

Contraries and opposites

At times we all allow vague words and phrases to persist in our arguments, because they help us make our points more persuasively. When you come across this in other people's work, it's not until you ask 'But what does he mean by that?' that you realise that a writer's compelling argument is built on shaky foundations. One source of vagueness in our arguments, which is often exploited, is that between opposites and contraries.

Opposites

If we treat two things as opposites, we imply that they are mutually exclusive. In *The Ballad of East and West*, Rudyard Kipling says, 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' And in the poem, *The Fall of Hyperion*, John Keats gives us another example:

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it.

Contraries

But there are many things that don't exclude their opposite. Instead, they include it as their most extreme form. These are 'contraries'. They represent the two extremes of a continuous series of changes. The statement 'This is white' has many contraries, including 'This is not white', 'This is coloured', 'This is grey', 'This is dirty' as well as, 'This is black.' It's not difficult to think of many examples of things like this:

young and old

sane and insane

intelligent and unintelligent

religious and irreligious

civilised and uncivilised

good and bad.

Although there is a real difference between each term, we struggle to say with any certainty when a thing or person stops being one and becomes the other. If we call something white and another thing black, we have created a continuum of imperceptible degrees of changes without a sharp dividing line, which stretch from white to black moving through many shades of white, grey and black. We are left wondering at what point white becomes grey and grey becomes black.

Consequently, when we do need exact distinctions, as we do when we set speed limits, they are usually arbitrary. Drivers travelling at 30 mph probably cause just as much harm when they collide as those travelling at 31 mph. But still we set the speed limit at 30 mph in a built-up area, making one a legal speed and the other illegal.

The effects in arguments

In arguments the problem is that writers either don't recognize the difference, which is more often the case, or they deliberately obscure it and exploit the advantage it gives them. There are two fairly common ways in which this is done:

- 1 They assume there is a sharp distinction between the two things where none exist – they distinguish between the two extremes of a continuum as if all we have are opposites with a sharp dividing line; alternatively,
- 2 They deny that there are differences between two things because they are at either end of a continuum and we cannot find a point where one ends and the other starts.

1. Assuming there is a sharp distinction

In the first case, a writer assumes that there is a precise definition to what is, and what is not, covered by a term. In the process, she succeeds in forcing you to accept a precise definition where none exists.

Example: Sane and insane

You might be discussing an issue that raises the contraries 'sane' and 'insane'. Those who hold a different view to yours might mistake them for opposites and insist that you must be clear about the definition of the terms you are using, so you can identify the point where one becomes the other. Knowing how important it is for you to define your terms, you can easily be encouraged to search for a clear dividing line and use them as opposites, when in fact it is quite reasonable for you to hold your ground and treat them as contraries that have no sharp division.

The important point is – and this seems quite different from the way we are normally encouraged to think – that it is quite legitimate to resist the pressure to create clear and sharp definitions that are too precise to fit the facts they are intended to describe. It doesn't help our thinking to mark off something sharply, which is not sharply marked off in fact. All that we're likely to achieve by doing so is to substitute clear-cut abstractions for untidy facts. As a result, although we might have created arguments whose validity is plain to see, in the process we will have lost contact with those matters of fact about which we want to think effectively.

Nevertheless, it's often assumed, misleadingly, that unless we are using precisely defined terms we cannot be arguing logically. At these points it's worth reminding yourself that thinking logically is not simply confined to thinking about clear-cut abstractions. We use all sorts of terms, some clear, others less clear, and all levels of probability in our premises, which must reflect accurately the substantive nature of what we are arguing about. For our arguments to be true our terms and our premises must accurately reflect the strength and nature of the evidence.

Logical argument is not about the clarity of our terms, but about the way we connect our ideas and move from our premises to our conclusion. It means not making mistakes in our reasoning, not in what reasoning is about. We think logically when we reject contradictory statements and when we draw from our premises only that which they entail.



2. Denying there are differences between contraries

In the second case, the writer assumes that because we cannot find a precise point on a continuum between two contraries, where one thing ends and another starts, there cannot be any difference between them. The fact that there might not be any perceptible difference in the accident rate when we drive at 30 mph as opposed to 31, and between 31 and 32, and so on right up to 70 mph, does not mean that there is no difference between driving at 30 and 70.

This has been the source of many dubious political arguments, where an advocate defends her position using all possible means. It was famously condemned by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'doublethink': he explains, 'Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.' Big Brother encouraged citizens to believe that 'War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.' You will come across a number of fairly common manifestations of this, variously known as 'the black-and-white fallacy', 'the bald man argument', 'the slippery slope' and 'the thin end of the wedge'.

Example: The bald man argument

In the bald man argument the question is at what point should we describe a man as bald? We can go on adding one hair at a time making no discernible difference until we've gone from a man with no hair to one with a full head of hair. So, it is not possible to define clearly the point when a man is bald and when he isn't. Yet clearly, although there is no sharp dividing line, there is still a difference between the two.