

Problematizing and critical reflection

The principle of charity

Critical reflection on the work of others should begin with this philosophical principle, which holds that:

- we are required to assume that the other's arguments are rational;
- we are required to consider the other's argument in its best, strongest rational interpretation;
- we are required to seek understanding, rather than contradictions or difficulties.

It is only on the the basis of this prior understanding that we can properly move on to critique. The principle is applied through **argument reconstruction**.

The reconstruction of an argument will involve, amongst others, the following steps:

1. The removal of extraneous material, ie material added for rhetorical or other purposes rather than expressing the argument's propositions.
2. The defusion of rhetoric, for example: neutralizing negative and positive connotations; and rendering rhetorical questions as declarative sentences.
3. Making implicit propositions explicit.
4. Removing irrelevant propositions.
5. Resolving ambiguity and vagueness.

Example of (1) **removing extraneous material**:

Why has marriage always meant man and woman? Because other sexual relationships are deviant. Obviously homosexual relationships are deviant; that's just biological fact. And that's what the legislation of same-sex marriage would mean: the legal protection of deviant sexual relationships - the legal protection of all sexual relationships, of whatever kind. Why not incest and bestiality too?

We might reconstruct this as follows:

Biologically atypical sexual relationships should not enjoy legal protection.
The legalisation of same-sex marriage would legally protect homosexual relationships.
Homosexual relationships are biologically atypical.

Same-sex marriage should not be legalized.

Note that this reconstruction removes the leading rhetorical question, and the concluding 'slippery slope' type of argument. We've also reduced the ambiguity of the term 'deviant' (we'll come to disambiguation later). The important thing to note is that we can now engage with the argument in a genuinely critical way by focusing on its close linkage (in the first premise) between biology (sexual reproduction) and culture (marriage and sexuality). This allows us to problematize the argument in the following ways:

- We could point out that culture is a relatively autonomous sphere of human life, and that a good many cultural practices are not biologically motivated (going to the opera, cultivating gardens for purely aesthetic purposes) and some, indeed, positively go

against the biological grain because of their consequences for health (the consumption of tobacco and alcohol for example).

- We could point out a good deal of heterosexual sexuality (within and without marriage) is not biologically motivated (wearing particular clothing, role-play, bondage, and so on).

Example of (2) **defusing rhetoric**:

That damned Kemp's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar again. He's history.

We might reconstruct this as:

If Kemp has been caught stealing money from the company, then he is going to get fired.

Kemp has been caught stealing money from the company.

Kemp is going to be fired.

Note that first of all we have removed the **epithet** 'that damned Kemp'. Expressive epithets are value-laden rhetorical strategies intended to influence an arguee's judgement of the moral character of an individual. Here are some further examples:

- the war criminal Tony Blair
- the philanthropist Bill Gates
- academy-award winner Denzil Washington

Such rhetorical strategies form no rational part of the argument being made, and should therefore be removed.

Secondly note that the metaphor 'caught with his hand in the cookie jar' has been re-rendered as a plain-language proposition, and thirdly that the idiomatic phrase 'he's history' has been similarly transformed. Although the result is much less idiomatic, it is more amenable to critical analysis.

Let's move on to issue (3), **making implicit propositions explicit**. Arguments often exclude, don't state, some of what is essential to an argument and this is left implicit. The process of argument reconstruction therefore involves making such material explicit. Consider the following argument:

The suggestion, that in order to protect children from sunburn a rule should be instituted requiring all children at our school to wear a sun hat when they are outside after 11 am, is unacceptable. For clearly such a rule would be an infringement upon the freedom of an individual.

In reconstructing this argument, it is clear that the conclusion is that a sun hat rule should not be instituted, but the only explicit premise is given in the final sentence. So our first attempt at reconstruction based on what is explicitly stated might be:

A sun hat rule at school would infringe upon the freedom of the individual.

A sun hat rule should not be instituted.

A single premise in a reconstruction is often a sign that some generalization, a major premise such as 'all men are mortal', has gone unstated. To apply the principle of charity, we have to supply this as generously as we can. Our second attempt might be:

A sun hat rule at school would infringe upon the freedom of the individual.
No rule that infringes upon the freedom of the individual is acceptable.

A sun hat rule should not be instituted.

We have arrived at a valid argument, If the premises are true, then of course the conclusion follows. However, are the premises true? Lets have a look at the second premise, a generalization and therefore a major premise. This is an example of what I would personally term 'conservative anarchism', an appeal to individual liberty that is ideologically dominant but which actually doesn't bear much critical scrutiny. Would we truly be prepared to accept such a proposition? I would confidently say no. Laws against rape, murder, and slavery are all rules 'that infringe upon the freedom of the individual.'

Before moving on, note that the application of the principle of charity almost immediately provides the opportunity for critique.

Assessing arguments

As we can see, argument reconstruction will often reveal an argument's invalidity by exposing the fact that it is not argued rationally, but rhetorically.

1. Counter evidence.
2. Counterexample.
3. Avoid 'who is to say' criticism.
4. Avoid labelling.