



Fallacy of equivocation

In Chapter 34 of *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation*, we examine the fallacy of equivocation, which occurs when we use different meanings for words or phrases in the same argument, where the argument depends for its consistency on words maintaining constant meaning throughout. We looked at the Australian commercial where the presenter makes his point by talking about 'Land', as in a culture, values and heritage, and then shifts his meaning to 'land' as in soil.

Exercises

After you have read the chapter the next step is to sharpen your sensitivity to the fallacy, so that when you read a passage that contains it you will be able to identify it easily and know what's going on in the argument. The best way of doing this is to work on a few examples. Read the passages below and then explain where you think the problem might be.

1 You can't step into the same river twice

The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, once claimed that you can't step into the same river twice. If you step into a river, then step out and then, even just a few seconds later, step back in, the river will not be the same. It will be quite a different river in a number of ways: water will have flowed by and with it fish and various other things that float in it. So it won't be the same river. Therefore, there must be two rivers that you step into: the river you step into the first time and another distinct river that you step into the second time.

Answer

Like the equivocation of 'land' this confuses two senses of the word 'river'. In one sense the argument is about the water and the different samples you will step into each time, which will be qualitatively different. The second sense is about the river, of which there is only one.

You could say the argument trades on a confusion over the meaning of the word 'same'. In one sense you are stepping into the same river in that numerically there is only one river. But in the other sense there is a qualitative difference between the water you stepped into the first time and that which you stepped into the second. The argument began by referring to the qualitative sameness and then shifted in the middle of the argument to numerical sameness. Alternatively, you might argue that in the first sense the argument is about the water and in the second sense it is about the river.

2 You cannot meet the same person twice

This argument is similar. See if you can identify where the problem lies.

Here the argument is that you cannot meet the same person twice. Between the two meetings that person will have changed: she will certainly have new memories, she will have learnt new things and had different experiences. Her mood may be quite different, along with her concerns, hopes, beliefs and fears. For all these reasons and more, it won't be the same person. Indeed, you cannot meet the same person twice. Therefore, like the river, there must be two people you meet: the one you first met and the distinctly different person you met the second time.¹



Answer

As in all of these cases, the writer is trading on a confusion about the meaning of a word: in this case, the word 'person', which is used ambiguously. In one sense you are meeting the same person, but in the other sense she has changed: she is 'qualitatively' different. So, while 'they' are 'numerically' the same person, in that there is only one person, they are qualitatively different.

Now that we have made that clear, it's obvious that this is an inconsistent argument. The conclusion is that you can't step into numerically the same river and meet numerically the same person, but this is drawn from the premises that you can't step into qualitatively the same river or meet qualitatively the same person. In the middle of the argument the writer has used an equivocation to make his argument by exploiting the ambiguity in the meaning of the words.

Now read the following short arguments. If you think there is something implausible about them, analyse them in the same way and explain where you think the problem might lie. Don't exclude the possibility that there may be nothing wrong with them at all.

3 Women as creators

As creators, women are superior to men since men can only create works of art, science, or philosophy, whereas women can create life.

4 Advertising campaign

We all know that we as citizens have a patriotic duty to protect our country from attack from other countries. Previous generations have given their lives to protect our homeland and way of life from foreign invaders. Now we have a different war, a different invader, but our duty is the same. We all have a patriotic duty to buy home-manufactured products like XXX, because the country is under attack from foreign imports.

¹ For an illustrated and dramatic presentation of this problem see Stephen Law, *The Philosophy Files* (London: Dolphin, 2000), pp. 101-121.