Philosophy 104

Chapter 13 Notes

Fallacies of Vagueness

Fallacies

O A fallacy refers to a type of argument or reasoning that is never acceptable.

Fallacies

O A fallacy refers to a type of argument or reasoning that is never acceptable.

O The number and variety of fallacies is limited only by the imagination, but what follows are some of the most common and most commonly overlooked.

Fallacies

O Very often, fallacies boil down to misunderstanding the relationship between truths and beliefs:

Fallacies

O Very often, fallacies boil down to misunderstanding the relationship between truths and beliefs:

   O It is reasonable to say that someone ought to believe something because it's true

   O It is unreasonable to say that someone ought to regard something as true because of who believes it.

Ways of Being Unclear

O Ambiguity: When a word or phrase has one of a distinct set of meanings (e.g. 'bank' or 'draw')

O Vagueness: When a word or phrase has a "fuzzy" or imprecise meaning

Vagueness

O Vagueness is an endemic part of our language.

- O Many evaluative and descriptive terms are vague.

- O Words that refer to classes of things are only tied together insofar as they have a "family resemblance".

Heaps

O The Sorites (or Heap) Paradox is a famous illustration of the role of vagueness in language.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, two grains of sand is not a heap.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, two grains of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, two grains of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, three grains of sand is not a heap.

Heaps

O One grain of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, two grains of sand is not a heap.

O Adding one grain of sand would not create a heap.

O Therefore, three grains of sand is not a heap.

O ...

O Therefore, a million grains of sand is not a heap.

Sorites Paradoxes

O Descriptive words like 'tall', 'bald', 'light', etc. can generate paradoxes of this kind.

Sorites Paradoxes

O Descriptive words like 'tall', 'bald', 'light', etc. can generate paradoxes of this kind.

O Some illegitimate conclusions:

Sorites Paradoxes

O Descriptive words like 'tall', 'bald', 'light', etc. can generate paradoxes of this kind.

O Some illegitimate conclusions:

O There is no difference between (e.g.) the hairy and the bald

Sorites Paradoxes

O Descriptive words like 'tall', 'bald', 'light', etc. can generate paradoxes of this kind.

O Some illegitimate conclusions:

    O There is no difference between (e.g.) the hairy and the bald

    O The word 'bald' is meaningless

Sorites Paradoxes

O Descriptive words like 'tall', 'bald', 'light', etc. can generate paradoxes of this kind.

O Some illegitimate conclusions:

- O There is no difference between (e.g.) the hairy and the bald

- O The word 'bald' is meaningless

- O No level of specificity is justified
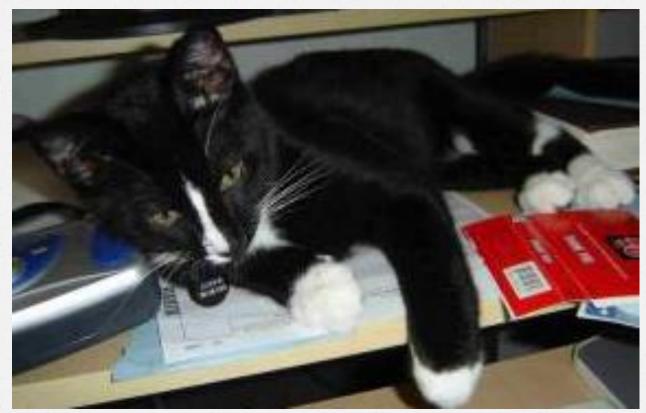
Family Resemblances

O This is a very famous contribution to the analysis of language made by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his book "Philosophical Investigations".

Family Resemblances

O This is a very famous contribution to the analysis of language made by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his book "Philosophical Investigations".

O The major upshot of this is that any project that tries to formulate a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for some object to have some given name (e.g. 'chair') is a futile project, and this futility is a function of facts about language.

Family Resemblances

O This is a very famous contribution to the analysis of language made by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his book "Philosophical Investigations".

O The major upshot of this is that any project that tries to formulate a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for some object to have some given name (e.g. 'chair') is a futile project, and this futility is a function of facts about language.

O Any such formulation will either include too much or exclude too much, and if you MUST make such a formulation you just have to be comfortable with what you include and exclude.

My name is Ludwig, too!

Example: Is it a Sport?

O The following list of necessary (and jointly sufficient) conditions for something to be called a sport was developed on one episode of KGSM's "Power Play" radio show.

Example: Is it a Sport?

1. The activity must involve total body athleticism as a necessary part of the activity.
2. The activity must have an offense and a defense (that is, players must be able to interfere with one another, competing directly against one another)
3. No style points.

Evaluating vagueness

O So given what has preceded, we cannot condemn things for just any degree of vagueness at all, but what we can do is determine whether some use of language is too vague for its given context and purpose.

Evaluating vagueness

O So given what has preceded, we cannot condemn things for just any degree of vagueness at all, but what we can do is determine whether some use of language is too vague for its given context and purpose.

O In such cases, one must make a ruling as to the specific intent of a term.

Slippery Slopes

O For whatever reason, many will argue that some action is a slippery slope to another action without realizing that such reasoning is fallacious.

O We will examine three kinds of slippery slope "arguments".

Conceptual Slippery Slope

O This argument relies on the vagueness inherent in language to argue that no distinction should be made between two things because they are not all that different. (this is principle 1 on p.280)

O Ordinarily, this is perfectly acceptable reasoning, but when it argues similarity by transitivity, it has become a slippery slope argument, and a fallacy (this is principle 2 on p. 280). A series of insignificant differences can add up to a significant difference.

Fairness Slippery Slopes

O Otherwise known as a line-drawing fallacy.

O Where to draw a line can be a legitimately argued point, but where the argument form turns fallacious is when one argues because there is controversy on where to draw a line, no line must be drawn.

Causal Slippery Slopes

O These are the most common variety.

O These are often called 'snowball' or 'domino' arguments.

O When a clear and likely means of causation is described in each step of such an argument, it isn't known as a slippery slope argument, but instead a chain argument (which is valid).

O When causality is badly misunderstood, the argument becomes a fallacy.

Example: militarism

O Consider: "If we invade Iraq, after having invaded Afghanistan, then it will *only be a matter of time* before we invade Iran, then the rest of the middle east, and then the US will be *locked into* a holy war with the entire Islamic world."

Example: militarism

O This argument is fallacious in that it badly misrepresents causality. It relies on previous decisions causing future ones, which is generally not the case, and also consider why the actual argument didn't in fact happen, in spite of the antecedent conditions occuring.