

Philosophy 104

Chapter 14 Notes

Ambiguity

- The phrase “Draw your weapon” might be called ambiguous because it could mean what Clint Eastwood does in many of his fabulous westerns or it could be what an artist does when sketching a pistol or sword.
- We’ll be more limiting in our approach. We’ll only call something ambiguous if the context doesn’t clear up the situation, or if the ambiguity results in something humorous.

Two kinds of Ambiguity

Semantic

- When the ambiguity stems from a particular word or phrase having more than one meaning

Syntactic

- When the ambiguity is a result of grammar or structure (usually concerns which words are intended to go together)

Consider ambiguity in job recommendations:

- For a chronically absent employee: A man like him is hard to find.
- For a dishonest employee: He's an unbelievable worker.
- For a lazy employee: You would indeed be fortunate to get this person to work for you.
- For the office drunk: Every hour with him was a happy hour.
- For a dishonest employee: Her true ability was deceiving.
- For the office drunk He generally found him loaded with work to do.
- For an employee who is so unproductive that the job is better left unfilled: I can assure you that no person would be better for the job.
- For an employee who is not worth further consideration as a job candidate: I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment.

Disambiguating:

- There are a couple of tried and true means of making an ambiguous statement clear:
 - Rewriting: substituting a different word or phrase for the ambiguous word or phrase.
 - Expanding: adding extra information that makes the context clear.

Equivocation

- Equivocation occurs when the same word or phrase is used in multiple ways in the same argument and causes an argument that appears to be valid to really be invalid.
- Usually the different meanings of the word are used in different ways over the course of the whole essay or book and usually not in the same formal argument. Often the meaning of a term may “drift” over the course of someone’s writing.

Terms that need defining:

- Sometimes unclarity can be remedied by taking more care in defining one's terms.
- There are several kinds of definitions that can be used depending on the purpose.

Lexical Definitions

- These are common dictionary definitions, that are meant to provide facts about the standard meanings of words in a particular language.
- They try to explain what some words mean by using some other words that are presumably familiar to the reader.

Disambiguating definitions

- These do not provide an account of a given word, but specify the intended meaning of a word that may have multiple meanings.

Stipulative Definitions

- These are used to assign a meaning to a new term or else to assign a new or unconventional meaning to an old term.
- Stipulative definitions are established by explicit performatives.

Precising Definitions

- As disambiguating definitions are used to resolve ambiguity, precising definitions are used to reduce vagueness.
- Often, precising definitions take the form of supplying standards for evaluative terms
- Precising definitions can often be argued on the basis of their effects, which is an excuse that some give for not supplying precising definitions where necessary or useful.

Systematic/theoretical definitions:

- These definitions are used to establish relationships among words and concepts for some formal structure (usually scientific, mathematic, or logical)