

Interpreting and Evaluating: A Dialogue Process

It can be seen from the discussion of these examples that when an argument contains unclear terms, the tasks of evaluating it and determining what the unclear terms mean are not separate. This point can be brought more clearly into focus through a discussion of another argument that you already attempted to criticize in Exercise 4.4. It might have been reconstructed in the following way:

- Example 7.7
- (1) *Getting married involves promising to live with a person for the rest of one's life.*
 - (2) *No one can safely predict compatibility with another person for life.*
 - (3) *If two people aren't compatible, then they can't live together.*
 - (4) *No one should make a promise unless she or he can safely predict that she or he can keep it.*

∴ No one should get married.

As we will see, an adequate evaluation of this argument and an interpretation of its unclear terms are two parts of a dialogue process in which each part affects the other. We call this a *dialogue process* because it simulates a dialogue that might actually occur if the author of the argument were present. We imagine the critic asking the arguer what is meant by certain expressions, and the arguer responding in turn by clarifying his or her meaning. The critic then assesses the implications of this interpretation for the argument as a whole.

It is possible simply to dismiss some of the premises in the argument given in Example 7.7 (and in many others) by interpreting vague or ambiguous expressions in ways that make the premises false. But by seeking interpretations (within reason) that will make the premises true, we can try to discover whether the argument advanced is making a point worth our consideration. This approach, which might be seen as an extension of the Principle of Charitable Interpretation, supports our objective of using critical reasoning to determine what is reasonable to believe rather than to defeat opponents in argument.

Since a written text provides no opportunity for a real dialogue, the reader must play the arguer's role as well as his or her own in interpreting and evaluating

this document. The first premise of our argument states that *Getting married involves promising to live with a person for the rest of one's life*. But the term *marriage* is broad (that is, vague) enough to cover common-law marriages and the recent phenomenon of self-styled marriage contracts that include no such promise. These cases suggest that the premise is false.

This criticism has a point; the first premise is at best misleading as stated. But it is both interesting and worthwhile to give the arguer the benefit of the doubt by interpreting *getting married* in a sense that restricts the term to cases involving the traditional vow "until death do us part" or some equivalent. This interpretation now makes the first premise true since traditional marriages do seem to involve a promise—that is, a marriage vow.

The second premise may also be subjected to the dialogue process. It states that *No one can safely predict compatibility with another person for life*. The expression *safely predict* is vague here. Would a prediction with 90 percent certainty be a safe prediction? 80 percent? 51 percent? Again, we can pick a meaning that will make premise 2 false since we can predict compatibility if we set the level of safe prediction low enough. But let us see where a more generous interpretation might lead us.

We can pick a level of certainty high enough to make the second premise true—one such that no one will be able to safely predict compatibility for life. But notice that the same expression—*safely predict*—is used again in premise 4. We must interpret it in the same way there.

Now a problem emerges. The high standards of predictability that were necessary to make premise 2 true make it less likely that *No one should make a promise unless she or he can safely predict that she or he can keep it*. We might be justified, for instance, in promising to return a book even though we know that a variety of factors, such as a house fire, might make the promise impossible to keep. To demand nearly absolute certainty of being able to keep a promise would rule out all but a few promises. Such a stipulation, if actually carried out in practice, would virtually eliminate the useful custom of making promises.

We are now left with the question of whether there is a range of "safe prediction" low enough to make this premise about promises true but high enough that it is also true that no one can safely predict compatibility with another person for life. It's doubtful that there is such a range.

There is a problem of interpretation regarding premise 3 as well. It maintains: *If two people aren't compatible, then they can't live together*. We have the same dilemma with *compatible* that we had with *safely predict*. For premise 3 to be true, we would have to call people "compatible" unless they had extremely serious conflicts. After all, many people continue to live together in spite of minor incompatibility. But by interpreting the notion of "compatible" in a liberal way, we make premise 2 less plausible—many people might be able to safely predict that they won't have serious conflicts (especially if they share a great many values and have known each other for some time). Therefore, an interpretation that makes premise 3 more plausible makes premise 2 less plausible.

What is the outcome of our dialogue process? Even being generous with the meanings of unclear terms, we judge the argument in question to be unsound—some premises are implausible. But reaching this conclusion through a dialogue process that makes every effort to find truth in the argument's premises is more important than jumping at easy ways to dismiss the argument. As an added benefit, the dialogue process has raised interesting questions about the nature of commitment in marriage. In actual practice, you need not act out a dialogue to interpret an argument. But you should try to provide a sympathetic, even generous, interpretation of crucial expressions.

The discussion of this example should have made clear how interpreting the words used in an argument, and evaluating the argument itself, are interrelated. We can often choose one of several meanings for an expression, and the choice we make can affect the truth or falsity of premises. But we must make our choices consistent to preserve the validity of an argument.

Exercise 7.1

Criticizing Arguments That Contain Unclear Words or Expressions

1. Discuss the ways vague or ambiguous expressions might be clarified in the following statements. Suggest how assigning different interpretations affects their truth or falsity.
 - a. Man is born free.
 - b. Exceptional children should be given special attention by the public education system.
 - c. Suicide, whether direct or indirect, should be strongly condemned.
 - d. The average American family has 3.2 members.
 - e. The war on poverty was no war.
 - f. Marriage is a bond of trust between equals, but the partners in a marriage are rarely equal.
 - g. The accused argued that he should not be required to pay the parking ticket because the sign said, "Fine for Parking" (from Mike Mailway, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*).
 - h. The public school system can never treat students equally; they come to the schools unequal in talent, experience, and family background.
 - i. America did not become a democracy until the 1960s. Women could not vote until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, and it was only in 1965 that a Voting Rights Act was passed that did away with property qualifications and literacy tests, and paved the way for the genuine participation of all people, regardless of race, creed, or national origin.
2. Write a brief critical assessment of the following arguments, focusing particularly on possible shifts in meaning of vague or ambiguous terms. Try to create a dialogue—suggesting possible meanings of unclear terms, evaluating the

argument in the light of these stipulations of meaning, and suggesting alternative interpretations that might get around any objections. Refer to the discussion of Example 7.7 for a model of this kind of dialogue.

- a. The United States is a democracy. This follows from the fact that the United States is ruled by the people and *democracy* means "government ruled by the people."
- b. If the average couple has more than two children, the population will rise drastically. But we should prevent the population from rising drastically. So we should prevent the average couple from having more than two children. (Note that this argument has been altered from the version presented in chapter 4 so that the shift in wording has been eliminated.)
- c. Space cannot be expanding unless it is finite. But space is not finite. Hence, space cannot be expanding.
- d. Equal rights for women should not be constitutionally guaranteed. This follows from the fact that men and women are different physiologically and emotionally. But if this is so, then men and women are not equal. And if men and women are not equal, then they should not be called "equal" by the law.
- e. Nobody should undertake college education without at least some idea of what she wants to do and where she wants to go in her life. But our world is full of change. We can't predict which fields will provide job openings in the future. If we can't confidently predict future employment, then we can't form a reasonable idea of what to do with our lives. So nobody should go to college.
- f. A game is time-bound. . . . It has no contact with any reality outside itself, and its performance is its own end. Further it is sustained by the consciousness of being a pleasurable, even mirthful, relaxation from the strains of ordinary life. None of this is applicable to science. Science is not only perpetually seeking contact with reality by its usefulness, i.e., in the sense that it is applied, it is perpetually trying to establish a universally valid pattern of reality, i.e., as pure science.² (**Hint: Assume that the conclusion being argued is that science is not a game.**)
- g. "Man is born free," said Rousseau, "and is everywhere in chains," but no one is less free than a newborn child, nor will he become free as he grows older. His only hope is that he will come under the control of a natural and social environment in which he will make the most of his genetic endowment and in doing so most successfully pursue happiness.³ (**Hint: Assume that Skinner is arguing in this passage for the conclusion that happiness does not involve freedom from control.**)

2. John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 203.

3. B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 201.

Argument and Definition

At the beginning of this chapter we pointed out that when an argument has been presented and the meanings of terms are challenged, the discussion is likely to get frustrating and confused. Some people become impatient with further discussion because they believe there is an easy resolution: a trip to the dictionary. Other people see the debate over meaning as pointless ("mere semantics") because they believe that definitions are arbitrary; anyone can use a word to mean almost anything he or she wants. We believe both points of view are mistaken.

Consider first the view that substantial problems of meaning can all be solved by consulting a dictionary. This presumption is faulty in two ways. First, dictionary entries often do little more than provide synonyms whose meaning is closely allied to the term being defined. As such, they fail to clarify meaning, as is illustrated in the following series of dictionary entries:

recondite—incomprehensible to one of ordinary understanding or knowledge

incomprehensible—impossible to comprehend; unintelligible

unintelligible—not intelligible; obscure

obscure—not readily understood or not clearly expressed; abstruse

abstruse—difficult to comprehend; recondite

Second, dictionaries give precise definitions for only a limited range of scientific or technical terms. They can define precisely, for instance, specially coined terms from physics, such as:

pion—a short-lived meson that is primarily responsible for the nuclear force that exists as a positive or negative particle with mass 273.2 times the electron mass or a neutral particle with mass 264.2 times the electron mass

But dictionaries give only incomplete analyses of more familiar terms:

marriage—the institution whereby men and women are joined in a special kind of social and legal dependence for the purpose of founding and maintaining a family

Even if we overlook the vagueness of certain terms (*social and legal dependence, family*), this dictionary entry faces difficulty. It is inadequate because people can be married without intending to found or maintain a family (that is, without intending to have children). It is not even clear that marriage must customarily be associated with intending to have children. To fix the dictionary entry to avoid this problem, we would need to investigate more closely the connection between the concept of marriage and related concepts such as that of a family or social and