

PAPER ASSIGNMENT I

STRAWSON AGAINST RUSSELL

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In his paper “On Referring”, P. F. Strawson criticizes Russell’s theory of descriptions. One of his criticisms starts at the beginning of section III, from the start of the section on p. 251, through the end of the left column on p. 252. You should read the rest of the paper to understand the big picture, but your sole assignment in this paper is to *extract*, *explain*, and *evaluate* Strawson’s argument from these paragraphs on pp. 251–252.

Extracting the argument means formulating an argument in numbered premise form, as I’ve done in class, that captures what Strawson is arguing. And, that argument must be a logically valid argument—this means that there can be no “suppressed premises” omitted.

For example, suppose you had to extract an argument from this paragraph:

People that cheat on their taxes should talk to my grandfather. My grandfather is a great man. He’s wise about all sorts of things, but particularly about advice about moral matters. Now, lots of people nowadays cheat on their taxes, but I know whose advice to take. Granddad was always clear: never cheat on your taxes!

A first attempt might be:

1. My grandfather is very wise
2. My grandfather says that cheating on your taxes is wrong
3. Therefore, cheating on your taxes is wrong

Notice that the conclusion of this argument—“cheating on your taxes is wrong”—is never explicitly stated in the paragraph. That’s OK. The point of the paragraph is clearly to establish that cheating on your taxes is wrong.

But this first attempt is unacceptable, since the argument is invalid. Premises 1 and 2 don’t logically imply the conclusion, 3. In order to make the argument valid, a premise needs to be added:

1. My grandfather is very wise
2. My grandfather says that cheating on your taxes is wrong
3. If my grandfather says that cheating on your taxes is wrong, then cheating on your taxes is wrong
4. Therefore, cheating on your taxes is wrong

Premise 3 doesn't appear explicitly in the paragraph (it's a "suppressed" premise), but it is clearly being assumed, and anyway is needed to make the argument valid.

This second attempt is better, but still not perfect. Premise 1 isn't needed to make the argument valid, so it isn't doing anything. So it should be removed. Here is the final form of the argument:

1. My grandfather says that cheating on your taxes is wrong
2. If my grandfather says that cheating on your taxes is wrong, then cheating on your taxes is wrong
3. Therefore, cheating on your taxes is wrong

What happened to the claim that my grandfather is wise? Wasn't that a crucial part of the argument? Yes, it was; but it still plays a role. When you explain the argument (see below), you'll need to say why the defender of the argument thinks that premise 2 is true. And the answer is that she or he thinks that the grandfather is so wise that he's bound to be right about the morality of cheating on taxes.

Explaining the argument requires doing two things. First, you must define any technical terms that you use. (You don't need to use technical terms, but if you do use any then you must define them.) Secondly, and more importantly, you need to go *line by line* through the argument you've presented, and say why the person who offered the argument thinks the premises are true.

Evaluating the argument means assessing the premises for truth. In the case of your assignment, Strawson of course thinks the premises are true; the question is whether he is right. How might Russell reply to Strawson? Would he be

right? Even if you agree with Strawson, you should have something to say here. For example, you could imagine a hypothetical objection to the argument and then criticize it.

It is important that any objection to the argument must concern a specific premise. You might say, for example, “I think that premise 2 is false because...”.