *therefore, thus, hence, consequently*). Use of inference indicators like this makes arguments much easier to follow. Use them plentifully but carefully in your own work.

Be careful in interpreting passages though. None of these terms *always* serves to mark argument structure. Interpreting a passage is not a simple mechanical procedure. Compare these three sentences (taken from Fisher):

> John broke the window because he tripped
> John broke the window because he had forgotten his key
> John must have broken the window because he was the only one there.

Only in the last sentence does *because* serve to mark a premise, and so show that the sentence contains an argument. (Further evidence that the third use of *because* is to mark a premise comes from the fact that the verb is a modal: *must have broken*, rather than just *broke*. Compare: 'He *couldn't* be there; I would have seen him'. That *has to be* right; it says so in the book')

Other terms serve to indicate the form of the proposition.

Conjunction: *and*
Disjunction: *or*
Conditional: *if, then; suppose, then; unless, then*
Biconditional: *if and only if ('iff')*

THREE KINDS OF ARGUMENTS FOR A CONCLUSION

DEDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS

>If p then q
>p
>Therefore q

A deductive argument is valid if and only if its conclusion follows from its premises; i.e. in case every possible world in which its premises are true is a world in which its conclusion is true.

A valid deductive argument cannot become invalid by adding new premises.
Any argument whose premises are inconsistent is valid. (From a contradiction, everything follows)
Any argument whose conclusion is necessary is valid.

A deductive argument is *sound* if and only it is valid and its premises are true.

Will a sound argument always be convincing? No. Consider:

>Any argument with inconsistent premises will be valid
>Therefore, any argument with inconsistent premises will be valid

INDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS

Generalizations from a sample to a universal claim

>Every emerald examined has been green
>Therefore all emeralds are green

A valid inductive argument can become invalid by adding new premises.

INFERENCES TO THE BEST EXPLANATION (ABDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS)

>If there were another planet outside Uranus, that would explain its course.
>Therefore these is another planet outside Uranus.

Very many arguments have this form. It is hard to codify the rules that govern them.

REFUTATION

Important point of usage: to *refute* an argument is to demonstrate that it does not work. You do not refute an argument simply by denying it.

A refutation of an argument is *ad hominem* if it is designed simply to show that the person propounding the argument cannot consistently make it; for instance because she accepts some other claims that are clearly inconsistent with the conclusion. There might be nothing intrinsically wrong with the argument.

In refuting an argument, you will normally be concerned to show that the conclusion is false. But you might simply be concerned to show that the author has not successfully established the conclusion; you might have an open mind about the conclusion, or you might even think that it is true.

An argument is sound iff it is valid and it has true premises. So you can show that an argument is not sound either by showing that it has false premises, or by showing that it is not valid (or both). Often this is straightforward. One simply points out a false premise, or shows that the author has employed a fallacious argument form (e.g. If p then q; Not p; therefore Not q). But it is worth mentioning two argumentative strategies that are widely used in philosophy, but are not so direct.

COUNTEREXAMPLE

Counterexamples work against universal claims. They can be deployed against premises or conclusions
They are also commonly employed against analyses of concepts, which are things that crop up in philosophy very frequently). For instance, consider the idea that we discussed in the free will lectures that a person has free will iff they are able to act on their desires. Was that meant as an analysis? If so, consider some counterexamples.

Analyses are frequently presented in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions:
A necessary condition NC, for a state of affairs A, is a condition that must be met for that state of affairs to obtain. This corresponds to the conditional

    If A, then NC

A sufficient condition SC, for a state of affairs A, is a condition which, if met, will ensure that the state of affairs obtain. This corresponds to a conditional of the form

    If SC, then A

In giving an analysis one tries at least to give conditions that are individually necessary, and jointly sufficient for the application of that concept. Counterexamples can be against either the sufficiency of the analysis (in which case they are cases which meet the analysis, but not the thing being analyzed) or against its necessity (in which case they meet the thing being analyzed, but not the proffered analysis).

REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

These work by taking your opponent's claim, and showing that, by reasoning on the basis of it, one can reach an absurdity. In mathematics the reduction is normally to a transparent absurdity like 0 = 1. In philosophy things are seldom so clear cut. Quite often it happens that what was intended as a *reductio* is simply accepted as a consequence by the person being criticized. Or, as it is sometimes put: one's *modus tollens* is another's *modus ponens.*

Reductio is often misunderstood: it's easy to think that the propounder of a *reductio* actually accepts the premises. It is wise to make it very clear what you are doing.

This is a case of a general form of accepting a premise for the basis of an argument. This need not only be *reductio*. For instance, I might accept a premise in order to test whether it is plausible. (The detective says: "Ok, let's assume that the butler did it, and see where that gets us".)

A refutation of either of these two forms doesn't get you very far on its own. To really see what has gone wrong with an argument, you need to see where the mistake lies: in one of the premises; or in the form of the argument. (Note though: a counter-example against an inductive or abductive argument need not show any mistake in the form of the argument; its proponent might just have been unlucky.)