

2.1 Meaning

1. Cognitive vs. Emotive Meaning: It is extremely common for people to express themselves in a way that is favorable to what they believe, or which skews or misrepresents the truth, or compels the listener to believe them—all while providing as little actual evidence as possible for what they are expressing. This lesson takes a closer look at this problem.

Consider an example:

“Abortion is disgusting! I hear that when they do it they have to snip the helpless little baby into pieces. How horrific! It takes a sick, sick human being to think that abortion is ok. Or an idiot.”

Believe it or not, this sort of “argument” for why abortion is wrong is INCREDIBLY common (I have, in fact, seen students of mine offer this sort of argument on numerous occasions in my ethics classes). Now compare it with the following:

“Abortion is morally wrong. It would clearly be wrong to end the life of a newborn baby, because the baby has the potential to be a wonderful human being. But, unborn fetuses also have the potential to be wonderful human beings. So, if it is wrong to end an infant’s life, it is also wrong to end a fetus’s life.”

Both of these passages make what are called **value claims**.

- **Value Claim:** This is any claim that something is good, or bad, or right, or wrong; or better (more good), or worse (more bad), etc.

Many (most?) of the arguments you will come across in your life will make value claims. For instance, they will tell you to “Buy this product. It’s really **good!**” or “Vote for this candidate. She’s **better** than the other one!” or “You should not do that, because it’s **wrong!**” and so on—these are the sorts of claims we’re presented with every day.

Now, return to our two passages about abortion. They are BOTH making the value claim that abortion is bad, or wrong. But, do you notice a difference between these two passages?

What is the first passage trying to do? It seems to use very EMOTIONAL language. The intent seems to be to get the listener to share the strong negative emotional reaction to abortion that the speaker clearly has. But, notice that this first passage does not really

offer any REASONS for having such a reaction. Instead, it merely uses very emotionally charged words and graphic imagery to force an emotional response in the listener (e.g., words like “disgusting”, “horrific”, “sick”, and “idiot”, and graphic imagery like “snipping helpless little babies into pieces”).

On the other hand, the second passage merely cites some obvious facts without using emotionally charged language at all. We say that the first passage has “**emotive meaning**” while the second passage has “**cognitive meaning**”.

- **Cognitive Meaning:** Words have cognitive meaning when they convey information.
- **Emotive Meaning:** Words have emotive meaning when they merely express the feelings of the speaker, or else evoke feelings in the listener.

Note that most words that have emotive meaning ALSO have cognitive meaning. Notice that SOME information IS being conveyed in the first passage (for instance, that the speaker is disgusted, that the procedure involves cutting the fetus into pieces, etc.). It is very rare that a passage will ONLY have emotive meaning and no cognitive meaning whatsoever.

Emotive passages serve to do three things:

- 1) They often disguise the fact that a value claim is being made.
- 2) They often disguise the fact that the passage has some cognitive meaning.
- 3) They often disguise the fact that no actual evidence is being offered in support of the conclusion.

All three of the above make it more difficult to arrive at truth, since they often confuse the listener, or in some way “trick” them into accepting the conclusion that is being offered without actually thinking about it (because they are blindly following their visceral, emotional reaction rather than engaging in proper reasoning). To fight this result, we must disentangle the emotive meaning from the cognitive meaning in any argument that we come across. Consider this passage:

“Can you believe that nurses claim to be underpaid? How much do they really think they should get paid just to watch a bunch of old people who mostly sleep all day? Especially when teachers are out there busting their behinds educating the next generation of leaders, inventors, and people who’ll find the cure for cancer, and probably getting paid less than nurses?”

This passage is designed to play with the listener's emotions. The listener is likely to come away from this passage feeling a bit resentful toward nurses, and a bit sympathetic toward teachers—ESPECIALLY if they are friends with the speaker, or respect them, etc. But, the passage is incredibly emotionally charged, and therefore misleading. Let's tease apart the cognitive content from the emotional content. Here are the actual FACTUAL claims being made:

1. The only thing that nurses do is sit with sleeping old people.
2. The effort of teachers will lead to better leaders, better inventions, and the cure for cancer.
3. Therefore, work of teachers is far more important than the work of nurses.
4. Teachers earn less than nurses.
5. Therefore, nurses are not underpaid.

This argument (or something in the ball park) is valid. But, now that we have removed the emotionally charged content from the passage, we can ask: Is the argument sound? In other words, are these premises TRUE? They may in fact ALL be false, but certainly premise 1 is CLEARLY false. So the argument is not successful. But, due to the emotionally charged language, a listener who is caught up in the moment may find themselves AGREEING to the conclusion because the emotional tone of what the speaker is saying disguises the fact that false claims are being made.

2. Vagueness: Another common source of confusion in arguments is vagueness.

- **Vagueness:** A term is vague when it allows for borderline cases for which it is impossible to determine whether or not the term applies to those cases.

For instance, terms like "happy", "sad", "normal", "abnormal", "big", "small", "fast", "slow", "excessive", "moderate", "dirty", "clean", "dangerous", "safe", and so on are all vague, because the definitions of these terms are not clearly laid out. For instance, how many crumbs have to be on the kitchen floor before we call it "dirty"? How many people have to die each year in automobile accidents before we call automobiles "dangerous"? It is difficult to say.

Often, when people are in disagreement, they disagree ONLY because the terms they are using are vague. Consider:

KIDS: Are we there yet?

PARENTS: Soon.

KIDS: Soon!? You said that an HOUR ago!

On an 8 hour drive, anything less than 2 hours away might count as "soon". But, to a child, anything more than 2 MINUTES might seem like forever. The term "soon" here is vague, and open to interpretation. Or consider:

PEGGY: You're rich.

SUE: Me? No way. I only have one yacht and one private jet. Harry has TWO yachts and TWO private jets!

How much money does one have to have to be "rich"? Since there is no definitive answer to this question (the answer is vague), the dispute will not likely be resolved. (For Peggy, having only one yacht and one jet doesn't count as rich. But, to Sue, it does.)

3. Ambiguity: Another common source of confusion in arguments is ambiguity.

- **Ambiguity:** A term is ambiguous when it can be interpreted in one of several different ways.

For instance, terms like "light", "critical", "free", "bank", "pound", "counter", "seat", "race" are all ambiguous. As the textbook notes, if someone says, "This is a light beer", do they mean that it is light in color, light in calories, or light in taste? If someone was "given a seat", were they given something to sit on, or were they given a position in, say, the Senate? Consider the following disagreement:

"PEGGY: If a seal has been tampered with, you should just throw it in the garbage.

SUE: Nonsense! That would be animal cruelty."

Clearly, Peggy and Sue are not talking about the same thing. The word "seal" is ambiguous here. Peggy is using the term to refer to the protective seal on, for example, a new bottle of medicine. Sue is talking about the marine mammal.

But, terms are not the only sources of ambiguity. Entire phrases can be ambiguous too. Consider some of the following humorous headlines from newspapers:

- "Stolen Necklace Found By Tree"
- "Girl Attacked by Bear In Hospital"
- "Prostitute Appeals to Judge"
- "First Car Talks At Noon"
- "2 Sisters Reunited After 18 Years In Line At McDonald's"
- "Local Children Make Delicious Snacks"

Each of these headlines is ambiguous. For instance, in the last example, are the children MAKING SNACKS themselves, or are people EATING THE CHILDREN? Probably the children are making snacks. But, not all cases of ambiguity are so easy to disambiguate.

Note: Do homework for section 2.1 at this time.

2.2 Intension & Extension of Terms

1. Intension vs. Extension of Terms: One of the causes of ambiguity is derived from a confusion between the “intension” and the “extension” of a term:

- **Intension:** The intension of a term is the list of attributes or qualities in an object or individual that the term picks out. For instance, the intension of the term “dog” picks out attributes like “mammal, four legs, fur”, and other characteristics that dogs all have.
- **Extension:** The extension of a term is the set of all the individuals to whom that term applies. For instance, the extension of the term “dog” picks out individuals like Lassie, Benji, Fido, Sparky, and so on—in fact, the extension includes ALL of the dogs in the world; past, present, and future.

Note that some terms can have an empty extension. For instance, the term “unicorn” has an empty extension, because there ARE NO individuals to whom that term applies (i.e., there aren’t any unicorns).

When people disagree with one another, it is sometimes the case that the only reason they are disagreeing is that one of the parties is using the term to refer to the INTENSION of that term, while the other party is using the term to refer to its EXTENSION. For instance,

Joe: Basketball players are so athletic.

Jeff: Nonsense! Johnson is super lazy. He just sits on the bench all the time.

Joe: Pizza is delicious.

Jeff: Um, have you tried Torpedo’s frozen pizza? It tastes like cardboard.

In each case, Joe is referring to the CONCEPT of pizza (or its intensional meaning), while Jeff is referring to SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS that fall under that concept (i.e., members of its extension). Their disagreement here is probably only because of this confusion in reference; i.e., their disagreement is not a genuine one. [Keep in mind however, that if someone says, “ALL pizza is delicious”, then citing just one example of non-delicious pizza (e.g., Torpedo’s) WOULD be a genuine disagreement.]

To help understand these terms better, it may be useful to consider what is meant by “increasing intension” (versus “decreasing intension”) and “increasing extension” (versus “decreasing extension”).

Since “intension” refers to a list of ATTRIBUTES, we say that a series of terms has **increasing intension** when each successive term in the series includes MORE AND MORE ATTRIBUTES. For instance, this list is arranged in the order of increasing intension:

living creature, mammal, feline, house cat

"living creature" is the LEAST specific term in this list, so it includes the SMALLEST number of specific attributes in its intension. Meanwhile, "house cat" is the MOST specific term in this list, so it includes the GREATEST number of specific attributes in its intension.

Now for extension: Since "extension" refers to a list of INDIVIDUALS, we say that a series of terms has **increasing extension** when each successive term in the series includes MORE AND MORE INDIVIDUALS. For instance, this list is arranged in the order of increasing intension:

CU student enrolled in Logic class, CU student, U.S. citizen, human being

Since "CU student enrolled in Logic class" is the MOST specific term in the series, it includes the LEAST number of individuals (only about 80 people at the moment). On the other hand, since "human being" is the LEAST specific term in the series, it includes the GREATEST number of individuals (over 7 billion human beings at the moment).

Note: Do homework for section 2.2 at this time.