FALLACIES OF AMBIGUITY

This chapter examines fallacies that arise from a second kind of unclarity: ambiguity. Ambiguity occurs when it is unclear which meaning of a term is intended in a given context. Ambiguity leads to the fallacy of equivocation, which will be defined and illustrated. The chapter closes with a discussion of different kinds of definitions that can be useful in avoiding or responding to fallacies of clarity.

AMBIGUITY

The idea of vagueness is based on a common feature of words in our language: Many of them leave open a range of borderline cases. The notion of ambiguity is also based on a common feature of our language: Words often have a number of different meanings. For example, the New Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary has the following entry under the word “cardinal”:

\[\text{cardinal adj.} \ 1: \text{of basic importance; chief, main, primary,} \\
\quad 2: \text{of cardinal red color.} \\
\text{n.} \ 1: \text{an ecclesiastical official of the Roman Catholic Church ranking next below the pope,} \\
\quad 2: \text{a bright red,} \\
\quad 3: \text{any of several American finches of which the male is bright red.} \]

In the plural, “the Cardinals” is the name of an athletic team that inhabits St. Louis; “cardinal” also describes the numbers used in simple counting.

It is not likely that people would get confused about these very different meanings of the word “cardinal,” but we might imagine a priest, a birdwatcher, and a baseball fan all hearing the remark, “The cardinals are in town.” The priest would prepare for a solemn occasion, the birdwatcher would get out binoculars, and the baseball fan would head for the stadium. In this context, the remark might be criticized as ambiguous. More precisely, we shall say that an expression in a given context is used ambiguously if and only if it is misleading or potentially misleading because it is hard to tell which of a number of possible meanings is intended in that context.
Using this definition, the word “bank” is not used ambiguously in the following sentence:

Joan deposited $500 in the bank and got a receipt.

Some writers, however, call an expression ambiguous simply if it admits of more than one interpretation, without adding that it is not possible to tell which meaning is intended. With this definition, the above sentence is ambiguous because it could mean that Joan placed $500 in a riverbank, and someone, for whatever reason, gave her a receipt for doing so. On this second definition of ambiguity, virtually every expression is ambiguous, because virtually every expression admits of more than one interpretation. On our first definition, only uses of expressions that are misleading or potentially misleading will be called ambiguous. In what follows, we will use the word “ambiguous” in accordance with the first definition. Ambiguity then depends on the context, because whether something is misleading also depends on context.

In everyday life, context usually settles which of a variety of meanings is appropriate. Yet sometimes genuine misunderstandings do arise. An American and a European discussing “football” may have different games in mind. The European is talking about what Americans call “soccer”; the American is talking about what Europeans call “American football.” It is characteristic of the ambiguous use of a term that when it comes to light, we are likely to say something like, “Oh, you mean that kind of cardinal!” or “Oh, you were talking about American football!” This kind of misunderstanding can cause trouble. When it does, if we want to criticize the expression that creates the problem, we call it ambiguous.

Thus, “ambiguous” is both dependent on context and a term of criticism in much the same ways as “vague.” But these kinds of unclarity differ in other ways. In a context where the use of a word is ambiguous, it is not clear which of two meanings to attach to a word. In a context where the use of a word is vague, we cannot attach any precise meaning to the use of a word.

So far we have talked about the ambiguity of individual terms or words. This is called *sematic ambiguity.* But sometimes we do not know which interpretation to give to a phrase or a sentence because its grammar or syntax admits of more than one interpretation. This is called *syntactic ambiguity* or *ambiguity.* Thus, if we talk about the conquest of the Persians, we might be referring either to the Persians’ conquering someone or to someone’s conquering the Persians. Sometimes the grammar of a sentence leaves open a great many possible interpretations. For example, consider the following sentence (from Paul Fleeceruzzte):

Only sons marry only daughters.

One thing this might mean is that a person who is a male only child will marry a person who is a female only child. Again, it might mean that sons are the only persons who marry daughters and do not marry anyone else. Other interpretations are possible as well.

The process of rewriting a sentence so that one of its possible meanings becomes clear is called *disambiguating* the sentence. One way of disambiguating a sentence is to rewrite it as a whole, spelling things out in detail. That is how we disambiguated the sentence “Only sons marry only daughters.” Another procedure is to continue the sentence in a way that supplies a context that forces one interpretation over others. Consider the sentence “Mary had a little lamb.” Notice how the meaning changes completely under the following continuations:

1. Mary had a little lamb; it followed her to school.
2. Mary had a little lamb and then some broccoli.

just in passing, it is not altogether obvious how we should describe the ambiguity in the sentence “Mary had a little lamb.” The most obvious suggestion is that the word “had” is ambiguous, meaning “owned” on the first reading and “ate” on the second reading. Notice, however, that this also forces alternative readings for the expression “a little lamb.” Presumably, it was a small, whole, live lamb that followed Mary to school, whereas it would have been a small amount of cooked lamb that she ate. So if we try to locate the ambiguity in particular words, we must say that not only the word “had” but also the word “lamb” are being used ambiguously. This is a reasonable approach, but another is available. In everyday speech, we often leave things out. Thus, instead of saying “Mary had a little portion of meat derived from a lamb to eat,” we simply say “Mary had a little lamb,” dropping out the italicized words on the assumption that they will be understood. In most contexts, such deletions cause no misunderstanding. But sometimes deletions are misunderstood, and this can produce ambiguity.
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EXERCISE 1

Show that each of the following sentences admits of at least two interpretations by (1) rewriting the sentence as a whole in two different ways and (2) expanding the sentence in two different ways to clarify the context.

Example: Kenneth let us down.
Rewriting: Kenneth lowered us.
Kenneth disappointed us.
Expanding: Kenneth let us down with a rope.
Kenneth let us down just when we needed him.

1. Barry Bonds (the baseball player) was safe at home.
2. I don’t know what state Meredith is in.
3. Where did you get bitten?
4. The president sent her congratulations.
5. Visiting professors can be boring.
6. Wendy ran a marathon.
7. The meaning of the term “altering” is changing.
8. I don’t want to get too close to him.
9. I often have my friends for dinner.
10. Slow Children Playing. (on a street sign)
11. Save Soap and Waste Paper. (on a sign during World War II)
12. In his will, he left $1,000 to his two sons, Jim and John.
13. There is some explanation for everything.
14. She is an Asian historian.
15. Nobody may be in the lounge this evening.
16. Nobody came to the concert at 8 pm.

EXERCISE II

Follow the same instructions for the following actual newspaper headlines, many of which come from Columbia Journalism Review, editors, Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim and Other Flubs from the Nation's Press (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

1. Milk Drinkers Turn to Powder
2. Anti-busing Rider Killed by Senate
3. Mrs. Gandhi Stoned in Rally in India
4. College Graduates Find Senior Citizen
5. Jumping Bean Prices Affect the Poor
6. Tuna Biting off Washington Coast

EXERCISE III

Poetry, songs, and jokes often intentionally exploit multiple meanings for effect. Find examples in poems, songs, and jokes that you like. Are these examples of ambiguity on the above definition? Why or why not?

EQUIVOCATION

Ambiguity can cause a variety of problems for arguments. Often it produces hilarious or embarrassing side effects, and it is hard to get your arguments taken seriously if your listeners are giggling over an unintended double entendre in which one of the double meanings has risqué connotations.

7. Time for Football and Meatball Stew
8. Police Kill Man with Ax
9. Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim
10. Child Teaching Expert to Speak
11. Prostitutes Appeal to Pope
12. Legalized Outhouses Aired by Legislature
13. Police Can’t Stop Gambling
14. Judge Permits Club to Continue Sex Bar
15. Greeks Fine Hookers
16. Survivor of Siamese Twins Joins Parents
17. Caribbean Islands Drift to the Left
18. Teenage Prostitution Problem is Mounting
19. Miners Refuse to Work After Death
20. Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
21. Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
22. Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
23. Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
24. Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Tesi Group
25. Hospitals Sued by Seven Foot Doctors
26. Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
27. Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
28. Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
29. Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
30. British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands
31. Stolen Painting Found by Tree
32. New Vaccine May Contain Rabies
Ambiguity can also generate bad arguments that involve the fallacy of equivocation. An argument is said to commit this fallacy when it uses the same expression in different senses in different parts of the argument, and this ruins the argument. Here is a silly example (from Carl Woff):

Six is an odd number of legs for a horse.
Odd numbers cannot be divided by two.

\[\therefore\] Six cannot be divided by two.

Clearly, “odd” means “impossible” in the first premise, but it means “not even” in the second premise. Consequently, both premises are true, even though the conclusion is false, so the argument is not valid.

Let’s consider another, more serious, example. In Utilitarianism (1861), John Stuart Mill claims to “prove” that “happiness is a good” with the following argument:

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible is that people hear it. In like manner the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people actually desire it... (Each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only the proof which the case admits of, but which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good."

Mill has sometimes been charged with committing a transparent fallacy in this passage. Specifically, the following argument is attributed to him:

(1) If something is desired, then it is desirable.
(2) If it is desirable, then it is good.

\[\therefore\] (3) If something is desired, then it is good.

Mill never presents his argument in this form, and it may be uncharitable to attribute it to him. Still, whether or not it is Mill’s way of arguing, it provides a good specimen of a fallacy of equivocation.

The objection to this argument is that the word “desirable” is used in different senses in the two premises. Specifically, in the first premise, it is used to mean “capable of being desired,” whereas in the second premise, it is used to mean “worthy of being desired.” If so, the argument really amounts to this:

(1*) If something is desired, then it is capable of being desired.
(2*) If something is worthy of being desired, then it is good.

\[\therefore\] (3) If something is desired, then it is good.

This argument is clearly not valid. To make the charge of equivocation stick, however, it has to be shown that the argument is not valid when the meaning of the word “desirable” is used in the same sense in the two premises. This produces two cases to be examined:

(1*) If something is desired, then it is capable of being desired.
(2*) If something is capable of being desired, then it is good.

\[\therefore\] (3) If something is desired, then it is good.

We now have a valid argument, but the second premise is not true, for sometimes people are capable of desiring things that are not good. The second way of restoring validity takes the following form:

(1*) If something is desired, then it is worthy of being desired.
(2*) If something is worthy of being desired, then it is good.

\[\therefore\] (3) If something is desired, then it is good.

Again, we have a valid argument, but this time the first premise is false, since sometimes people do desire things that they should not desire. Thus, in both cases, altering the premises to produce a valid argument produces a false premise, so the argument cannot be sound.

This is a pattern that emerges when dealing with arguments that involve the fallacy of equivocation. When the premises are interpreted in a way that produces a valid argument, then at least one of the premises is false. When the premises are interpreted in a way that makes them true, then the argument is not valid. Here, then, is the strategy for dealing with arguments that may involve a fallacy of equivocation:

1. Distinguish the possible meanings of the potentially ambiguous expressions in the argument.
2. For each possible meaning, restate the argument so that each expression clearly has the same meaning in all of the premises and the conclusion.
3. Evaluate the resulting arguments separately.

If the argument fails whenever each term has a consistent meaning throughout the argument, then the argument is guilty of equivocation.

**Exercise IV**

Each of the following arguments trades on an ambiguity. For each, locate the ambiguity by showing that one or more of the statements can be interpreted in different ways.

1. We shouldn’t hire Peter, because our company has a policy against hiring drug users, and I saw Peter take aspirin, which is a drug.
2. Man is the only rational animal, and no woman is a man, so women are not rational.

(continued)
3. My doctor has been practicing medicine for thirty years, and practice makes perfect, so my doctor must be nearly perfect.
4. Our cereal is all natural, for there is obviously nothing supernatural about it.
5. Ice cream is never all natural, since it never appears in nature without human intervention.
6. I have a right to spend all my money on lottery tickets. Therefore, when I spend all my money on lottery tickets, I am doing the right thing.
7. You passed no one on the road; therefore, you walked faster than no one.
8. Everything must have some cause; therefore, something must be the cause of everything.
9. The apostles were twelve. Matthew was an apostle. Hence, Matthew was twelve. (attributed to Bertrand Russell)
10. If I have only one friend, then I cannot say that I have any number of friends. So one is not any number. (from Timothy Duggan)
11. "Our bread does have fiber, because it contains wood pulp." (The Federal Trade Commission actually ordered the Continental Baking Company to indicate in their advertising that this is the kind of fiber in their Fresh Horizons bread.)
12. Anyone who tries to violate a law, even if the attempt fails, should be punished. People who try to fly are trying to violate the law of gravity. So they should be punished. (This argument is reported to have been used in an actual legal case during the nineteenth century, but compare Stephen Colbert, "Physics is the ultimate Big Government interference—universal laws meant to constrain us at every turn... Hey, is it wrong that I sometimes want to act without having to deal with an equal and opposite reaction?")

DEFINITIONS

Some think that the injustice of all affirmative action programs is obvious or easily demonstrated. [One argument] goes this way: "Affirmative action, by definition, gives preferential treatment to minorities and women. This is discrimination in their favor and against non-minority males. All discrimination by public institutions is unjust, no matter whether it is the old kind or the newer 'reverse discrimination.' So all affirmative action programs in public institutions are unjust."

This deceptively simple argument, of course, trades on an ambiguity. In one sense, to "discriminate" means to "make a distinction," to pay attention to a difference. In this evasively neutral sense, of course, affirmative action programs do discriminate. But public institutions must, and justifiably do, "discriminate" in this sense, for example, between citizens and noncitizens, freshmen and seniors, the talented and the retarded, and those who pay their bills and those who do not. Whether it is unjust to note and make use of a certain distinction in a given context depends upon many factors: the nature of the institution, the relevant rights of the parties involved, the purposes and effects of making that distinction, and so on.

All this would be obvious except for the fact that the word "discrimination" is also used in a pejorative sense, meaning (roughly) "making use of a distinction in an unjust or illegitimate way." To discriminate in this sense is obviously wrong, but now it remains an open question whether the use of gender and race distinctions in affirmative action programs is really "discrimination" in this sense. The simplistic argument uses the evasively neutral sense of "discrimination" to show that affirmative action discrimiates; it then shifts to the pejorative sense when it asserts that discrimination is always wrong. Although one may, in the end, conclude that all public use of racial and gender distinctions is unjust, to do so requires more of an argument than the simple one (just given) that merely exploits an ambiguity of the word "discrimination."

3. Many people argue that homosexuality is immoral because it is unnatural. Defenders criticize this argument for equivocating on various meanings of the term "unnatural." Distinguish some meanings of "unnatural." For each meaning, ask: Is homosexuality unnatural in that sense? Are acts immoral whenever (and because) they are unnatural in that sense? Why or why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When a newspaper was criticized as a scandalous rumormonger, its editor responded with the following argument (as paraphrased by Deni Elliot). Does the editor's argument commit the fallacy of equivocation?

   It's not wrong for newspapers to pass on rumors about sex scandals. Newspapers have a duty to print stories that are in the public interest, and the public clearly has a great interest in rumors about sex scandals, since, when newspapers print such stories, their circulation increases, and they receive a large number of letters.

2. In the following passage, Tom Hill Jr. claims that a common argument against affirmative action commits a fallacy of equivocation. Do you agree that this argument equivocates? Why or why not?

   It is sometimes suggested that a great many disputes could be avoided if people simply took the precaution of defining their terms. To some extent this is true. People do sometimes seem to disagree just because they are using terms in different ways, even though they agree on the nonverbal issues.

   Nonetheless, definitions will not solve all problems, and a mindless insistence on definitions can turn a serious discussion into a semantic quibble. If you insist on defining every term, you will never be satisfied, because every definition will introduce new terms to be defined. Furthermore,
definitions themselves can be confusing or obfuscating as, for example, when an economist tells us:

I define “inflation” as too much money chasing too few goods.

Not only is this definition metaphorical and obscure, it also has a theory of the causes of inflation built into it.

To use definitions correctly, we must realize that they come in various forms and serve various purposes. There are at least five kinds of definitions that need to be distinguished:

1. **Lexical or dictionary definitions** are the most common kind of definition. We consult a dictionary when we are ignorant about the meaning of a word in a particular language. If you do not happen to know what the words “jejune,” “ketone,” or “Kreis” mean, then you can look up these words in an English, a scientific, and a German dictionary, respectively.

   Except for an occasional diagram, dictionaries explain the meaning of a word by using other words that the reader presumably already understands. These explanations often run in a circle, such as when the Oxford American Dictionary defines “car” as “automobile” and “automobile” as “car.” Circular definitions can still be useful, because if you know what one of the terms in the circle means, you can use that background knowledge plus the definition to figure out what the other terms mean.

   The goal of dictionary definitions is to supply us with factual information about the standard meanings of words in a particular language. As dictionary definitions are, in effect, factual claims about how people in general actually use certain words, dictionary definitions can be either accurate or inaccurate. The Oxford American Dictionary defines one meaning of “fan” as “a device waved in the hand or operated mechanically to create a current of air.” This is, strictly speaking, incorrect because a bellows also meets these conditions but is not a fan. Dictionary definitions can be criticized or defended on the basis of a speaker’s sense of the language or, more formally, by empirical surveys of what speakers accept as appropriate or reject as inappropriate uses of the term.

2. **Disambiguating definitions** specify a sense in which a word or phrase is or might be being used by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. (“When I said that the banks were collapsing, I meant river banks, not financial institutions.”) Disambiguating definitions can tell us which dictionary definition actually is intended in a particular context, or they can distinguish several meanings that might be intended. They can also be used to remove syntactic ambiguity or amphiboly. (“When I said that all of my friends are not students, I meant that not all of them are students, not that none of them are students.”)

   Whether the ambiguity is semantic or syntactic, the goal of a disambiguating definition is to capture what the speaker intended, so such definitions can be justified by asking the speaker what he or she meant. This is a different question than asking what a word means. Whereas dictionary definitions say what words mean or how they are used by most speakers of the language, a disambiguating definition focuses on a particular speaker and specifies which meaning that speaker intended on a particular occasion.

   Such disambiguating definitions can be used in response to arguments that seem to commit the fallacy of equivocation. A critic can use disambiguating definitions to distinguish possible meanings and then ask, “Did you mean this or that?” The person who gave the argument can answer by picking one of those alternatives or by providing another disambiguating definition to specify what was meant. Speakers are sometimes not sure which meaning they intended, and then the critic needs to show that the argument cannot work if a single disambiguating definition is followed throughout. Whether one sides with the arguer or the critic, arguments that use terms ambiguously cannot be evaluated thoroughly without the help of disambiguating definitions.

3. **Stipulative definitions** are used to assign a meaning to a new (usually technical) term or to assign a new or special meaning to a familiar term. They have the following general form: “By such and such expression I (or we) will mean so and so.” Thus, mathematicians introduced the new term “googol” to stand for the number expressed by 1 followed by one hundred 0s. Physicists use words like “charm,” “color,” and “strangeness” to stand for certain features of subatomic particles. Stipulative definitions do not report what a word means; they give a new word a meaning or an old word a new meaning.

   Notice that if I say, “I stipulate that . . .” I thereby stipulate that . . . ; so such utterances are explicit performatives, and stipulation is a speech act. (See Chapter 2.) This explains why stipulative definitions cannot be false, since no performatives can be false. Stipulative definitions can, however, be criticized in other ways. They can be vague or ambiguous. They can be useless or confusing. Someone who stipulates a meaning for a term might go on to use the term with a different meaning (just as people sometimes fail to keep their promises). Still, stipulative definitions cannot be false by virtue of failing to correspond to the real meaning of a word, because they give that meaning to that word.

4. **Precising definitions** are used to resolve vagueness. They are used to draw a sharp (or sharper) boundary around the things to which a term refers, when this collection has a fuzzy or indeterminate boundary in ordinary usage. For example, it is not important for most purposes to decide how big a population center must be in order to count as a city rather than as a town. We can deal with the borderline cases by using such phrases as “very small city” or “quite a large town.” It will not make much difference which phrase we use on most occasions. Yet it is not hard to imagine a situation in which it might make a difference whether a center of population is a city or not. As a city, it might be eligible for development funds that are not available to towns. Here a precising definition—a definition that draws a sharp boundary where none formerly existed—would be useful.
Precising definitions are, in effect, combinations of stipulative definitions and dictionary definitions. Like stipulative definitions, they involve a choice. One could define a city as any population center with more than fifty thousand people, or one could decide to decrease the minimum to thirty thousand people. Precising definitions are not completely arbitrary, however, because they usually should conform to the generally accepted meaning of a term. It would be unreasonable to define a city as any population center with more than seventeen people. Dictionary definitions, thus, set limits to precising definitions.

Precising definitions are also not arbitrary in another way: There can be good reasons to prefer one precising definition over another, when adopting the preferred definition will have better effects than the alternative. If development funds are to be distributed only to cities, then to define cities as having more than fifty thousand people will deny those funds to smaller population centers with, say, ten thousand people. Consequently, we need some reason to resolve the vagueness of the term “city” in one way rather than another. In this case, the choice might be based on the amount of funds available for development. In a more dramatic example, a precising definition of “death” might be used to resolve controversial issues about euthanasia—about what doctors may or must do to patients who are near death—and then our choices between possible precising definitions might be based on our deepest value commitments. In any case, we need some argument to show that one precising definition is better than other alternatives.

Such arguments often leave some leeway. Even if one can justify defining cities as having a minimum of fifty thousand people instead of ten thousand, one’s reason is not likely to justify a cutoff at fifty thousand as opposed to forty-nine thousand. A different kind of defense would be needed if someone used a slippery-slope argument to show that it is unfair to provide development funds to one city with fifty thousand people but to deny such funds to its neighbor with only forty-nine thousand people. Against this kind of charge, the only way to defend a precising definition might be to show that some precising definition is needed, the cutoff should lie inside a certain general area, one’s preferred definition does lie within that area, and no alternative is any better. Such responses might also apply to nearby alternatives, but they are still sometimes enough to support a precising definition. If responses like these are not available, then a precising definition can be criticized as unjustified.

5. Systematic or theoretical definitions are introduced to give a systematic order or structure to a subject matter. For example, in geometry, every term must be either a primitive (undefined) term or a term defined by means of these primitive terms. Thus, if we take points and distances as primitives, we can define a straight line as the shortest distance between two points. Then, assuming some more concepts, we can define a triangle as a closed figure with exactly three straight lines as sides. By a series of such definitions, the terms in geometry are placed in systematic relationships with one another.

In a similar way, we might try to represent family relationships using only the primitive notions of parent, male, and female. We could then construct definitions of the following kind:

“A is the brother of B.” = “A and B have the same parents and A is male.”

“A is B’s grandmother.” = “A is a parent of a parent of B and A is female.”

Things become more complicated when we try to define such notions as “second cousin once removed” or “stepfather.” Yet, by extending some basic definitions from simple to more complicated cases, all family relationships can be given a systematic presentation.

Formulating systematic definitions for family relationships is relatively easy, but similar activities in science, mathematics, and other fields can demand genius. It often takes deep insight into a subject to see which concepts are genuinely fundamental and which are secondary and derivative. When Sir Isaac Newton defined force in terms of mass and acceleration, he was not simply stating how he proposed to use certain words; he was introducing a fundamental conceptual relationship that improved our understanding of the physical world.

Such theoretical definitions can be evaluated on the basis of whether they really do help us formulate better theories and understand the world. Evaluating theoretical definitions often requires a great deal of empirical investigation. When water was defined as H₂O, this made it possible to formulate more precise laws about how water interacted with other chemicals. Other alternatives were available. Whereas molecules count as H₂O, and hence as water, even if they contain unusual isotopes of hydrogen and oxygen, chemists could define water so that it would have to contain only the most common isotopes of hydrogen and oxygen. Why don’t they? Because they discovered that differences among isotopes generally do not affect how molecules of H₂O react with other chemicals. As a result, the simplest and most useful generalizations about the properties of water can be formulated in terms of H₂O without regard to certain isotopes of hydrogen and oxygen. This illustrates one way in which choosing one theoretical definition over another can lead to a better theory.

Definitions can play important roles in the presentation of arguments, but demands for definitions can also hinder the progress of an argument. In the middle of discussions people often ask for definitions or even state, usually with an air of triumph, that everything depends on the way you define your terms. We saw in Chapter 2 that definitions are not always needed, and must issues do not turn on the way in which words are defined. When asked for a definition, it is appropriate to reply: "What sort of definition do you want, and why do you want it?" Of course, if you are using a word in a way that departs from customary usage, or using it in some special way of your own, or using a word that is too vague for the given context, or using a word in an ambiguous way, then the request for a definition is perfectly in order. In such cases, the demand for a definition represents an important move within the argument rather than a distraction from it.
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EXERCISE V

Look up lexical or dictionary definitions for the following words. (For fun, you might try to guess the meanings of these words before you look them up, as in the game "Balderdash.")

1. jejune
2. ketone
3. fluvial
4. xebec
5. plangent

EXERCISE VI

1. Give a stipulative definition for the word “klurh.”
2. Stipulate a word to stand for the chunks of ice that form under car fenders in winter.
3. Describe something that does not have a common name, for which it would be useful to stipulate a name. Explain how the name would be useful.

EXERCISE VII

Give precising definitions for the following words. In each case, supply a context that gives your precising definition a point.

1. book
2. alcoholic beverage
3. crime
4. warm
5. fast

EXERCISE VIII

Give disambiguating definitions for the following words. In each case, supply a context in which your definition might be needed to avoid confusion.

1. run
2. pen
3. game
4. painting
5. fast

EXERCISE IX

Using the notions of parents, male, and female as basic, give systematic definitions of the following family relationships:

1. A and B are sisters.
2. A and B are siblings.
3. A is B’s half-brother.
4. A is B’s niece.
5. A is B’s cousin.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

The U.S. federal criminal prohibition against torture (18 U.S.C. §§ 2340-2340A) prohibits conduct "specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering." On August 1, 2002, the U.S. attorney general’s office issued a statement that "severe" pain under the statute was limited to pain "equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death." (This interpretation was withdrawn in 2004.) What kind of a definition is this? Is it justified or not? What does this controversy show about the nature and importance of definitions?

NOTES

4 Notice that in these definitions an individual word is not defined in isolation. Instead, a whole sentence containing the word is replaced by another whole sentence in which the defined word does not appear. Definitions of this kind are called “contextual definitions” because a context containing the word is the unit of definition. Dictionary, disambiguating, stipulative, and precising definitions can also be presented in this contextual form.
5 If you doubt that the identity “Water is H₂O” is used as a definition, just consider how you would react to someone who claims to have discovered some water that is not H₂O. We would dismiss this person as linguistically confused, as the discovered stuff cannot properly be called “water” if it is not H₂O.