1 Chapter 3: Clarifying Meaning

1.1 The Principle of Charity

The principle of charity is concerned with cases in which there is more than one way to interpret what is meant by a speaker or writer and the speaker or writer is not present to clarify what was said or written. The principle of charity states that we have a moral obligation to adopt the most charitable interpretation of the speaker or writer’s words. This principle should always be adopted when the source is reputable, but there are reasons to adopt it in general. For instance, if one’s aim is to criticize an argument, then if one disarms the argument by giving the most charitable interpretation to its statements, then one gives the most penetrating criticism possible. Less charitable interpretations will then also fall.

1.2 Linguistic Ambiguity

We will now consider several ways that language can be difficult to give an interpretation.

1.2.1 Ambiguity and Vagueness

Here we want to distinguish between vague and ambiguous sentences. An ambiguous sentence is one that has two or more different but usually quite precise meanings. A vague sentence is one that lacks a precise meaning. Ambiguous sentences should be avoided whenever there is a possibility of someone choosing the wrong meaning. Vague sentences should also be avoided except in cases where more precision is either not required or not possible. For instance, it might be necessary to use vague language when describing a vague thought or feeling as in

That was a noisy party that they had last night, and it went on until all hours,

In the case of the following,

My officials are monitoring the situation very closely, and I can promise that we shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the situation is resolved in a way that is fair to all the parties involved,

vague language, such as appropriate measures and in a way that is fair, is not required and is being used intentionally to be non-committal. In such cases more precise language should be used and sentences like the one here should be criticized for not using more precise language.

1.2.2 Referential Ambiguity

Referential ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase, in the context of a particular sentence, could refer to two or more properties or things. It is sometimes clear from the context which meaning is intended, but not always. For instance, in the sentence

Pavarotti is a big opera star,

it is not clear that big means fat or famous. A particular kind of referential ambiguity occurs between the collective and distributive uses of a term. This applies to term that have extensions. When we use a term, such as dog, to talk about each member of the class, we use the term
distributively, whereas when we use the term to talk about the class as a whole we use the term collectively. In some cases it is not clear which way the word is being used as in

Americans make more telephone calls than Canadians,

which leads to referential ambiguity.

1.2.3 Grammatical Ambiguity

Grammatical ambiguity occurs when the grammatical structure of a sentence allows two different interpretations, each of which gives rise to a different meaning. For example, in the sentence

Lord Denning spoke against the artificial insemination of women in the House of Lords,

it is not clear whether in the House of Lords is modifying insemination or spoke and so the meaning is unclear.

1.2.4 Use and Mention

Ambiguity may arise when a distinction is not made between the use and the mentioning of a word or phrase. To see this, notice that

Tom said I was angry.

Tom said, “I was angry.”

express two very different things even though the words are the same. This occurs because the phrase “I was angry” is being used in the first case and mentioned in the second. [Notice that I sometimes use italics sometimes as emphasis and sometimes to indicate that a word or phrase is being mentioned, which I do when I do not suspect that confusion will arise.] When no emphasis is used (either quotes or italics or some other kind of emphasis) the meaning becomes unclear, as in the case,

Paddy is Irish,

where it is not clear whether Paddy refers to a person or the name.

1.3 Analytic, Contradictory and Synthetic Statements

In most cases knowing the meaning of a statement does not tell us about its truth or falsity. There are, however, certain statements that we know are true simply from the meaning of the words used, such statements are called analytic. Statments that are false for the same reason (by definition) are called contradictory. An example of an analytic statement is,

All bachelors are unmarried adult males.

Statements whose truth or falsity is not solely dependent on the meanings of the words in it are called synthetic statements. All analytic statements are in some sense trivial, since they are true by definition, and, thus, not informative. Thus, one must be careful that someone is not making a claim analytic, by defining a term or to show that it is true, and then switching to a synthetic interpretation in order to support their argument. See Hughes 74 for a good example of this.
1.4 Descriptive and Evaluative Meaning

The two most common uses of language are, arguably, the descriptive and evaluative. In fact, many words combine descriptive and evaluative meanings, such as the word *renowned*, which means that a person is well-known and very skilled at some activity. It is important to remember that the descriptive characteristic is factual but the evaluative characteristic is not. Some words may have the same descriptive meaning but different evaluative meaning, such as *renowned* and *notorious*. It is important to be aware of these differences in meaning since it can lead one to accept a particular evaluation that is supported (since it supports the descriptive meaning) but not determined by the facts. An instance is the use of the phrase,

They are freedom fighters,

versus the phrase,

They are terrorists.

Such word choice is common in the many forms of propaganda and in political rhetoric.

1.5 Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

A special kind of ambiguity can arise when considering the conditions that must be met in order for something to occur. This may occur when we are talking about the conditions for certain entitlements, for instance:

What are the conditions for graduating with distinction?

There is an important distinction that should be made when considering such conditions. This distinction identifies two fundamental kinds of conditions, necessary and sufficient conditions. Ambiguity can arise if this distinction is not made, as will become clear. Let us look at the definitions:

**necessary condition**: *X is a necessary condition for Y if, and only if, when X is false Y must also be false (or when X is absent Y cannot occur).*

Another way of saying this is that when X is false (or does not occur) Y cannot be true (or occur) but the truth (or occurrence) of X does not guaranty Y. This can also be thought of (in a causal way) as an inference from effect to cause, since the presence of Y enables us to infer the presence of X. An example of a necessary condition is the following:

A necessary condition for graduating is completing a university course.

We can see that this is true by applying the definition, i.e., it is true that when someone has not completed a university course then they cannot graduate. We can also see that this is true since from the fact that someone has graduated we can infer that that person has completed a university course.

**sufficient condition**: *X is a sufficient condition for Y if, and only if, when X is true Y must also be true (or when X is present Y must occur).*

Another way of saying this is that when X is true (or occurs) then Y must be true (or occur) but the falsity (or absence) of X does not prevent Y from being true (or occurring).
This can also be thought of (in a causal way) as an inference from cause to effect, since the presence of X allows us to infer the presence of Y. An example of a sufficient condition is the following:

A sufficient condition for graduating is meeting all the program requirements for a university program (and not having any outstanding library fines).

We can see that this is true by applying the definition, i.e., it is true that when someone has met all the program requirements for a university program (and does not have any outstanding library fines) will graduate (or has graduated). We can also see that this is true since we can infer from the fact that someone has met all the program requirements for a university program that they will graduate (or have graduated).

In some cases a condition can be both necessary and sufficient, which is in fact the case for the example of a sufficient condition above, which can be seen by applying the definition of a necessary condition to the conditions.

1.6 Questions for Discussion: §3.10 (pp. 83-85 in Hughes)

Comment on the following passages:

1. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. (from the *Declaration of Independence*)

2. No rational person ever commits suicide.

3. **Politician:** As far as we are concerned an impartial dispute-settling mechanism is an essential precondition for any free trade deal between Canada and the United States. **Interviewer:** So you are saying, then, that you would support a free trade deal as long as the Americans accept an impartial dispute-settling mechanism.

4. For years, Canadian governments have persisted in lecturing other countries about their racist policies. Last week the Minister of Foreign Affairs continued in this tradition by lecturing the Malaysian government about its racist policies. May I pose a question for the Minister and for all those who think the same way: Why should another country pay attention to the carping of foreigners whose country still follows racist policies and practices? I refer, of course, to the large number of subtle ways in which our government discriminates against our native people. The overall effect of these policies is to bring about a slow cultural genocide.