How to Reconstruct an Argument

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Below, I have reprinted a brief passage from the Eleatic philosopher Melissus (as reported by Simplicius—see page 93 in the second edition of *Early Greek Philosophy*). I have then indicated my own thought process as I reconstructed the argument from the passage in standard premise-conclusion format. My hope is that, by working through this handout, you will get a better idea of how to reconstruct arguments for yourself.

Here is the passage:

*Again, nothing is empty of what exists. For what is empty is nothing; and hence, being nothing, it will not exist. Hence what exists does not move—for it has no way to retreat if nothing is empty…*

First observation: “Again” is often used when restating a conclusion or, sometimes, when moving on to another conclusion. So, I’m going to put down the first line from the passage as a conclusion to be established:

(C) Nothing is empty of what exists.

(Note that the indicator word “again” does not appear as part of the premise. The same thing applies to words like “for” and “hence”—these shouldn’t appear in your premises and conclusions. Also, note that I put a (C) in front of this line to remind myself that this is a conclusion to establish.)

Next, we get a “For”. This indicates that what follows is a premise. (It also indicates that the preceding thing was a conclusion.) So, I’ll put this down as the first premise of the argument:

(1) What is empty is nothing.

We then get a “and hence”. This is a clear conclusion indicator. But there is also an inference being suggested here: “being nothing, it will not exist”. So, I’ll put this down as a premise first:

(2) If it is nothing, it will not exist.
(Note that I've added an “if” and “then” to make clear that this is conditional statement.)

What follows from (1) and (2) is our earlier conclusion:

(3) [So] Nothing is empty of what exists.

(Note that I have replaced the “(C)” with a “(3)” since I now know where it fits into the argument. I've also put in a “[So]” to remind myself this is a sub-conclusion.)

Next up: “Hence what exists does not move.” This is the final conclusion in Melissus’ argument. But a premise comes right after it: “For it has no way to retreat if nothing is empty”. I’m going to try and make this last premise clearer while also linking it directly to line (3):

(4) If nothing is empty of what exists, then there’s nowhere empty to move to.

(Note that the “if” part of (4) is exactly what line (3) says. This is what I meant when I said I wanted to “link” this premise to the earlier line—it’s a way of making the language uniform so that we’re all set up for a modus ponens inference.)

Finally, we come to the one implicit (i.e., unstated) premise of the argument. The “then” part of (4) says “there’s nowhere empty to move to” and the conclusion says that “What exists does not move”. I just need a conditional linking these two things:

(5) If there’s nowhere empty to move to, then what exists does not move.

(Melissus presumably left this last premise unstated because he took it to be so obvious—in order to move somewhere, there has to be an open spot to move to. In any case, when we reconstruct arguments in this class we want to be sure to include all of the premises—even the ones that seem obvious.)

At this point, we can write out all of Melissus’ argument in standard premise-conclusion format:

(1) What is empty is nothing.
(2) If it is nothing, it will not exist.
(3) [So] Nothing is empty of what exists.
(4) If nothing is empty of what exists, then there’s nowhere empty to move to.
(5) If there’s nowhere empty to move to, then what exists does not move.

(6) What exists does not move.
In closing, I should note that your reconstruction of this passage might not match my own. That’s fine. There are many different ways of ordering and arranging the premises of an argument. There are also different terminological choices and editorial decisions to make when reconstructing arguments. So, every argument reconstruction might look a little different. Still, this exercise illustrates a few general tips. When reconstructing an argument in this class, you should:

- Look for premise and conclusion indicators.
- Make implicit premises explicit.
- Make explicit premises clear.
- Make the language uniform.

These are just a few general guidelines. For more tips on argument reconstructions, see Chapter 2 of *The Power of Logic*.