

Equivocation

In *How to write Better Essays* I explained that equivocation occurs when an author uses a word to mean one thing in one part of the argument and something else in another part. The way to critically evaluate a passage that you suspect may involve equivocation, of course, is to ask whether the definition of the term at one point of the argument is the same as in the other and, if it isn't, replacing the doubtful words with others. In the Australian advertisement the word 'land' with a small 'l' should be replaced with 'soil', but then this would rob the advertisement of its persuasiveness.

So, ask yourself the following questions:

Critical evaluation

1. Does the persuasiveness of the argument depend on equivocation?
2. Has the writer been consistent in the way he has used words at different stages in his argument?

Exercises

1. You can't step into the same river twice

Read the following argument. You may not think there is anything implausible about them, but if you do, see if you can identify where the problem might lie and explain what you think might be going on.

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. The argument began by referring to the qualities of the water that you are stepping into and then carries the conclusion of the first part of the argument into the second part by arguing that, therefore, there is more than one river.

2. Meeting the same person twice

Indeed, there is a similar argument to this, that you cannot meet the same person twice. Read through the following passage and explain what you think is happening:

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.

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

3. Women as creators

As in the previous exercise, read the following short argument. If you think there is something implausible about it, analyse it 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 the argument.

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