THE FALLACY OF EQUIVOCATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

The central question of this thesis is when, if ever, the verdict that an argument commits the fallacy of equivocation is warranted, where a verdict is a final decision about whether or not an argument should be rejected. In order to answer this question, I develop five conditions under which such a verdict would be warranted. A verdict of equivocation is warranted only if (1) someone has drawn a conclusion from one or more premises; (2) the argument contains at least two tokens, x and y, of the same expression and x and y mean different things; (3) if x and y had the same meaning at each occurrence, then the conclusion would follow from the premises (unless there was some other reason for the argument to be invalid); (4) Given that x and y mean different things, then the conclusion does not follow from the premises; (5) The presence of a meaning shift between x and y (condition 2) is not open to serious debate. If these individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions are met, then a verdict of equivocation is warranted. The argument should be rejected.

These conditions are developed only after a discussion of the concept of the fallacy of equivocation in chapter one and a discussion of

several serious problems with the modern treatment of the fallacy of equivocation in chapter two. The third chapter is the development of the above conditions together with their justification, their application to the problems of chapter two and a discussion of possible objections to these conditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

An accusation that someone's argument has committed the fallacy of equivocation can be made for any number of reasons, and some reasons are better than others. But perhaps the best reason for accusing someone of equivocation is to pronounce a verdict on an argument, to point out that an argument contains a particular fault (an equivocation) which is so serious that the argument should be rejected.

The central question of this thesis is when, if ever, such a verdict of equivocation is warranted. For the purposes of this thesis, a "verdict" is a definitive statement about whether or not an argument should be rejected. In this introduction I will clarify this question by making a few distinctions and I will show why this question is important. Finally I will outline how this question will be answered in the remainder of the thesis.

I. Basic Distinctions and Definitions.

First of all, I would like to distinguish "equivocation" from "the fallacy of equivocation" and "charges of committing the fallacy of equivocation."

a) "Equivocation."

Equivocation can be defined as follows:

Definition 1

Eq: Equivocation, Eq, is the use of
two tokens of the same word
which occur in such a way that
one token has one meaning in
one occurrence and the second
token has a second meaning in
the second occurrence.

The meaning of a word is any description of that word found in a

reputable dictionary, and a word has two or more meanings if it has two

or more dictionary descriptions.

b) "The Fallacy of Equivocation."

Equivocation, as roughly defined above, is not necessarily illicit

and can occur in any context. "The fallacy of equivocation" on the other

hand is an illicit meaning shift occurring in the context of an

argument.[1] Since this is an important concept, I will use the following

definition of the fallacy of equivocation, E, as my canonical definition:

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[1]An "argument" is "a group of statements, one or more of which (the
premises) are claimed to provide support for, or reasons to believe, one of
the others (the conclusion). (Hurley 1991, 1)

Definition 2

E: The fallacy of equivocation, E, is the illicit drawing of a conclusion which only appears to follow from the premises when different meanings of identical words appearing throughout the argument are not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow.

Throughout this thesis I will be using the phrase "valid argument" in its broadest sense to refer to any argument whose conclusion follows from the premises. These can include deductively valid arguments, inductively strong arguments, and strong analogical arguments. Where validity is being used in its narrower sense, to refer to deductively valid arguments, then they will be called specifically "deductively valid" arguments. An argument is deductively valid if it cannot be the case that the premises are true and the conclusion is false.

Consider the following example of the fallacy of equivocation:

Example 0.1

Everything that runs has feet.
Rivers run.
Therefore, rivers have feet. (Walton 1987, 241)

In this example the word "run" is being used in two different senses. In the first premise it means, according to Webster's dictionary, "to go

steadily by springing steps so that both feet leave the ground for an instant in each step", while in the second premise it means "to flow rapidly or under pressure." The problem with this example, however, is that the argument "appears" to be formally valid in spite of the absurdity of the conclusion and the truth of the premises. The argument appears to be valid because if both occurrences of the word "run" mean the same thing, then the argument would instantiate the valid argument form given in example 0.1a:

Example 0.1a

Premise 1: (x)(if Rx then Fx)
Premise 2: (x)(if Vx then Rx)
Conclusion: (x)(if Vx then Fx)

So, the argument appears to be valid, at least on the surface.

However, given that the two occurrences of the word "run" do not mean the same thing, the argument is in fact invalid. The "real" argument being presented, despite appearances, is given in example 0.1b:

Example 0.1b

Premise 1: Everything that runs$_1$ has feet.
Premise 2: Rivers run$_2$.
Conclusion: Rivers have feet.

Example 0.1b is invalid because runs$_1$ and run$_2$ can be interpreted so that the premises are true but the conclusion is false. This argument commits the fallacy of equivocation (E) because if the word "run" were interpreted the same way throughout the argument, the conclusion would follow logically from the premises.

Why, then, is it important to distinguish "Equivocation" from "the fallacy of equivocation"? For the simple reason that not all instances of "equivocation" are "fallacies of equivocation"[2] although all instances of "the fallacy of equivocation" contain an equivocation as described in 1(a).

c) "A charge of equivocation."

Thirdly, I would like to distinguish equivocation (Eq) and the fallacy of equivocation (E) from a "charge" of the fallacy of equivocation (E).

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[2]The following example is not illicit yet contains an equivocation on the word "hide": "The beast wanted to hide in the bushes, as if he knew the value of his own hide." In the first occurrence of "hide" it means "an act of concealment" while in the second occurrence it means "the skin of an animal." There is nothing illicit in this passage and this passage is not a group of premises supporting a conclusion so it is not an instance of "the fallacy of equivocation" as described in Definition 1.

Definition 3

CE: A charge of the allacy of
equivocation (CE) is any
ccusation that a given
argument commits the fallacy
of equivocation, E.

Such a charge occurs either in a dialogical setting or as a written or oral

response to a discursive text. In either case, it involves one person's

criticism of another person's argument and so is a dialogical

phenomenon, where a "dialogue" is, according to Douglas Walton, "a

sequence of exchanges or messages or speech acts between two (or more)

participants" (Walton 1989, 3).

These are important distinctions. This thesis is not directly

concerned with "the fallacy of equivocation" or with "equivocation"

(although an understanding of these concepts will be presupposed), but

rather is directly concerned with "charges of equivocation."

II. Motivation for Questioning the Critical Value of Verdicts of Equivocation.

Recall that the central question of this thesis is when, if ever, a

verdict of equivocation is warranted. Let me now spend a few moments

outlining why I think this is an important question.

In example 0.1, the argument which concluded that "rivers have feet," a verdict of equivocation is warranted because the fallacy of equivocation is the only way to explain the apparent deductive validity of the argument and the apparent acceptability (or soundness, or truth) of the premises together with the absurdity of the conclusion. The argument is actually invalid and so should be rejected.

Unfortunately not all arguments are exactly alike and certainly most real-life arguments involve conclusions which are controversial and open to serious debate rather than being absurd or tautologous. One would have prima facie reason to doubt the importance of an argument about rivers having feet. So, consider the following more controversial argument:

Example 0.2

> Killing innocent human beings is wrong.
> The fetus is an innocent human being.
> Therefore, killing the fetus is wrong.
> (Warren 1973, 144)

While this argument seems to be valid (at least on the surface) it has been open to the charge of equivocation. In criticizing this argument Mary Anne Warren has suggested that the phrase "human being" is being used in two different senses. On the one hand it is being used to refer to genetically human beings, while on the other hand it is being

used to refer to a "human member of the moral community" (Warren 1973, 144). Warren goes on to develop the criteria which justify the distinction.

In many ways, the argument in example 0.2 is similar to the argument in example 0.1. Both seem valid and both seem to equivocate on a word or phrase which is central to the validity of the argument. But the first example is much more clearly an example of the fallacy of equivocation (in the sense that it is difficult and perhaps even unnecessary to debate this accusation). In example 0.2 the fallaciousness of the argument is not so clear. One could contest the charge of the fallacy of equivocation by denying that the argument contains an equivocation (in the sense of 1(a)). In order for an equivocation to take place, one "token" must have one meaning while the other token has a different meaning. Now, in order to deny this, one must deny that the second token has a different meaning. In the context of example 0.2, one must argue that the word "human" does not shift meaning but means <u>the same thing</u> in each occurence. One could argue, for example, that the distinction between moral and genetic humanity has no basis in reality, that one of the criteria determining moral worth is genetic humanity. In this case, whatever is genetically human <u>just is</u> morally human. In this way, one denies that the second

token ("human" in the second premise) has a different meaning and hence, one denies that there is an equivocation. It would be much easier to deny the charge of equivocation in example 0.2 in this way than it would be in example 0.1, the argument about rivers having feet.

My question, then, is this: while a verdict of equivocation on example 0.1 is warranted, is the verdict of equivocation also warranted on example 0.2? Considering it is so easy to deny the charge (the charge certainly has not laid the pro-life argument to rest), the answer to this question might not be as clear as it first seems.

A preliminary foray into some possible answers to this question might bring out some of the problems that can be encountered. Consider "A" as a possible answer:

> A: Equivocation is a warranted verdict if and only
> if the argument contains the fallacy of
> equivocation, E.

Unfortunately, A is inadequate. If the meaning of a seriously debated phrase like "human being" is not settled, then we may never know whether the fallacy of equivocation has taken place in example 0.2 and, according to A, we may never know whether the verdict of equivocation is warranted. The fallacy of equivocation, while considered a warranted verdict for the person attacking the argument, is not considered a warranted verdict by the person defending the argument.

Of course, one could take another approach and simply deny that verdicts of equivocation are warranted in those cases where the meanings of terms are seriously disputed. But this brings in an additional consideration, like "B" below:

> B: The verdict of equivocation is a warranted verdict only if the meaning of a word or phrase is not seriously disputed.[3]

What, exactly, are the implications of "B" for argument criticism? Are there any more such "additional considerations?" Can all these "additional considerations" ever be met? In other words, when, exactly (if ever), is a verdict of the fallacy of equivocation warranted on an argument? This is the central question of this thesis.

III. Outline of the thesis.

This thesis is the development of a complete set of conditions, perhaps not unlike "A" and "B" above, which, I argue, should be fulfilled in order for a verdict of equivocation to be. Such conditions will provide an argument critic with a precise measuring device with which he or she can agree or disagree with an accusation of equivocation, or defend or

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[3]"A" above would have to be changed to read "only if" in place of "if and only if". "A" would be necessary but not sufficient.

withdraw his or her own charge of equivocation. The creation of such conditions is the goal of this thesis.

In the first chapter, I discuss the fallacy of equivocation as described in definition 1, including some historical examples. At this point, no evaluation of the critical value of charges of equivocation will have been made. My goal in this first chapter is only a realistic understanding of the "concept" of the fallacy of equivocation.

In the second chapter, I begin to raise some interesting problems with the fallacy of equivocation and with its role as a form of argument criticism. Hopefully, after this chapter, the reader will begin to appreciate more fully the necessity of taking a second look at whether or not a verdict of equivocation is warranted.

In the third chapter, I propose a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the practical application of charges of equivocation to everyday arguments. These conditions will not alter in any way my own conception of the fallacy of equivocation presented in the first chapter and described by "E" in definition 1 above. These conditions will avoid the kinds of problems raised in chapter 2. Discussion and application of these conditions will follow their presentation.

I will reach an interesting conclusion: charges of the fallacy of equivocation can be made for any number of reasons, and some reasons are better than others. We will see that some charges of equivocation have enormous potential for use as a sophistical device which breathes a lot of hot air but which says little of value about an argument. Whatever their value is, in such cases, verdicts of equivocation are not warranted and should not be used as such.

It is possible to distinguish these cases from cases where a charge of equivocation does say something interesting about the argument: It says that the argument is invalid and should be rejected, even though it appears to be both valid and sound on the surface. In these cases this type of criticism is not only warranted as a verdict but absolutely necessary. These arguments are simply wrong and must be rejected no matter how attached we may become to the conclusion. Otherwise someone who had never seen a river may end up actually believing that rivers have feet.

Chapter One: The Fallacy of Equivocation

In the introduction I proposed the following definition, E, as my canonical definition of the fallacy of equivocation:

> E: The fallacy of equivocation, E, is the illicit
> drawing of a conclusion which only
> appears to follow from the premises when
> different meanings of identical words
> appearing throughout the argument are
> not properly distinguished. When the dif-
> ferent meanings are distinguished, the
> conclusion does not follow.

However, the assessment of the critical value of <u>charges</u> of equivocation

must also include some understanding of E. Once one understands

what the fallacy of equivocation is, then one can see how alleging it

functions as a verdict being pronounced on an argument, if it functions

as such at all. And so, in this first chapter, I would like to examine the

fallacy of equivocation, E, by examining some of its historical

appearances and modern textbook and theoretical treatments in light of

this canonical definition.

I. Plato and Aristotle

Let me begin first with a few brief historical notes about the

fallacy of equivocation. As a phenomenon, equivocation might have been

happening as long as we were using words to signify objects. In the

<u>Sophist</u> Plato issues a warning to those using words, suggesting that whatever correspondence between word and object exists in one's own mind, this correspondence should be made public in order to avoid confusion. At 218b Plato writes

> At present, you see, all that you and I possess is
> the name. The thing to which each of us gives
> that name we may perhaps have precisely before
> our eyes but it is always desirable to have
> reached an agreement about the thing itself by
> means of explicit statements rather than be
> content to use the same word without formulating
> what it means. (<u>Sophist</u> 218b)

In other words, to quote John Anton's thoughts on the passage, "given a name which is commonly used by two persons it is by no means certain that both entertain the same meaning" (Anton 1968, 316).

Although examples of the manipulation of this weakness in language abound in ancient works like Plato's <u>Euthydemus</u>, it is not until Aristotle's <u>De Sophisticis Elenchis</u> that this phenomenon is put into a theoretical framework. <u>De Sophisticis Elenchis</u> concerns "arguments which appear to be refutations but are really fallacies and not refutations" (<u>SE</u> 164a 21), where a refutation is simply "reasoning accompanied by a contradiction of the conclusion" (165a 3). Aristotle writes

> There are two modes of refutations; one has to do
> with the language used, the other is unconnected

with language. The methods of producing false
illusion in connection with language are six in
number: equivocation, ambiguity, combination,
division, accent, and form of expression. (165b 23
- 27)

Under the fallacy of equivocation, Aristotle provides four examples with

corresponding explanations of how the arguments are equivocal. First of

all,

Example 1.1

Those who know the use of letters learn what is
dictated to them.
Therefore, those who know, learn. (165b 31 - 32)

Aristotle explains that "learn" is equivocal, meaning "understand by

using knowledge" and "acquire knowledge." Hence, the conclusion does

not follow. Secondly,

Example 1.2

What must exist is good.
Evils must exist.
Therefore, evils are good. (165b 34 - 35)

In this case, the problem is an equivocal phrase, "must exist." According

to Aristotle, it can mean "what is necessary, which is often true of evils

(for some evil is necessary) and we also say that good things 'must exist'"

(165b 36 - 38), in the sense of "ought to be." Again, this is a

straightforward case of meaning shift.

In the text, Aristotle's third and fourth examples are combined, but they can be easily unpacked:

Example 1.3

The man who stood up is standing.
The man who was seated stood up.
Therefore, the same man is seated and standing.
    (165b 37 - 166a 1)

Similarly,

Example 1.4

It is he who is recovering his health that is
restored to health.
It is he who is sick that is recovering.
Therefore, the same man is a sick man and
restored to health. (165b 37 - 166a 2)

Aristotle provides the following explanation, similar to the explanation in the first two examples:

For that 'the sick man' does such and such a
thing or has such and such a thing done to him,
has not one meaning only but at one time means
'the man who is now sick'; and at another time
'the man who was formerly sick.'(166a 2 - 4)

So far, then, the main characteristic emerging out of Aristotle's examples of equivocation is the multiple use of words with different meanings at each occurrence.

II. Post Aristotelian Treatments.

a) Pierre Gassendi.

But Aristotle's treatment of the fallacies in <u>De Sophisticis Elenchis</u> is not perfect (Ebbesen 7).[1] Not surprisingly, "interest in Aristotle's <u>De Sophisticis Elenchis</u> decreased in the following centuries" writes Ebbesen. However, for some strange reason, the fallacies, including (in some ways especially) the fallacy of equivocation seem to be hanging on. Ebbesen continues,

> but even long after it became unusual to read the <u>elenchi</u>, its classification of fallacies survived (often distorted, it's true) in textbooks of logic. Even now it is not quite dead. (Ebbesen, 7)

On the other hand, Ebbesen's faint sarcasm might be mitigated by the importance some authors have given the fallacy of equivocation. Consider, for example, Pierre Gassendi's <u>Institutio Logica</u> written in 1658. He claims that all of Aristotle's 13 fallacies can be reduced to one, namely ambiguity (although it is quite clear that he is referring more specifically to what we have been calling equivocation). He writes

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[1] I have not examined Ebbesen's claim closely, but in <u>Commentators and Commentaries on Aristotle's De Sophisticis Elenchis</u> Ebbesen notes that it is difficult to interpret many of Aristotle's examples; it is difficult to glean real definitions from his imprecise remarks; quantifiers are rare; denotation is often confused with connotation; the subject of terms is often confused with the predicate of terms; it is difficult to tell whether Aristotle was referring to propositions, discourses, dialogues, words, or arguments.

> There is really one single place serving as the root
> of the sophistic syllogism -- ambiguity, and when
> this is uncovered it is clear that what appeared to
> be a syllogism is not a syllogism at all. (Gassendi
> 1658, 152)

and he describes them as follows:

> Aristotle listed 13 places: homonym, amphiboly,
> composition, division, accent and so on. But all
> have this in common, namely that there is
> present some ambiguity of word or expression,
> and the sense of the word or expression is
> different in the proposition from what it is in the
> assumption, so that it is not surprising that when
> both have been admitted as true an absurd
> conclusion follows. (Gassendi 1658, 152)

Now Gassendi offers no proof of this claim. I mention Gassendi only because he provides evidence that the fallacy of equivocation was not some peripheral fallacy which has barely survived the course of the centuries.

b) The "Standard Treatment".

But for the most part, Ebbesen would be quite justified if we were to interpret his remarks about fallacies being "not quite dead" as sarcastic. What has survived from Aristotle with respect to fallacies has found its way into many modern logic textbooks virtually unchanged. This phenomenon has been dubbed "The Standard Treatment" by Charles Hamblin. Hamblin writes:

> There is hardly a subject that dies harder or has
> changed as little over the years. After two
> millennia of active study of logic, and, in
> particular, after over half of that most iconoclastic
> of centuries, the twentieth A. D., we still find
> fallacies classified, presented, and studied in
> much the same old way.
> (Hamblin 1970, 1)

Hamblin supplements Aristotle's examples of equivocation with several

taken from the "standard treatment". He writes:

Example 1.5

> At its lowest level, equivocation is plain punning:
> At least three modern American books I have
> consulted think it worthwhile to give the example
> "some dogs have fuzzy ears; my dog has fuzzy
> ears; therefore my dog is some dog." (Hamblin
> 1970, 14)

Other examples cited by Hamblin are taken from Abraham Fraunce's

Lawyer's Logic:

Example 1.6

> All the maydes in Camberwell may daunce in
> an egge shell. (Hamblin 1970, 14)

Fraunce explains:

> Of a little village by London, where Camberwell
> may be taken for the Well in the towne or ye
> towne itself. (Hamblin 1970, 14)

And finally,

Example 1.7

> So lastly, the Mayre of Erith, is the best Mayre
> next to the Mayre of London. Where the towne
> god knowes is a poore thing and the Mayre
> thereof a seedy fellow, in respect of the Mayre's of
> divers other cities, yet is the very next to London,
> because there is none between. (Hamblin 1970,
> 14-15)

It is clear that some of these examples of equivocation share some sort of meaning shift among multiple appearances of words and some of these meaning shifts also form part of an illicit inference, with the possible exception of the last two examples which are merely puns on the words "next to" and "Camberwell." This thesis is not concerned with puns, but is more concerned with those meaning shifts which lead unacceptably to conclusions. However, if one is using one-line puns as part of a reasonable argument (where one is drawing a conclusion), it is quite possible that an illicit inference can result, so one-line puns are not totally irrelevant.

III. The Fallacy of Equivocation in Modern Textbooks.

a) Irving Copi.

But let me turn now to consider some more popular modern conceptions of the fallacy of equivocation. First of all, Irving Copi describes equivocation in the following way:

> Most words have more than one literal meaning,
> as the word "hide" may denote either the process
> of concealing something or the skin of an animal.
> When we keep these different meanings apart, no
> difficulty arises. But when we confuse the
> different meanings a single word or phrase may
> have, using it in different senses in the same
> context, we are using it equivocally. If the context
> happens to be an argument, we commit the
> fallacy of equivocation. (Copi 1961, 74)

Copi seems to concentrate on the idea of "confusing" different meanings

of the same word within the context of an argument. Copi also mentions

the special problems associated with what he calls "relative" terms --

terms like "tall" which have different meanings when associated with

"building" and "man". Although many textbook examples are frankly

ridiculous, Copi assures us that the use of such relative terms as "tall"

and even "good" can cause some serious difficulties. For example, Copi

points out that being a "good" scholar does not mean that one is a "good"

teacher. The meaning of the word "good" has shifted. Of course, there

can be as many kinds of shifts of meaning as there are words, but Copi

does illustrate the possible frequency of equivocation, especially if even

the slightest shifts in shades of meaning are brought into consideration.

b) *Howard Kahane*

While still discussing equivocation as essentially a "meaning

shift", Howard Kahane places the fallacy of equivocation within the

context of a dialogue between two people. This is an interesting

development. Much recent work in argumentation theory also attempts

to bring the features of dialogue, communication, and interaction to bear

on the study of the main features of argumentation, including fallacies.

(See, for example, Walton 1989; Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984;

and Willard 1990. This approach and its application to the fallacy of

equivocation will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter.)

Kahane's work in 1973 predates this more recent work. He writes:

> One way to convince an opponent is to use
> ambiguous terms (terms with more than one
> meaning). For instance, key terms or expressions
> can be used which when construed in one way
> render the argument valid and when construed in
> another way render one'or more of its premises
> true. Your opponent, you hope, will thus be led
> to believe that your argument both is valid and
> has true premises, although when construed
> consistently it does not. If you are taken in by
> such shenanigans, you commit the fallacy of
> Ambiguity, also called the fallacy of equivocation.
> (Kahane 1973, 235)

Although the conception here of equivocation as meaning shift is similar

to Copi's, Kahane is emphasising the idea of deception. It is interesting

to note that in Kahane's account, the fallacy of equivocation is com-

mitted by the person who is "taken in" by the meaning shift rather than by the person who introduces the argument. It would be clearer, at least to my way of thinking, to say that if an argument contains the fallacy of equivocation, it is "committed" by the inventor of the argument and exists regardless of the awareness of the person who receives the argument. Kahane's account leaves me with the impression that if no one is "taken in" by the fallacy of equivocation, then no fallacy has been committed. I would suggest, however, that deception asks too much of equivocation, for it is entirely possible that the double meaning of a word escapes the awareness of all participants in a dialogue, including the person who puts forth the argument (Hamblin 1970, 289). Nevertheless, for anyone who favours such games, equivocation is certainly an interesting and no doubt effective type of "shenanigan".

c) Willard Quine.

Willard Quine's conception of equivocation is the same as that found in Copi and Kahane, but in <u>Methods of Logic</u> he mentions the fallacy of equivocation within the context of translating natural language argumentation into logical notation. He writes:

> In general, the trustworthiness of logical analysis
> and inference depends on our not giving one and
> the same expression different interpretations in

the course of reasoning. Violations of this
principle are known traditionally as the fallacy of
equivocation. (Quine 1982, 56)

Quine's wording here also illustrates the importance of equivocation,

influencing even "the trustworthiness of logical analysis". For example,

Quine mentions that it is possible to rephrase the following two

compatible statements in such a way that they turn out incompatible:

Example 1.8

(3) He went to Pawcatuck and I went along.
(4) He went to Saugatuck but I did not go along.

Superficially, according to Quine, one could paraphrase these sentences

into logical notation as pqrq which is, of course, inconsistent. Yet in the

English language, the two statements are not false when joined by a

conjunction. The reason is simple:

Actually, of course, the 'I went along' in (3) must
be distinguished from the 'I went along' whose
negation appears in (4); the one is 'I went along to
Pawcatuck' and the other is 'I went along to
Saugatuck'. When (3) and (4) are completed in
this fashion they can no longer be represented as
related in the manner of 'pq' and 'rq', but only as
'pq' and 'rs'; and the apparent inconsistency
disappears. (Quine 1982, 56)

While Quine is using a much more modern approach to logic, the

problem of equivocation still reduces to the problem of a shift of

meaning.

Quine's examples raise an interesting problem which will always haunt formal logicians: the problem of translating natural language into logical notation. But this problem tells us something more about the location of equivocation as a fallacy within logic. A formal language is of great value because its meanings are more clearly specified and ideally they are unequivocal. Equivocation, then, can be a "formal" fallacy in this (or any) formal language only if it is possible to confuse the specifications of two symbols. Given the nature of formal languages, this risk is greatly minimized. Getting to the point of formal analysis, however, is not so easy. English language sentences must be translated into logical notation, and at this point the logician should also be on his or her guard against "giving one and the same expression different interpretations in the course of reasoning" (Quine 1982, 56). We might also call the fallacy of equivocation a translation problem.

However, it is not often that one hears of a debate in the House of Commons done entirely in logical notation (although this might help). Meaning shifts happen even when an argument in English is not translated into logical notation, as exemplified by the examples given in this chapter. Equivocation is not only a translation problem.

Quine goes on, however, to make an interesting point about the threat of this fallacy. He writes:

> Insofar as the interpretation of ambiguous
> expressions depends on circumstances of the
> argument as a whole - speaker, hearer, scene,
> date, and underlying problem and purpose - the
> fallacy of equivocation is not to be feared, for
> those background circumstances may be expected
> to influence the interpretation of an ambiguous
> expression uniformly wherever the expression
> recurs in the course of the argument. (Quine
> 1982, 56)

The problem with equivocation, then, lies only in those situations where

the immediate context of the argument changes the reference of the word

or symbol within that argument. As Quine says,

> in such cases we have to rephrase before
> proceeding; not rephrase to the extent of resolving
> all ambiguity, but to the extent of resolving such
> part of the ambiguity as might, if left standing,
> end up by being resolved in dissimilar ways by
> different immediate contexts within the proposed
> logical argument. (Quine 1982, 57)

So here we have Quine discussing the fallacy of equivocation in much

the same way as Copi and Kahane.

IV. Theoretical Treatments of the Fallacy of Equivocation.

a) Douglas Walton

The foregoing are all text book treatments , but I think the best

theoretical analysis of the fallacy of equivocation has been given by

Douglas Walton. According to him,

> The traditional fallacy of equivocation is said to
> occur in an argument when a word or phrase is
> used ambiguously, shifting into different
> meanings during the course of the argument. The
> danger of equivocation is that, if the ambiguous
> term is taken in one way in one occurrence in the
> argument and in another way in the second
> occurrence, the argument could seem to be valid
> without really being so. (Walton 1989, 250)

It might be objected that Walton's analysis is not entirely accurate. It might be suggested, for example, that the danger is not that the ambiguous term is taken in different ways at its different occurrences, but that it is not noticed that it is being used in different senses in the two places. I recognize this possible weakness in Walton's analysis, but I would defend him (at least for the moment). Consider my paradigm example of the fallacy of equivocation mentioned in the introduction:

Example 0.1

> Everything that runs has feet;
> Rivers run,
> Therefore, rivers have feet.

It is obvious, at least to me, that in order for the premises in this argument to make any sense at all, the word "run" must, whether it is noticed or not, be interpreted in two different ways. If this shift is noticed, then the argument is to be rejected. I will grant, however, that the danger of equivocation is in not knowing that the shift has taken place. Hence its deceptiveness.

But the key to Walton's analysis is the "contextual shift".

Concerning example 1.9,

Example 1.9

All stars are in orbit in outer space,
Sarah Flamingo is a star,
Therefore Sarah Flamingo is in orbit in outer space.

Walton writes:

> What makes an equivocation work is the
> contextual shift. We are tugged to interpret 'star'
> one way in order to make one premise come out
> true but tugged another way in the different
> context of the other premise. (Walton 1989, 251)

In fact, according to Walton, the argument contains a bundle of different

arguments conflated into one. In order to avoid what he calls "cognitive

dissonance" the mind naturally favours the illusory or non-existent

equivocal argument which makes the premises true and the argument

valid. Walton writes:

> The fallaciousness of equivocation in such a case
> has been explicated by Woods and myself in
> terms of cognitive dissonance. Whichever way the
> subject of the argument chooses he is faced with
> inconsistency. Here, he must choose between
> invalidity and unsoundness. He can only have
> validity at the cost of false premises. Or,
> alternatively, he can only have true premises at
> the cost of considering the invalidity of the
> argument. However, the way (being offered by the
> sender of the argument) to resolve the dissonance
> is to amalgamate the two arguments into one

pseudo-argument having the appearance of both
soundness and validity. (Walton 1987, 244)

The advantage of Walton's analysis of equivocation lies in its explanatory

force. It seems to give us some clue as to why equivocation might work

and why it might be deceptive, even though none of the examples given

so far would deceive anybody for a moment.[2]

V. Canonical Definition of the Fallacy of Equivocation.

Several key features of the fallacy of equivocation have been

recurring throughout this discussion. First of all, the fallacy of

equivocation contains an equivocation, where an equivocation (Eq) can

be defined as the multiple use of words which have different meanings,

as defined in Ia (page 1). Secondly, the equivocation is found in an

argument, where an argument is a set of statements, several of which

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[2]It could be mentioned at this point that Walton (1987) goes further and
provides conditions for "A good case of the fallacy of equivocation." Such
conditions "should be (1) an incorrect (invalid) argument; (2) based on
meaning shift; and (3) the putting forward of which is part of a strategy of
deception or significant mischief in argumentation" (249). While these
appear to be good conditions, I have some reservations about them. A
better context for discussing these particular conditions (and my
reservations about them) can, I think, be found in the next chapter where
I deal more specifically with problems.

are meant to give support to one other statement (the conclusion).[3]

Thirdly, the argument is invalid, and fourthly, the argument appears to

be valid when two identical words have different meanings and can be

taken to be valid by either an interlocutor or the presenter of the

argument. Because of the "apparent validity", the equivocation is illicit.

These observations are perfectly compatible with the canonical

definition of the fallacy of equivocation, E, given on page three (Definition

2) and again on page 13:

> E: The fallacy of equivocation, E, is the illicit
> drawing of a conclusion which only
> appears to follow from the premises when
> different meanings of identical words
> appearing throughout the argument are
> not properly distinguished. When the
> different meanings are distinguished, the
> conclusion does not follow.

Such "use" of multiple meanings manifests itself as a "shift" or a "slide"

in the meaning of a word from one occurrence of the word to the next

and it can be so subtle that it is unnoticeable. Equivocation, E, is

successful when the mind conflates plausible premises with a valid

argument form in order to avoid "cognitive dissonance." In effect, the

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[3]My reason for ignoring those meaning shifts which do not occur in arguments is purely stipulative. I think "clever turns of phrase" using subtle and not-so-subtle meaning shifts are fascinating in any context, and worthy of serious study. But in the interests of brevity the scope of this thesis will be limited to those illicit meaning shifts which occur in an argument as described above.

mind simply does not see the equivocation until it has been pointed out. Perhaps the whole effect is not unlike the drawing of an optical illusion, or a diagram which is theoretically impossible but appears on the printed page nonetheless. This is one reason why I suggest that being taken in by the fallacy of equivocation is an error in judgement.

VI. Summary.

So examples of meaning shift or equivocation seem to abound in logic textbooks, and they have been grouped generally into a fallacy known as the fallacy of equivocation. Let me try to summarize what has been said so far in this chapter by making a few general observations. First of all, there is some evidence here that equivocation might be a very important fallacy. Quine relates the fallacy to the "trustworthiness of logical analysis" and Pierre Gassendi makes the rather bold claim that all of Aristotle's thirteen fallacies can be identified as variants of the fallacy of equivocation. Indeed, this is a wonderful thought, as it could be a way of unifying fallacy theory. Perhaps the key to dispute resolution is nothing more than finding and identifying these shifts in meaning. (See also Powers 1986.)

But this leads me to my second point about the fallacy of equivocation. Despite the fact that equivocation might be an important

fallacy, there has been precious little theoretical work other than a chapter here and there by theorists like Woods and Walton and Hamblin. And, what is worse, Hamblin's chapter on equivocation in his influential book <u>Fallacies</u> raises many difficult theoretical problems which have yet to be answered. (I will discuss Hamblin's chapter on equivocation in more detail in the next chapter, which will be, I think, a more appropriate context.) As a result of this lack of theoretical work on the fallacy of equivocation, most of my sources so far have been textbooks. However interesting these examples may be, this is not the normal procedure: Usually textbooks are written in order to explain or teach some theoretical advancement.

My third observation about the fallacy of equivocation is more positive and it represents my main point in this chapter. As a concept, the fallacy of equivocation is not difficult to understand. In fact, it is quite simple: The fallacy of equivocation is the illicit drawing of a conclusion which only appears to follow from the premises because different meanings of identical words appearing throughout the argument are not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow. And examples abound in textbooks which illustrate this fallacy.

However, now that we know <u>what</u> the fallacy of equivocation is, we do not yet know whether or not it is warranted as a verdict pronounced on an argument. As we approach this more practical question, problems emerge, problems which are not answered by the textbooks, but which will be considered in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Problems with Equivocation

The following definitions were discussed in the last chapter

and in the introduction:

Definition 1

Eq: Equivocation, Eq, is the use of two tokens of the same word which occur in such a way that one token has one meaning in one occurrence and the second token has a second meaning in the second occurrence.

Definition 2

E: The fallacy of equivocation (E) is the illicit drawing of a conclusion which only appears to follow from the premises because different meanings of identical words appearing throughout the argument are not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow.

Definition 3

CE: A charge of the fallacy of equivocation (CE) is any accusation that a given argument commits the fallacy of equivocation, E.

The central question of this thesis is when, if ever, a verdict of

equivocation is warranted. It was mentioned in the introduction that

there were some potential problems in answering this question, that an

assessment of the critical value of the fallacy of equivocation was not as

simple as it might appear. While the first chapter was a discussion of the fallacy of equivocation (E), this second chapter will address several problems associated both with charges of committing the fallacy of equivocation (CE) and with the fallacy of equivocation (E) itself. In particular, I will discuss three possible difficulties in current treatments of the fallacy of equivocation and three problems which need to be resolved as part of an account of when, if ever, a verdict of equivocation is warranted. They can be summarized as follows:

I. Difficulties in current Discussions of Equivocation.

a) The weakness of fallacy theory.

b) The triviality of textbook examples of equivocation.

c) The confusion of ambiguity with equivocation.

d) The problem of distinguishing licit from illicit meaning shifts in a given context.

II. Substantive Problems.

a) The problem of determining whether or not a meaning shift has taken place.

b) The problem of distinguishing warranted from unwarranted verdicts of the fallacy of equivocation.

c) The problem of detecting illicit charges of equivocation which falsely prejudice a valid argument.

These three major problems are not presented in any particular order, but taken together they demonstrate a need for those conditions which will be developed in the third chapter.

I. Difficulties in Current Discussions of Equivocation.

a) Fallacy Theory.

I would like to mention, first of all, that the lack of an accepted unified fallacy theory has us at a slight disadvantage in discussing the fallacy of equivocation. An accepted comprehensive and systematic theory of fallacies would be an ideal context in which to place the fallacy of equivocation, and there is no doubt that such a theoretical framework would be of great value for the study of any fallacy and would simplify the study of the fallacy of equivocation greatly.

Unfortunately, this ideal is not available to us. For whatever historical reason, the lexicon of fallacies which was created by Aristotle has been passed on from one generation of logicians to the next with little critical analysis until the past several decades. In 1970, Charles Hamblin called this motley collection of fallacies which seem to persist in textbooks "the Standard Treatment." He writes:

> There is hardly a subject that dies
> harder or has changed as little over the
> years. After two millennia of active study

of logic and, in particular, after over half
of that most iconoclastic of centuries, the
twentieth A.D., we still find fallacies
classified, presented and studied in
much the same old way. (Hamblin 1970,
1)

Sten Ebbesen makes the same point about Aristotle's original list of

fallacies:

but even long after it became unusual to
read the elenchi, its classification of
fallacies survived (often distorted, it's
true) in textbooks of logic. Even now it is
not quite dead. (Ebbesen, 7)

The difficulty that this presents for those who study the textbooks is

made clear by Woods and Walton writing in 1979:

Among those who deal with this sadly
understudied area of logic, authors of
introductory logic texts often seem to
commit, more than explain, the informal
fallacies. What the student gets is the
"standard treatment" as Hamblin calls it.
Long on titillating examples and short on
serious explanation or general
guidelines. But the fact is that we lack
theory. Discussion of the most
rudimentary textbook examples quickly
makes it plain that non-arbitrary sorting
of the "correct" from the "fallacious"
argument is simply not available to us.
(Woods and Walton 1979, 234)

This lack of theory may prove to be a disadvantage in trying to

create a systematic treatment of any particular fallacy. However, such a

treatment would not be impossible. In any case, this lack of theory is not going to prevent the treatment of the fallacy of equivocation which is being given in this thesis. But this is only one problem with the fallacy of equivocation.

b) Textbook Examples.

One possible problem with the fallacy of equivocation is the absurdity of the examples which are found in so many textbooks. According to Charles Hamblin, many examples of the fallacy of equivocation given in the "standard treatment" (including many examples given in the previous chapter of this thesis) are inadequate. It is possible to agree that this is a problem, especially if one assumes that in order for a mistake to be worth recording in a textbook, it should be the kind of mistake which is likely to occur outside of the textbooks, in real-life argumentation. Unfortunately, the examples that have found their way into textbooks often do not involve inferences which are likely to be accepted. One would hope to illustrate the fallacy of equivocation with more realistic examples. As Hamblin says,

> These kinds of examples introduce us to
> different kinds of ambiguity. They do
> not, however, provide good examples of
> fallacies, since, whatever our feelings
> about maids in Camberwell or the Mayre

of Erith, we are hardly capable of being
deceived by any serious chain of
reasoning exploiting the double
meanings or the statements about them.
(Hamblin 1970, 15)

There are two problems with the kinds of examples that Hamblin is

referring to. On the one hand, they are not examples of arguments or

inferences, and on the other hand they are so obvious that they can

hardly be called "fallacies" of equivocation, since no one would be taken

in by them (or "deceived"). They fail, then, to illustrate what they intend

to illustrate (if they are really meant to illustrate "fallacies" of

equivocation and not just "ambiguity"). Let us, for convenience, label

these types of examples "trivial examples".

My response to this problem is mitigated rejection. Whether or

not anybody is deceived or capable of being deceived by an equivocal

argument is not entirely relevant: the fact is, the argument commits the

fallacy of equivocation whether or not it is trivial.

Here again, however, the poverty of fallacy theory is keenly felt.

Hamblin is presupposing a concept of "the fallacy" which involves

deception, but this is not a concept of fallacy which I endorse. I think a

fallacy is a "mistake" which can be used in a deceptive way, but

deception, to me, is not strictly necessary in order for a fallacy to exist.

This view of fallacy theory is obviously open to debate, and may diverge slightly from the common notion of a fallacy as an argument which seems valid but is not. However, I will not develop any new theory of fallacies here. I do agree with Hamblin that it is a pity that most examples of equivocation are not really deceitful, but this is more of an observation rather than the statement of a problem. These trivial examples are, nonetheless, examples of the fallacy of equivocation and any treatment of this fallacy must be able to account for them.[1]

c) Equivocation and Ambiguity.

The third point I would like to make about "the standard treatment" is the association made between ambiguity and the fallacy of equivocation. I have some reservations about this association, and I am a little uneasy about allowing it to pass without comment. Consider Charles Hamblin's description of "Fallacies dependent on Language" and "the Fallacy of Equivocation:"

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[1]Unfortunately, once we move beyond these trivial examples and consider examples of equivocation which are "deceitful" further more serious problems arise. These more serious problems are the central concern of this thesis and will be dealt with in this present chapter. However, this is a problem with non-trivial examples, not a problem with trivial examples.

> Aristotle classified fallacies into those
> Dependent on Language and those
> Outside Language. ... Fallacies of the
> first category are those that arise from
> ambiguity in the words or sentences in
> which they are expressed. ... In the
> simplest case of Fallacies Dependent on
> Language the ambiguity can be traced to
> double-meaning in a single word. This is
> the Fallacy of Equivocation. (Hamblin
> 1970, 14).

Unfortunately, there is an ambiguity in the word "ambiguity."

On the one hand, ambiguity can mean simply having (in the abstract)

more than one meaning. In this sense, virtually every word in the

English language is ambiguous and certainly the fallacy of equivocation

is closely related to ambiguity. In order for a word to occur twice with

two different meanings, it must be ambiguous in this way. Let us call

this type of ambiguity "ambiguity in the abstract" and define it in the

following way:

Definition 4

AA: A word is ambiguous in the abstract (AA) if and only if it
has more than one possible meaning, independently of
context.

But there is also a sense in which ambiguity means that a

given word has multiple meanings even when that word is used in one

specific context. This type of ambiguity can be defined in the following way:

Definition 5

AC: A word is ambiguous in context (AC) if and only if it is not clear which of the multiple meanings of a word is being implied in a given sentence.

For example, one might encounter the phrase "the captain of the boat ran into the bank" and wonder whether "bank" meant "a place for monatery transactions" or "the side of a river". In this case, the word "bank" is unclear or "of dubious meaning". There is a sense in which if a word is "ambiguous" we do not know which of the two meanings to apply to the word. Ambiguity in context should be avoided by making clear which meaning of a word is being used.

Ambiguity taken in this second sense is not necessarily related to the fallacy of equivocation. In fact, in a fallaciously equivocal argument, as the argument moves from one premise to the next, it can be perfectly clear what is being meant by each occurrence of each word in each context. The problem with the fallacy of equivocation is not that the meanings of the words are unclear but that the meanings shift from one premise to the next. Within each premise, however, the meaning of each occurrence of the word in question may be still perfectly clear.

Example 0.1 used in the introduction should help clarify this point. The premise "everything that runs has feet" is a clear statement, even though the word "runs" has potentially more than one meaning (and is "ambiguous in the abstract"). The meaning of the word "run" in this premise is not open to debate. The same thing can be said in the second premise, "rivers run." The context is different, but the meaning of the word "run" is still clear (different, but still clear). An absurd conclusion is drawn in an argument which seems to instantiate a valid argument form. In this example, the word "run" is ambiguous in the abstract, but not in context.[2]

d) The problem of distinguishing licit from illicit meaning shifts in a given context.

Another possible problem with some textbook accounts of the fallacy of equivocation is that they falsely assume that all meaning shifts in the course of an argument are fallacies of equivocation. For example, Irving Copi writes that:

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[2]I would caution the reader not to assume too much from my observations at this point. I claim only that an equivocal argument does not have to contain an ambiguous word, where ambiguity is defined as unclarity or doubt about the meaning with which a word is being used in a context. Based on what I have said so far, an equivocal argument does not have to contain this type of ambiguity, but it still could contain this type of ambiguity.

> When we confuse the different meanings
> a single word or phrase may have, using
> it in different senses in the same context,
> we are using it <u>equivocally</u>. If the
> context happens to be an argument, we
> commit the fallacy of equivocation. (Copi
> 1961, 74)

I would criticize this conception of equivocation for being too wide. It is possible for a word to switch meanings in a given context without the argument being fallacious. Of course, this might not be the clearest way to argue, but as long as both parties in the argument understand each meaning of each word as it occurs, and the conclusion still follows from the premises, then there would not be a serious problem with the argument. Consider the following example:

Example 2.1

> A short is a drink of small volume an
> high alcoholic content.
> One can drink a small volume in a short time.
> Therefore, one can drink a short in a short time.

In example 2.1, the word "short" changes meaning from one premise to the next, yet the conclusion still follows from the premises.

My definition of the fallacy of equivocation, E, avoids this problem by requiring that the validity of the argument (where validity is being used in the broad sense) turns on the meaning shift. If, according to my definition, the meanings of the words are not distinguished, the

conclusion follows from the premises, but when they are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

e) Summary.

These four preliminary problems are interesting and worthy of further study, but I will not go into further detail here. Lack of fallacy theory certainly has us at a disadvantage with regards to a detailed study of the fallacy of equivocation, but with care and imagination this problem can be overcome. The weakness of the textbook examples of the fallacy of equivocation is lamentable to some extent, but in itself it represents less of a problem and more of a symptom. The real problem is lack of significant theory, both of fallacies in general and of the fallacy of equivocation. In the same vein, the observation about ambiguity and equivocation is an example of the carelessness which plagues current textbook treatments of fallacies and keeps earnest students sceptical, and so is the problem of distinguishing licit from illicit meaning shifts. But there are more serious problems with the fallacy of equivocation.

II. Substantive Problems.

a) Meaning shift.

It is a pity that many textbook treatments of the fallacy of

equivocation involve inferences which would not be taken seriously, but

at least these trivial examples involved clear cases of meaning shifts. It

seems, however, that the further we get from trivial examples of the

fallacy of equivocation, the less clear it is that they are cases of meaning

shift. Hamblin writes that "if we try to find better examples we meet

another kind of difficulty, in that what is non-trivial may be

controversial" (15).

It could be the case, however, that disagreement about the

meaning of terms is impossible to resolve. Consider the following less

trivial example, cited in Douglas Walton's Informal Logic:

Example 2.2

Following the law is obligatory.
Failure to do something obligatory is morally wrong.
Therefore, failure to follow the law is
morally wrong. (Walton 1989, 270)[3]

Walton points out that "obligatory" can mean either "morally obligatory"

or "legally obligatory" and "the only way both premises can be plausibly

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[3]This argument also appears in Hamblin (1970) on page 292.

taken as true is to equivocate" (270). However, Walton also says that

one can deny the shift of meaning:

> This criticism seems very reasonable, but
> what if the proponent of [this] example
> replies to the criticism as follows: "My
> argument is not an equivocation. It is a
> perfectly convincing and sound
> argument, for in it I have identified the
> class of morally obligatory acts and the
> class of acts prescribed by law as
> perfectly equivalent in meaning. In fact,
> I am stipulating that, for the purposes of
> argument, "morally obligatory acts" and
> "acts prescribed by law" shall mean the
> same thing. (Walton 1989, 270)

The problem is simple: an interlocutor has simply denied that the word

"obligatory" has shifted meaning. In this case, what has become of the

charge of equivocation? Is the argument fallacious or not?

For the moment, this problem must remain unresolved, at

least until it is possible to reach agreement about the use of such terms

as "obligatory" (which could be a long time). If it is not clear whether or

not there is a meaning shift, then it is not clear whether or not the

argument has committed the fallacy of equivocation.

b) *Unwarranted verdicts of equivocation.*

Of course the problem of meaning shifts identified above is not

necessarily devastating to the fallacy of equivocation. It simply shows

that the fallacy of equivocation is <u>difficult</u> to pin down, perhaps in some

cases almost impossible. Let us simply admit this as a property of the

fallacy of equivocation, PE:

> PE: The fallacy of equivocation is
> difficult to substantiate as long
> as there is a difference of
> opinion with regard to the
> presence or absence of a
> meaning shift.

But now a second major problem arises: Given PE, is it possible to

assess the value of a <u>verdict</u> of equivocation? (Recall that a verdict on an

argument is a final statement that the argument should be rejected or

accepted as sound and valid.)

The answer to this question depends upon how one chooses to

assess the value of verdicts of equivocation. (An "assessment"

presupposes some set of standards upon which the merits of such a

charge should be based.) In other words, there must be some set of

conditions that will allow one to say that "in case x, the verdict of

equivocation is warranted; in case y, it is not warranted." What are

these conditions? So far, we have only one such condition: the presence

of the fallacy of equivocation. Let us formulate this condition in the

following way:

A': A verdict of the fallacy of equivocation is warranted only if the argument contains the fallacy of equivocation, E.[4]

Unfortunately, "A'" will not always be able to help us assess the value of charges of the fallacy of equivocation. For example, it will not help us assess the value of the charge of equivocation brought against example 2.1. Given "A'" and PE, we may still never know whether this charge is a worthwhile form of argument criticism in this instance, because no final verdict has been reached about whether or not there has been even a meaning shift. A "guilty" verdict would be warranted for the person attacking the argument, but unwarranted for the person defending the argument and hence, a verdict of equivocation may or not be warranted.

Perhaps, like the problem of meaning shift, one could simply leave this problem alone and label it "unsolvable until it is possible to solve problems of meaning shift." In other words, we simply may never know whether or not a verdict of equivocation is warranted.

But there is another possible answer to this question. One could say that when it is not known whether or not the fallacy of equivocation actually exists (because of, for example, doubt about the presence of a meaning shift) then a charge of committing the fallacy of

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[4]This condition differs from "A" mentioned in the introduction in that it allows for additional conditions. The wording of this condition has changed from "if and only if' to "only if'.

equivocation would be warranted only in initiating a discussion about the meanings of various words in the premises, or the truth about the premises themselves. Such a charge, however, would not be able to place a final verdict on the argument. The fallaciousness of the argument would no longer be an immediate issue, the immediate issue would concern the meaning of the repeated word or expression.

This approach to assessing charges of the fallacy of equivocation is, I think, correct, but it brings in an additional condition other than "A" above. What exactly is this condition? Are there any more such conditions?[5]

This rough outline of an answer needs further development and explanation, and my third chapter will spell these conditions out.

c) Unfairly prejudicial charges of equivocation.

Unfortunately, no one has been anxious to develop any conditions which warrant verdicts of equivocation, beyond the mere presence of the fallacy of equivocation itself. Perhaps my third chapter will be a small development in this direction. However, this gap leaves open the possibility of a third problem. If it is a matter of dispute whether or not a particular verdict of equivocation is warranted, then

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[5]These questions were also raised briefly in the introduction.

one could use a charge of the fallacy of equivocation in order to prejudice an audience unreasonably against an argument. If it is difficult to agree about the existence of a meaning shift, then a dubious charge of the fallacy of equivocation can cast a dark and unfair cloud over an argument.

Any charge of any fallacy which purports to pronounce a final verdict on an argument is a serious accusation, and it is well worth making an earnest attempt to distinguish cases where such a serious charge is warranted from cases where it is not. This is the best way to avoid charges which unreasonably prejudice an argument. With respect to the fallacy of equivocation, the conditions which will be discussed in chapter three will help make this distinction.

d) Summary of the Substantive Problems.

These three substantive problems with the fallacy of equivocation all point to a need to assess the value of verdicts of equivocation, which, in turn, points to a need to create a set of conditions which warrant such a verdict. Such conditions will not help us solve disagreements about the meaning of words, but they will help us decide whether or not a verdict of equivocation is warranted. Further, since an explicit set of conditions will help distinguish

warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation in this respect, the problem of charges of equivocation unfairly prejudicing an audience against an argument will be avoided.

III. Conclusion.

This chapter has been a discussion of problems which are associated with the fallacy of equivocation and verdicts of equivocation. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at verdicts of equivocation as verdicts, and I will introduce a set of criteria which warrant a verdict of equivocation. Once it has been determined when a verdict of equivocation is actually warranted, most of the above problems disappear and it can be seen that equivocation is of great critical value in some circumstances. In the third and final chapter of this thesis I hope to do justice to Hamblin's final words in his influential book Fallacies:

> The road to an understanding of
> equivocation, then, is the understanding
> of charges of equivocation. For this, the
> development of a theory of charges,
> objections, or points of order is a first
> essential. (Hamblin 1970, 303)

Chapter 3: A Warranted Verdict of Equivocation

The central question of this thesis is when, if ever, a verdict of equivocation is warranted. In the first chapter I examined the fallacy of equivocation and offered the following definition:

> E: The fallacy of equivocation (E) is the illicit drawing of a conclusion which only appears to follow from the premises when different meanings of identical words occurring throughout the argument are not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow.

In the second chapter, I discussed the following seven problems in detail:

I. Difficulties in Current Discussions of Equivocation.

a) The weakness of fallacy theory.

b) The triviality of textbook examples of equivocation.

c) The confusion of ambiguity with equivocation.

d) The problem of distinguishing licit from illicit meaning shifts in a given context.

II. Substantive Problems.

a) The problem of determining whether or not a meaning shift has taken place.

b) The problem of distinguishing warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation.

c) The problem of unfairly prejudicial charges of equivocation.

In this third chapter I will offer a set of conditions which I believe should be fulfilled in order for a verdict of equivocation to be warranted. By moving beyond considering the fallacy of equivocation as an illicit move in an argument to asking when, or under what conditions, a verdict of committing these illicit moves is warranted, I avoid if not resolve all of the major problems mentioned in the second chapter. These problems occur in situations where a verdict of equivocation would not be warranted. A warranted verdict results in the rejection or withdrawal of the argument.

So in this chapter I will present these conditions, together with their justification, apply these conditions to the problems mentioned in the second chapter, and answer several objections to these conditions. I will conclude this chapter with an answer to the central question of this thesis: A verdict of equivocation is warranted if and only if the conditions expressed and defended in this chapter are met.

I. Conditions which justify a verdict of equivocation.

a) Conditions based on the Fallacy of Equivocation.

Recall my appeal to the following principle in chapter 2:

> A': A charge of the fallacy of equivocation is warranted as a verdict pronounced on an argument only if the argument contains the fallacy of equivocation, E.

E was defined as follows:

> E: The fallacy of equivocation (E) is the illicit drawing
> of a conclusion which only appears to follow from
> the premises because different meanings of identical
> words appearing throughout the argument are not
> properly distinguished. When the different
> meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does
> not follow.

Although it has been shown how this principle was not sufficient in order to solve problems 2(b) and 2(c) in the last chapter, I think this principle is a good starting point for my conditions. In the light of A' and E I would suggest that a verdict of equivocation is warranted only if:

Condition 1: Someone has drawn a conclusion from one or more premises.

The fallacy of equivocation as defined above (E) is a failing of "arguments" where an argument is a claim-reason complex. Condition 1 requires the presence of such an argument structure in order for a charge of the fallacy of equivocation to be warranted. This condition has the advantage of ruling out one-line puns which are clever but are only fallacious if they occur in an argument.

Another way of approaching fallacy theory is to see a fallacy as the violation of a dialectical rule, or a weakness in some feature or other of the dialogue in which the argument takes place (See Van Eemeren

and Grootendorst, 1984; 1987, Willard 1989). Certainly, a charge of the fallacy of equivocation can take place in the context of a dialogue, when the charge is brought against an argument in the sense of a group of premises supporting a conclusion (Let us call this a "Claim-Reason Complex" or CLC).

However, the fallacy of equivocation is specifically an inferential mistake. The verdict of equivocation is not being placed on the process of dialogue (e.g. whether the communicative intent of the participants is being achieved) but is being placed on a given inference in an argument (in the sense of a CLC). Even though two people understand each other perfectly, a meaning shift can still take place within the inferences of one person by himself or herself. Further, nothing in a given set of rules for the conduct of a discussion could prevent the fallacy of equivocation, E, from occurring without at least some prior reference to the need for each individual to use only valid inferences in the statements that he or she makes. A valid inference is not a property of the dialogue but a property of the reasoning processes of the individuals who are arguing.

Condition 2: There is one expression in the argument ofwhich there are at least 2 tokens, x and y, which mean different things.

Condition 2 is meant to tackle the elusive notion of a meaning

shift. But how do we know that a word has shifted meanings? This is

perhaps the most philosophically interesting point about the fallacy of

equivocation and the most difficult problem to address. A complete and

comprehensive answer is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present

project.

The question is whether two tokens of the same expression

have the same meaning at the two occurrences. Charles Hamblin

wrestled valiantly with this problem in the final chapter of his book

Fallacies, a chapter devoted to the fallacy of equivocation. He writes:

> Now equivocation, if we think of the
> meanings of sentences or terms as
> extralinguistic entities, becomes in
> essence the association of a single
> sentence or term with two or more such
> entities instead of one. (Hamblin 1970,
> 286)

Now we cannot simply "write in" an assumption of meaning constancy,

according to Hamblin, because a meaning change is something which is

determined a posteriori. So naturally, the question to be considered is

"What are the external criteria of meaning-constancy" (286)? Hamblin

considers four possible answers to this question and rejects each in turn

as less than adequate for the purpose of resolving disputes about

meaning shifts. Instead, Hamblin wonders whether a better analysis of

charges of equivocation "might not be given in terms of their procedural role, resting on features not realizable at the topical level" (296).

This seems to represent an abandonment of the problem on the part of Hamblin. We must recognize, however, that the person who is accusing someone of equivocating must be able to point out how x and y have shifted meaning. Perhaps the model here is Mary Anne Warren's criticism of the pro-life argument (1973). She says "human" means either "genetically" or "morally" human and goes on to list the criteria which warrant the distinction. I reject the value of her accusation of equivocation on other grounds, but I admit that there may have been a shift in meaning in the pro-life argument, if her criteria of personhood stand up (a big "if").

What Mary Anne Warren has done, then, is substantiated her charge of equivocation with a list of distinguishing features of the two occurrences of the word "human." This is precisely the way Warren's example can serve as a model for identifying meaning shifts. Ideally, there would have to exist a lexicon that could be constructed listing all the possible meanings of individual words and expressions in the language. It is admitted, of course, that such a lexicon would be impossible to construct, but it is also admitted that problems of meaning shift might also be impossible to resolve without such a lexicon. In any

case, let us for the sake of argument assume that such a lexicon has been constructed in accordance with an acceptable conception of meaning.

Next, a family of interpretations for each statement in the argument could be constructed by listing all the possible permutations of the meanings of each word and expression which makes up each statement.

Following this, we could eliminate all of the interpretations of each premise which are not prima facie acceptable. Then, an expression undergoes a meaning shift from one premise to another if its meanings in the remaining members of the family of interpretations do not overlap with its meanings in the remaining members of the family of interpretations in the other premise or the conclusion. Supposing such a lexicon actually existed, this would be a "perfect" and "certain" way to distinguish beyond the shadow of a doubt the existence of a word with more than one meaning. However, it should be noted that this procedure is an impossible idealization of what we in practice do in disambiguating words in context, an idealization which can be used (in theory) to determine whether a repeated word or expression has shifted meaning.

The only two remaining conditions to offer which will fulfil our obligation to principle "A'" above (and definition "E") are a condition outlining the appearance of validity and a condition outlining actual invalidity (where validity is taken in the wide sense to include inductive and analogical validity). These conditions will render the drawing of the conclusion illicit. For this, I offer the following two corresponding conditions:

Condition 3: If x and y had the same meaning at each occurrence, then the conclusion would follow from the premises.

Condition 4: Given that x and y mean different things, then the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

Condition 3 guarantees that the argument appears to be valid; and Condition 4 guarantees that the argument is in fact invalid once the meanings of x and y are distinguished. Further, the meaning shift is "illicit" because of the invalidity.

So far, all aspects of both condition "A" and the definition of equivocation "E" are covered by the above conditions. "E" stated that "The fallacy of equivocation is the illicit [condition 4] drawing of a conclusion [condition 1] which only appears to follow from the premises [condition 4] when different meanings of identical words [condition 3] are

not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow [condition 4]. If a given argument fails to meet any one of these conditions, then the fallacy of equivocation, E, is not present in the argument and a verdict of equivocation would not be warranted as a verdict.

b) *Additional Conditions.*

The above conditions are both necessary and sufficient for "A'" above. However, it has been shown in chapter 2 that "A'" is not adequate to avoid problems in distinguishing warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation, nor is "A'" adequate to avoid charges of equivocation which prejudice an argument unreasonably. It might be worthwhile at this point to review the problem. Consider example 0.2 again:

Example 0.2

Killing innocent human beings is wrong.
The fetus is an innocent human being.
Therefore, killing the fetus is wrong.

Given principle "A," there would be no way to resolve whether or not a verdict of the fallacy of equivocation was warranted, for it would be debatable whether or not the fallacy of equivocation, E, was actually present in the argument. The person attacking the argument would

claim that the phrase "human being" can mean either "genetically human" or "morally human" and hence the argument commits the fallacy of equivocation. In other words, for the person attacking the argument the verdict of equivocation is warranted.

The person defending the argument, however, might simply claim that the word "human" is not being used in two different senses and hence there is no fallacy of equivocation. For example, if the person defending the argument creates a good counter-argument suggesting that whatever is genetically human is also morally human, then, for the person defending the argument, a verdict of equivocation is not warranted.

This problem can be avoided simply by suggesting that in cases where there is some doubt or disagreement about whether or not a meaning shift actually takes place, a verdict of equivocation is not a warranted. As suggested in the introduction and in the second chapter, one could introduce the following principle in addition to Principle "A'":

> B: A verdict of the fallacy of equivocation is warranted only if the meaning shift of a word or phrase is not seriously disputed.

If this principle is followed one would ideally respond to a charge of equivocation with the sudden realization that a mistake had been made.

There would be no need of further discussion, and the verdict of

equivocation would be warranted. Consider again example 0.1:

Example 0.1

> Everything that runs has feet.
> Rivers run.
> Therefore, rivers have feet.

In this argument, the word "run" could be described as having

undergone a meaning shift according to the procedure outlined on page

62. Perhaps the family of interpretations of the word "run" which occur

in one prima facie acceptable premise do not overlap with the family of

interpretations of the word "run" which occur in the second prima facie

acceptable premise.

Now, assuming that this argument does contain a meaning

shift in the sense just described, then someone who accuses this

argument of committing the fallacy of equivocation would be stating

something very informative about the argument: the charge would be

true, the verdict would be warranted and the argument would have to be

rejected.

Now, in example 0.1 debate about a meaning shift is less likely

to occur because the meanings of "run" are more clearly different in each

premise in which they exist. This notion of "debate" is very important.

Not only are the intepretations of the words in each premise prima facie

acceptable but it is possible to <u>agree</u> that each interpretation of the two tokens of the same word is different. If each meaning of the word "run" was switched both premises would be false. Unfortunately, such clarity of meaning is not always available to us. What about those cases where the meanings of the words are less obviously different? I would suggest that the question of the presence of a meaning shift would be more open to debate and less likely to be agreed upon.

Principle "B" was meant to suggest that a verdict of equivocation is warranted only if the presence of a meaning shift was not open to serious debate. Although we are presently deprived of a good theory of meaning, most common sense reasoners would see and agree to the meaning shift in example 0.1. If it is impossible to agree that there is a meaning shift, then I would simply suggest that a verdict of equivocation would be impossible. Principle "B" is the requirement of this "agreement" about a meaning shift.

How can this principle be formulated into a condition? The easiest way is as follows:

> **Condition 5: The presence of a meaning shift between x and y (condition 2) is not open to serious debate.**

Only when it is agreed that the meaning shift has taken place would a verdict of equivocation be warranted.[1]

Now agreement is a dialogical concept, and condition 5 may work well when the argument occurs in the context of a discussion. Then, it is possible to know very quickly whether or not a charge of the fallacy of equivocation was warranted. But what about arguments which take place in discursive texts or speeches?

In discursive texts or speeches, the only way to know whether or not condition 5 has been met would be through the application of a procedure like the one outlined on page 62. However, this presupposes the existence of a perfect lexicon able to list all the possible permutations of the meaning of every word which occurs in a statement. This lexicon, in turn, presupposes an acceptable theory of meaning which we do not have.[2]

This is, in fact, a serious problem which must remain unresolved. What I would suggest, however, is that in discursive texts and speeches the best that we could hope for is a _conditional_ verdict on

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[1] Some may be uneasy with this requirement, for it may appear to be too narrow. This objection and its answer will be considered in the next section.

[2] See Charles Hamblin (1970) for a comprehensive discussion of various theories of meaning which might be applied to the problem of equivocation. Unfortunately, he does not arrive at a solution.

an argument. If it were possible to agree that there was a meaning shift in a given argument, (which may be difficult but not impossible) then that argument would have to be rejected because it contains the fallacy of equivocation. Until such an agreement could be determined, or reached, it would never be known for certain whether or not a verdict of equivocation was warranted. Such a verdict would simply have to wait. Meanwhile, raising the point that there could be a meaning shift, or that there could be a problem with one of the premises under a certain interpretation of a word is itself a worthwhile form of argument criticism. But it would not be cause for rejection of the argument on the basis of the fallacy of equivocation.

Another possible weakness with condition 5 is that it does not specify the criteria for a meaning shift not being open to serious debate. One suggestion that I favour (and this will remain only a parenthetical suggestion) would be to modify condition 5 in such a way that agreement about the presence of a meaning shift is <u>forced</u> (figuratively) onto participants of the argument. I would suggest that some sort of <u>soundness</u> condition be added to condition 5. For example, if one agreed that each premise was true <u>and</u> (subsequently) two tokens of the same word had different meanings, then as a result of the agreement to the premises, one would be forced to accept that the word had changed

meaning. In other words, with a soundness condition, one would be forced either to deny the truth of the premises or deny that certain words were univocal. How do we know that two tokens of the same word changed meaning? This will remain a difficult question to answer; however, an approach similar to the approach outlined on page 62 might serve as a test to determine whether or not the words had in fact changed meaning.

These, then, are 5 conditions which I would like to propose in order for a verdict of equivocation to be warranted. Condition 5 is of inestimable value in avoiding the major problems mentioned in the previous chapter.

II. The Conditions and the Substantive Problems.

At this point in this chapter, I would like to discuss the three major problems mentioned in the second chapter in the light of the above conditions.

a) The problem of meaning shifts.

The first major problem discussed was the problem of determining whether or not a meaning shift has taken place in an argument. It was mentioned that it would be almost impossible to

resolve disputes about the meanings of words such as "obligatory" (i.e. whether "morally obligatory" meant the same thing as "legally obligatory") and that this represented a stumbling block to assessing the value of verdicts of equivocation.

In the conditions above, however, I have simply written in the condition that when there is debate about the presence of a meaning shift, then a verdict of equivocation is no longer warranted. This pushes the problem away rather than solving it directly but such a solution is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I did try to give the outlines of a solution in the justification of condition 2. But it should be noted that the problem of identifying meaning shifts may hinder but it does not prevent the creation of a set of conditions which warrant a verdict of equivocation.

b) *The problem of distinguishing warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation.*

This second problem has been resolved as well. It will be recalled that the problem of distinguishing warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation stemmed from the lack of agreement on the presence of a meaning shift. The verdict of equivocation became warranted to the person who agrees that a meaning shift had taken

place and unwarranted to the person who disagrees that a meaning shift

has taken place. But when condition 5, which states that the meaning

shift must not be debatable, is satisfied, then the verdict would be final.

Quite simply, a verdict of equivocation is warranted if the above

conditions have been satisfied, and unwarranted if they have not been

satisfied.

c) The problem of unfairly prejudicial charges.

This problem has been solved to the extent which the second

problem has been solved. It is not only possible for a charge of

equivocation to prejudice an argument unreasonably if a verdict is in

fact warranted. As just mentioned, the above conditions clarify when a

charge of equivocation would be warranted, hence reducing the risk (if

not eliminating it altogether) of unreasonable charges of the fallacy of

equivocation which falsely prejudice an argument.

One can see, then, that each of the three major problems

brought up in the second chapter is solved with these conditions.

Conflicts about the meaning shifts of a word have been avoided;

problems in distinguishing licit from illicit verdicts of equivocation have

been avoided; and problems of prejudicial charges of equivocation have

also been avoided. I will turn now to consider some possible objections to these conditions.

III. Possible Objections to the Conditions.

First of all, one might object that these conditions are too narrow, and arguments which are faulty would not be able to pass the above conditions for a warranted verdict of equivocation. Secondly, one might object that these conditions still allow absurd textbook examples. Thirdly, and perhaps most seriously, except for the absurd textbook examples, very few "real-life" arguments would ever be worthy of a charge of equivocation, because so few real-life arguments involve non-contentious meaning shifts. It would not be easy to admit that one is using words in different ways throughout the argument. I will consider each of these objections in turn.

a) The objection of excessive narrowness.

One of the problems with the above conditions, especially with the requirement of <u>prima facie</u> acceptability of the truth of the premises, is that they are too narrow. They rule out arguments which may, in fact, contain the fallacy of equivocation once agreement on the meaning of the

words has been reached. Consider again the pro-life argument in example 0.2:

Example 0.2

It is wrong to kill an innocent human being.
The fetus is an innocent human being.
Therefore, it is wrong to kill the fetus.

As it stands now, this argument would fail condition 5 which requires universal agreement about a meaning shift. Although it could be the case that a shift of meaning is taking place in this argument, it has not been obvious enough to bury the pro-life argument.

But what if, through some miracle, humanity could agree that the fetus was not, in fact, a human member of the moral community and that a meaning shift did take place? Then condition 5 would be satisfied and the argument in example 0.2 would derserve a verdict with equivocation. Yet this same argument failed my conditions at one point. How can a verdict of equivocation on an argument which contains the fallacy of equivocation not be warranted?

First of all, my conditions are not set out to determine whether or not the fallacy of equivocation is present in the argument. My conditions are set out to determine when it would be worthwhile mentioning this fact as a final verdict on the argument. Example 0.2

may, in fact, contain the fallacy of equivocation, but because we do not yet agree that it does, I am simply saying that pronouncing this as the final verdict on the argument would not be warranted. Perhaps at some future time when the meanings of the words involved are clearer and are agreed upon it might be worth mentioning that the verdict of equivocation was warranted, but not yet.

Secondly, to say that a verdict of equivocation is not applicable and warranted in example 2 is not to suggest that the argument is sound, or valid, or non-fallacious, or convincing, or anything of the kind. It is simply to suggest that it may or may not contain the fallacy of equivocation and hence a pronouncement of this particular verdict would be unwarranted at this time. In fact, there are still many things wrong with the argument, not the least of which is (at times violent) disagreement about the tenability of the second premise and the meaning of the words used in the argument. My point is that there are many other ways to criticize arguments, and a failure of the above conditions does not affect these other criticisms. The conditions above are indeed narrow, but they apply only to verdicts of equivocation on an argument, and to nothing else.

b) *The objection of excessive breadth.*

One could also object that these conditions are too wide, in that they allow some rather absurd examples to be worthy of verdicts of equivocation. Consider, for example, the following argument:

Example 0.1

Everything that runs has feet.
Rivers run.
Therefore, rivers have feet.

This example passes all of the conditions warranting a verdict of equivocation, yet is totally unrealistic and would not be taken seriously.

My response to this objection is simple. Even though this argument would not be taken seriously, a verdict of equivocation does say something important about the argument: it explains why the argument appears to be valid. Given agreement about the meaning shift, a verdict of equivocation calls for a rejection of the argument. A final verdict has been pronounced on the argument and that verdict is warranted despite the absurdity of the conclusion.

c) *The objection of inapplicability.*

This second problem leads to a third, more serious objection. One might object that with the possible exception of examples like 0.1, no argument can meet these conditions. For one thing, no one is likely

to admit that their argument contains a meaning shift, especially if there is any doubt whatsoever as to what those meanings actually are in the contexts in which they are used.

But even if we grant that examples of warranted verdicts of equivocation are extremely rare, I would simply say: so much the worse for the fallacy of equivocation. The central question of this thesis has been when, if ever, a verdict of equivocation is warranted. One possible answer would be "hardly ever".

But given this possible answer, I would still consider the fallacy of equivocation a fallacy worthy of serious consideration. I think that in some contexts arguments might easily lend themselves to warranted verdicts of equivocation. For example, arguments using specialized technical terminology are particularly vulnerable because many people who are unfamiliar with the technical meaning may be too quick to associate the technical meaning with some more common meaning. For example, "significant" in statistics means "probably not due to chance" while in common parlance "significant" means "important" or "momentous." The two meanings are not to be confused, for what is significant in a statistical sense may not be of the slightest importance in reality. That my conditions may admit only unreasonable examples may be more of a problem for the fallacy of equivocation than

for the conditions. My conditions have the advantage of eliminating prejudicial charges of equivocation, of allowing us to distinguish warranted from unwarranted verdicts of equivocation, and of ensuring unanimity about the presence of the meaning shift of a word. These advantages far outweigh the possible disadvantage that examples which meet these conditions are rare.

IV. Summary and Conclusion.

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that the fallacy of equivocation might not have any critical value in argumentation whatsoever. This conclusion was based largely on the frustrating problems raised in the second chapter. What I have done in this chapter, however, is created and successfully applied a set of conditions which seem to avoid these problems, which can be summarized as follows:

A verdict of equivocation is warranted if and only if:

Condition 1: Someone has drawn a conclusion from one or more premises.

Condition 2: There is one expression in the argument of which there are at least 2 tokens, x and y, which mean different things.

Condition 3:   If x and y had the same meaning at each occurrence, then the conclusion would follow from the premises.

Condition 4:   Given that x and y mean different things, then the conclusion does not follow from the premises.

Condition 5:   The presence of a meaning shift between x and y (condition 2) is not open to serious debate.

Now I am able to come to a direct answer to the central question of this thesis. When is a verdict of equivocation warranted? A verdict of equivocation is warranted if and only if the argument being criticized meets the above conditions.

Before concluding this chapter and this thesis, I would like to mention the problem of fallacy theory mentioned in the second chapter. This problem concerned a fundamental weakness with the various theoretical treatments of fallacies which have been circulating since Aristotle (cf. Hamblin (1970), Woods and Walton (1979) and Woods (1990)). I would like to claim to have solved this problem in this thesis, but of course, I cannot. But what I can say is that I have taken a very small step towards solving it. Most theoretical treatments of fallacies have been concerned to develop a general conception of fallacy, a taxonomy of fallacies, and for each fallacy a set of defining conditions. The approach here, however, has been novel and slightly different: I have shown not only <u>what</u> the fallacy of equivocation is (chapter one),

but also under what conditions an accusation of equivocation would be warranted as a verdict pronounced on an argument (chapter three).

I suspect that this newer approach to the fallacy of equivocation could be applied to other fallacies as well. To begin this project, one thing that might be helpful is a hierarchy of argument criticism, that is, a general theory outlining what type of criticism of an argument would be most valuable and what type of criticism would be least valuable. One could suggest, for example, that criticism of the truth of the premises should be offered before any other type of criticism. One could go on and suggest that if the "apparent" truth of the premises is firmly established, one could then go on to criticize the strength of the argument from a logical point of view. I'm not exactly sure what such a theory would look like, but it could look like a "ranking" of various types of criticism. Based on what has been done so far in this thesis, I would suggest that the fallacy of equivocation would rank fairly low on such a scale of valuable argument criticisms. But much work would need to be done in order to develop such a theory.

Appendix: Definitions.

Definition 1

Eq: Equivocation, Eq, is the use of two tokens of the same word which occur in such a way that one token has one meaning in one occurrence and the second token has a second meaning in the second occurrence.

Definition 2

E: The fallacy of equivocation (E) is the illicit drawing of a conclusion which only appears to follow from the premises because different meanings of identical words appearing throughout the argument are not properly distinguished. When the different meanings are distinguished, the conclusion does not follow.

Definition 3

CE: A charge of the fallacy of equivocation (CE) is any accusation that a given argument commits the fallacy of equivocation, E.

Definition 4

AA: A word is ambiguous in the abstract (AA) if and only if it has more than one possible meaning, independently of context.

Definition 5

AC: A word is ambiguous in context (AC) if and only if it is not clear which of the multiple meanings of a word is being implied in a given sentence.

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