Equivocal Terms

I. Lesson

"Things are said to be named 'equivocally' when, though they have a common name, the definition corresponding with the name differs for each."

-Aristotle, *Categories* (W. D. Ross, 1952)

- **Equivocal Terms:** an equivocal term is a term that has multiple, different meanings throughout its uses in a given argument. We can say that a term is used *equivocally* in an argument.

Philosophers use these three related terms:

-**Equivocation** (noun): An *instance* in which same term can refer to more than one thing or concept

-**Equivocal** (adjective): A *term* that is used in many senses can be described as equivocal

-**Equivocate** (verb): An *action* in which a term is used to refer to more than one concept or thing in the course of an argument, the term is equivocated

Equivocation is extremely important because it is the cause of many logical fallacies, as will later be discussed. If we were to use the same term twice in an argument, but were to differ the meaning of such a term each time it is used, we run the risk of faulty logic.

"For should any one define in what sense each is an animal, his definition in the one case will be appropriate to that case only."

-Aristotle, *Categories* (W. D. Ross, 1952)

II. Examples

(1) Take, for instance, the term "form." Form can be used in a number of ways. In other words, the term "form" can be assigned to a number of different meanings or ideas.

(a) Please fill out this *form* before you go to the doctor's office.

Versus:

(b) The sculpture has the *form* of a man.

In the first sentence, "form" is used to represent the concept of a document that serves to account for certain pieces of relevant information. In the second, it represents the concept of the shape or physical arrangement of a piece of art.

(2) A standard example from antiquity is the term "key." It can refer to one of two things:

(a) A tool used to unlock a lock (as we know them today)

Versus:

(b) What we call the collarbone today.

This example survives in German, where keys are referred to as "Schlüssel" and the collarbone is referred to as "Schlüsselbein" (key-bone).

III. Exercises

1. Suppose someone says to you "let's meet at the river bank," pointing to the shores of a nearby river. You understand that she means: she would like to meet at the banks of the river. What is another meaning of "bank" that, in a different context, would likewise seem natural as an interpretation?

2. Most often, terms such as "form," "bank," and "key" are used as examples when discussing equivocation. There aren't too many terms that are equivocal. Still, can you come up with another example? Describe the different meanings the term can take.

Thus far, we have examined the equivocation of terms. Equivocation is notable, because it can easily lead to misunderstandings. If there is no explicit context (such as a statue or a river bank nearby as in exercise 1), one speaker may think in terms of one meaning, while the other speaker thinks in a completely different meaning.

This becomes a problem in logic, because it can lead to fallacious reasoning. An argument generally contains multiple sentences and thus multiple places in which a term can be used. A person may use a term in one meaning at one place in her argument, and in another meaning at another place in her argument.

3. Evaluate the following arguments. Determine if each uses a term equivocally or if all terms refer to the same things (do not worry about evaluating the actual structure of the arguments, nor whether any of the premises are true – many of them may be false)

Ex.) The content of this exercise is easy for a logician!
Therefore, it is easy for a logician to be content about this exercise.

Answer: The argument above contains an equivocation. The term "content" is being equivocated. In the first sense, it refers to the subject matter of the exercises. In the second sense it is synonymous to "happiness."

a.) All sewers were installed by the urban development team.
Following my mother's teaching, I became a sewer.
Therefore, I was installed by the urban development team.

b.) No timespan greater than 60 seconds is a minute.
100 days is a timespan greater than 60 seconds.
Therefore, 100 days is not minute.

c.) Deontological Ethicists require duty (as a part of their philosophy).
Immanuel Kant is a Deontological Ethicist.
Therefore, Immanuel Kant, the person, requires duty (Kant could not live without duty).

d.) The moral of the story is to be generous.
Therefore, it is moral to be generous.

e.) All books on my bookshelf have covers.
The Genealogy of Morals is a book on my bookshelf.
Therefore, *The Genealogy of Morals* has a cover.

IV. Conclusion:

As can be seen, terms which are equivocated can lead an argument with good premises to absurd conclusions. This is why it is crucial to recognize equivocation within arguments, so that faulty conclusions can be avoided.

V. Lesson Goals:

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define equivocal terms
- Understand why equivocating terms in logic can lead to fallacious reasoning
- Identify equivocal terms in an argument

Answer Key:

Exercise 1

Answers may vary. The most common alternative meaning of "bank" refers to a financial institution which holds money and turns assets into liabilities.

Exercise 2

Answers may vary. Correct answers are those that state an equivocal term and justify that term by describing its different meanings.

Exercise 3

(a) The argument contains an equivocation. The term "sewer" is being equivocated. In the first sense, it refers to someone who sews (making stitches with a needle and thread). In the second sense it is an underground system for clearing waste and water.

(b) The argument contains an equivocation. The term "minute" is being equivocated. In the first sense, it refers to a timespan equal to 60 seconds. In the second sense it refers to something that is very small in magnitude. However, here equivocation combines with a second glitch. The argument moves from "a minute" to "minute." "A" serves as a quantifier, it effectively means "one." The adjective "minute" isn't quantifiable in this sense; it doesn't make sense to use "a" or "one" in combination with the adjective.

(c) The argument contains an equivocation. The term "require" is being equivocated. In the first sense, it refers "duty" as being a necessary component for a philosophical system. In the second sense it refers to "duty" as being a necessary component for a person to be.

(d) The argument contains an equivocation. The term "moral" is being equivocated. In the first sense, it refers to the lesson learned from a story. In the second sense refers to a greater standard of what we "ought" to do (can sometimes be used synonymously with "ethical")

(e) The argument does not contain an equivocation. This is likewise a valid argument (it takes the form *modus ponens*).