Everything You Think about Equivocation Is False

Bryan Frances

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Abstract:

I show that virtually all the platitudes regarding equivocation—with notions such as ambiguity, lack of warrant upon disambiguation, and multiple reference or meaning—are false. I present fifteen stories meant to mark the boundaries and reveal the types of equivocation. The stories are used to argue for ten theses regarding equivocation.

Consider a simple case of an argument that could, if the circumstances were just right, contain an equivocation: laws require lawgivers; there are laws of nature; therefore, there must be a lawgiver for laws of nature. Another: sugar is an essential component of health; cookies have lots of sugar; so cookies provide lots of an essential component of health. A third: Jo refuted Bo's belief; a refutation of a belief is an argument that shows the belief is false; hence, Bo's belief was false. It's tempting to make eight observations regarding these cases.

- Equivocation occurs when someone uses a word or term that has at least two meanings.
- The word has at least two referents or extensions.
- The word is ambiguous.
- The equivocator uses the term at least twice, with different meanings each time.
- Equivocation occurs in arguments alone.
- Their argument containing the equivocation is flawed.
- Upon consistent disambiguation, in which we assign the same meaning to each occurrence of the ambiguous term, the argument is still flawed.
- The reason the argument is still flawed upon consistent disambiguation is that some of the premises will lack warrant.

Virtually all of those claims will strike most philosophers as platitudes. As Hans Hansen writes in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on fallacies, "The fallacy of equivocation is an argument which exploits the ambiguity of a term or phrase which has occurred at least twice in an argument, such that on the first occurrence it has one meaning and on the second another meaning" (Hansen 2020). Or, as Bradley Dowden puts it in his Fallacies entry in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Equivocation is the illegitimate switching of the meaning of a term that occurs twice during the reasoning; it is the use of one word taken in two ways" (Dowden 2023). Similar remarks occur wherever equivocation is discussed in detail.

I will argue that *all of the alleged platitudes are false*. Not some: all. Equivocation is much richer than we thought. This essay supplies the groundwork for further research by sweeping away the alleged platitudes and arguing for ten theses about equivocation.

1. The Externalism Thought Experiment

Pretend that there are two theses that fall under the banner of 'content externalism'. First, there is an *anti-supervenience* thesis: you could have lived the same internal physical life and yet not have believed that water is wet.

Second, there is a *dependency* thesis: necessarily, if you believe that water is wet, then you have had some direct or indirect contact with water. Details won't matter for our purposes.

Philosophy student Harry constructs an argument using the following words in an essay.

1. If externalism is true, then P holds. The reason is….
2. And if P holds, then Q holds.
3. But if Q holds, then externalism is false. This is because….
4. So, if externalism is true, then it's false; so it's false. As a consequence…

Suppose it is clear that in (1) he was writing about the anti-supervenience thesis: what came after 'The reason is' was clearly about anti-supervenience, not dependency. And in (3) there is no doubt he was writing about the dependency thesis, as the material after 'This is because' indicates. We can stipulate that he uses 'externalism' if and only if he is thinking of exactly one of Burge 1979—which we can pretend is solely about anti-supervenience—and Burge 1982—which is solely about dependency. (This is almost actually true.) So the material after 'The reason is' in (1) cites and discusses Burge 1979 but not Burge 1982 while the material after 'This is because' in (3) does the reverse. Finally, the material occurring after 'As a consequence' in (4) makes it plain that dependency, and not anti-supervenience, was meant in the use of 'externalism' in (4).

2. Equivocation in Word but not Thought

Did Harry equivocate in (1)-(4)?

At this point *we cannot tell*. It will depend, in part, on what was going through his mind while giving the argument. Suppose he is constructing the argument for the first time. He starts out writing (1)-(3), reproduced here with brackets indicating their correct interpretation.

1. If externalism [anti-supervenience] is true, then P holds. The reason … [insert Burge 1979 anti-supervenience considerations].
2. And if P holds, then Q holds.
3. But if Q holds, then externalism [dependency] is false. This is because … [insert Burge 1982 dependency considerations].

He hasn't equivocated yet: for all we know, the next thing he'll do is expertly and validly conclude that if anti-supervenience is true, then dependency is false.

At this point in his thinking, after writing (1)-(3), he stops to answer a phone call. After finishing with it he restarts philosophizing, gazing at (1)-(3) (recall that they are written down) and mistakenly thinking that they are *all* about dependency. This may occur in at least two ways.

First, it may seem to him that he *remembers* that he was exploring dependency in (1)-(3). This is a case of misremembering. He ends his thinking by writing (4), and of course (4) is about dependency.

Second, he may gaze at the *structure* of (1)-(3) and implicitly make the usually true but this time mistaken assumption that he had been using his terms univocally in what he had written. He is not trying to remember anything. Instead, he's using linguistic structure to tell him what to do next in the argument. He *assumes* that the notion being employed in (1)-(3) is dependency; no *memory* is involved; he just plumps for dependency and moves on. He then finishes with (4), which has dependency content.

Regardless of how he came to write (4), he has gone through *two* processes of reasoning. His earlier bout of reasoning, before the phone call, was just an argument *fragment*, (1)-(3). Again, it clearly contains no equivocation since he could easily go on to conclude that if anti-supervenience is true, then dependency is false, which would not introduce any equivocation. His second process of reasoning, the one occurring entirely after the phone call and in his mind alone—

not on paper—constitutes a full argument. But it isn't a case of equivocation either, at least in his head, as it has the content of the following sentences (which are *not* the ones he wrote):

5. If dependency is true, then P holds.
6. And if P holds, then Q holds.
7. But if Q holds, then dependency is false.
8. So, if dependency is true, then it's false; so it's false.

Anti-supervenience isn't a part of this *mental* argument at all! Although when he *originally wrote* (1) it had the anti-supervenience meaning, that meaning was never part of a full argument *in his mind*, after the phone call; it was only an argument fragment that happened before the phone call. The post-phone-call argument (5)-(8) is mistaken not in being equivocal but in having an undefended first premise. After the phone call he read (1) and misinterpreted it as having the content of (5). And after the phone call he mistakenly assumed that he had earlier justified the first premise, (5).

He need not have at any point in his reasoning been unaware of the anti-supervenience/dependency distinction. When constructing (1)-(3) before the phone call he might have been telling himself 'Okay, I've got to be sure I don't confuse anti-supervenience with dependency'. After the phone call he misremembers what his use of (1) expressed. Even here, while writing (4) and going through (5)-(8) in his mind, he might have kept reminding himself 'Don't mix up dependency and anti-supervenience!' There is simply *no* basis for accusing his thought processes as harboring equivocation.

However, although his two *reasoning processes*, before and after the phone call, included no equivocation, the content of what he *wrote* is equivocal provided the circumstances are appropriate. The philosopher who reads what he wrote—lines (1)-(4) with the accompanying paragraphs indicated by the ellipsis, remember, as (5)-(8) are never written down—can correctly complain that in (1)-(4) Harry justified only the anti-supervenience reading of (1) and the dependency reading of (3), thereby producing an equivocal argument (1)-(4). Indeed, any philosopher competent in the dependency/anti-supervenience distinction will do so. Sentence (1) gets its meaning partly from the text surrounding it, which as described earlier appeals solely to Burge 1979, the anti-supervenience reading. Same for (3): it partly gets its meaning from the accompanying sentences which appealed to just Burge 1982, which is entirely about dependency.

Further, we can stipulate that among philosophers of mind it is commonly thought that the anti-supervenience and dependency theses are distinct and it is currently not settled how they are related to one another. In particular, in our thought experiment it's known that it's not at all clear that anti-supervenience materially entails dependency (the premise that would link (1)-(3) to (4) in the obvious way). It's also known by those specialist philosophers that many other philosophers, who don't specialize in the philosophy of mind, are unaware of the anti-supervenience/dependency distinction and occasionally run them together. If you were one of the philosophers of mind aware of the state of the art, and you read Harry's essay when refereeing it for a journal, you would accuse it as equivocating on 'externalism'—even though you of course do not know went through Harry's head while composing his essay.

If we pointed out to Harry that (1) was about dependency while (3) is about anti-supervenience, he would, if he was honest with himself, chastise himself for making such a foolish equivocal argument. He knows of the anti-supervenience/dependency distinction and the argument in the essay equivocated on 'externalism'. It's most charitable to say that *Harry* failed to equivocate whereas *his essay* did equivocate.

The univocal argument constituted by (5)-(8) doesn't appear in the essay. In particular, premise (5) is not expressed by any sentence in the essay. The argument on the page, the content there given by (1)-(4), the argument content presented to the reader, is equivocal even if the thoughts that ran through Harry's head in producing the written words did not constitute any equivocal argument. It's true that his thoughts partially inform the meanings of his words, but even so the current circumstances are enough in this case that the word can be equivocal while the thought isn't. There

is *nothing whatsoever*, in Harry's mind, words, or professional context, to suggest anything other than the content of (1)-(4) for his argument on paper. There is of course plenty of controversy regarding how written words and sentences get their meanings, but under no plausible theory will Harry's words get anything other than the contents I indicated above, with (1)-(4).

Thus, to charge the essay with equivocation is not necessarily to charge the reasoning process or person that generated the essay with equivocation.

So, in what I will call the *Harry story*, which includes the whole story including the events after the phone call, there is no equivocation in thought but there is one in word, on paper.

> Thesis **T1**: *one can be guilty of equivocating in word, in the words one uses to express oneself, even though one never equivocates in one's thoughts*.

It's probably obvious that in Harry's phone call case, the argument on the page, (1)-(4), is equivocal regardless of Harry's reasoning processes. Given that the material in (1) is obviously about anti-supervenience, and the material in (3) and (4) are obviously about dependency, it is clear that there is equivocation *on paper*, even if not in thought.

This natural thought is false. The argument on the page need not be equivocal provided the non-linguistic conditions are appropriate. Consider the *Hermione story*.

Another PhD student, Hermione, wrote (1)-(4) and the accompanying text just as Harry did in the phone call story, but she has no pause after writing (1)-(3). We can stipulate (this is an alternative thought experiment) that at the time she wrote (1)-(4) it was mistakenly believed throughout much of the profession that the dependency and anti-supervenience theses are logically equivalent. When constructing the argument Hermione did not even consider including reference to the equivalence, as she implicitly knew that almost all her readers were perfectly familiar with it. In her situation, although (1)-(4) certainly look equivocal to us, as they are *exactly* the same as they were in Harry story, due to the well-known (yet mistaken) acceptance of the equivalence, we should interpret her argument as having a missing (false) premise, thereby escaping the charge of equivocation. Any informed reader of hers will accurately take (1)-(4) to be an enthymeme. Her actual argument is given completely by (9)-(13)—and Hermione would of course gladly confirm the enthymeme interpretation.

9. If anti-supervenience is true, then P holds.
10. And if P holds, then Q holds.
11. But if Q holds, then dependency is false.
12. Oh, and by the way, dependency and anti-supervenience are logically equivalent.
13. So, if dependency is true, then it's false; so it's false.

Thus, the proper semantic interpretation of one's words is not sufficient to determine whether equivocation in word has occurred. For Harry and Hermione produced the same words with the same truth-conditional semantic values and yet only Harry equivocated in word (and neither equivocated in thought).

The lesson of the Hermione story is this: in composing (1)-(4) she didn't equivocate in any sense. She is mistaken about the equivalence, but that's not equivocation. Hence, the combination of the Harry and Hermione stories establish our second thesis.

> Thesis **T2**: *two people can write the same words with all the same truth-conditional semantic values even though just one equivocated in word (and neither in thought)*. Neither Harry nor Hermione equivocated in thought; only Harry did so in word.

Now consider Ron, who is exactly like Hermione in writing (1)-(4) all in one go, with no phone call break. In writing the words of (1)-(4) Ron and Hermione go through the very same *occurrent* thought processes in the specific sense that their conscious thoughts during the relevant time period have the very same truth-conditional semantic values in

the very same sequence. Since their thoughts have the very same contents, it's natural to suppose that if one equivocates, then so does the other.

This is false. While Hermione *doesn't equivocate in thought*--because she has a firm background belief in the logical equivalence and is disposed to say her argument was an enthymeme--Ron *does equivocate in thought* because of the combination of three key facts that distinguish him from Hermione: he is ignorant of the community's belief about the equivalence (he and Hermione are in the same community), he would insist that his argument was not an enthymeme, and he actually rejects the equivalence. When he later edits his work, he will insist that he carelessly equivocated in his thinking.

The combination of the Hermione and Ron stories generate another thesis.

> Thesis **T3**: *two people can write the same words with all the same truth-conditional semantic values and live through occurrent thought processes with all the same truth-conditional semantic values even though just one equivocated in thought.* Ron equivocates in thought despite going through the same occurrent thoughts as the non-equivocating Hermione.

3. Equivocation in Thought but not Word

We saw that one can equivocate in word but not thought (the Harry story, with **T1**). The reverse is true as well: one can equivocate in thought but not in word. Shockingly, one can equivocate in thought with no linguistic ambiguity or multiple linguistic interpretations whatsoever.

Suppose George had written (1)-(4) all in one go (no phone call or similar interruption) even though he was convinced that the dependency thesis is not equivalent to the anti-supervenience thesis. By *his own* lights, he has unknowingly run together two notions as if they were one: in the past he said to himself, multiple times, that these are two inequivalent theses that must be distinguished. But on this particular occasion, in going through the reasoning in writing (1)-(4), he just ran the two theses together without thinking about it. Any analysis of this case has to conclude that George made a blameworthy mistake in reasoning. So far, George is *exactly* like Ron.

However, in this alternative thought experiment the two theses are not only logically equivalent but mere terminological variants. That is, unbeknownst to George the "two" philosophy of mind theses don't differ much more than 'Jack hit Jill' and 'Jill was hit by Jack' differ. Suppose everyone but him realized that the "two" theses were just one thesis put in ever so slightly different linguistic garb. George is mistakenly convinced that the dependency and anti-supervenience theses are distinct and not equivalent; so when he later reflects on his (1)-(4) he will be convinced that he equivocated—despite the fact that no one who reads his argument will accuse it of equivocating or even being enthymematic. That's the *George story*.

George did not equivocate *in word*, on paper. Even so, he did equivocate in his thoughts.

We have to be careful here: the *truth-conditional contents* of his thoughts and words contain no equivocation. When I claim that George equivocated in his thoughts, I'm *not* saying that a truth-conditional analysis of his thought contents will reveal any evidence of equivocation. Even so, there should be a *truth-conditionally independent* notion of equivocation, one that focuses on psychological dynamics such as our juggling of "mental files".[1]

Kripke's (1979/1988) Paderewski story can be used to explain this proposal. In world W1 Neville rationally comes to mistakenly think that his uses of 'Paderewski' stand for two people. He thinks that there is a politician and a distinct pianist with that name. Now suppose that while discussing pianists he says this:

14. Paderewski is tall.

[1] This is not to say that there is equivocation in *narrow contents* (c.f. Loar 1988, Chalmers 2003, Jackson 2003, Kriegel 2008), since there might be no narrow contents (Yli-Vakkuri and Hawthorne 2018).

At this point Neville is perfectly disposed to say 'We are talking about pianists, Paderewski in particular'. His audience takes him to be remarking on someone they all know to be a pianist. A minute later while discussing politicians he says this:

15. Paderewski is rich.

At this point Neville is perfectly disposed to say 'We are talking about politicians, Paderewski in particular'. His audience takes him to be talking about someone they all know to be a politician. He then concludes with this:

16. So, I guess there is someone who is tall and rich.

He confusedly says this even though he still thinks that the pianist is poor, he still thinks the politician is short, and up until now he has always thought that no one has been both tall and rich. This is the *Neville story*.

Neville has made *some* kind of error here in W1. But has he *equivocated*?

He has not equivocated *in word*, in truth-conditional semantics anyway, as there is just one Paderewski to think about: the politician-pianist. There isn't even a whiff of linguistic equivocation in his case. One does not get to alter truth-conditional values merely by mistakenly thinking that a name is referentially ambiguous—unless some kind of truly radical view of the truth-conditional semantics of proper names is correct, which I'll assume is not the case. Thus, on that relatively secure assumption there is no linguistic equivocation in W1. But has he equivocated *in thought* in W1?

If we focus on Neville's psychological dynamics, and not truth-conditional thought contents, then we'll conclude that Neville equivocated in his thoughts—as he and nearly everyone else is convinced the politician isn't the pianist. When we remind him of his belief that there are two relevant people named 'Paderewski', he will immediately admit he equivocated in word; and nearly everyone else will concur. In his own mind he equivocated *just as clearly* as if he had said something like 'Aristotle was a rich guy in the 1960s; Aristotle was a great philosopher; thus, a rich guy in the 1960s was a great philosopher'. It is natural to say that he equivocated due to his confused use of two "mental files" in his mind associated with his uses of 'Paderewski.'[2] In using (14)-(16) he first employed the pianist file, then he employed the politician file, and then he confusedly ran them together.

The lesson is that in world W1 Neville equivocated in thought but not word—and the equivocation in thought had nothing to do with equivocating over truth-conditional contents.

If this lesson isn't clear, consider a possible world W2 in which Neville is physically and linguistically identical to how he was in W1: throughout his life he has the same internal physical makeup, encounters and uses all the same words, etc. The only relevant difference in the two worlds is that in W2 but not W1 his uses of 'Paderewski' are referentially ambiguous in referring to distinct people. So in W2 he and everyone else thinks there are two relevant people named 'Paderewski', a politician and a pianist—and this time they are right about that, unlike in W1. It's clear that in W2 he is guilty of ordinary equivocation in both thought and word with his uses of (14)-(16) (because now it's exactly like the 'Aristotle' case). The important point here is that since Neville's psychological dynamics are identical across worlds (again, this need not be cashed out in terms of narrow contents), if he equivocates in thought in one world then he does in both worlds.

The George and Neville stories give us a fourth thesis.

> Thesis **T4**: *a person can equivocate in thought even if she doesn't equivocate in word—and the equivocation in thought need not have anything to do with truth-conditional semantics.*

[2] I use 'mental file' instead of 'concept' or 'conception' because the latter two are multiply ambiguous and by using the term 'mental file' in an obviously metaphorical way we won't fool ourselves into thinking that we have a clear grasp of the relevant issues regarding what is happening in the equivocator's mind.

4. Remarks on Methodology

It might turn out that **T4** isn't really a *thesis*, at least not in the traditional sense. I wonder whether 'equivocation' is not semantically complete enough to handle odd cases like the George and Neville stories—or some of the other odd ones that are presented below.[3] Perhaps *there is no one phenomenon out there in the world that our term 'equivocation' latches onto*. The term 'equivocate' has a large degree of incompleteness when it comes to truth-conditional semantic value. In that respect, it is unlike a term such as 'electron' and more like 'romantic date', 'tasty dish', 'great concert', 'chair', 'social media', etc. This is why we will be frustrated if we ask for a theory of equivocation: there can no more be a theory of equivocation than there can be one for being-a-nice-person or social-media.

My evidence for this claim is that the many philosophers I have talked to about equivocation have *wildly* divergent intuitions about what hypothetical cases are equivocal—and *they never have any awareness of this divergence*. I found this situation striking. It's like posing the question of free will/determinism compatibilism and getting as responses 'Only a deeply confused person would reject compatibilism' and 'Only a deeply confused person would reject incompatibilism' with not even a hint of awareness that numerous highly intelligent and thoroughly informed folk occupy with full confidence the opposite position. My guess is that these philosophers with wildly divergent intuitions are unknowingly "completing" the semantically incomplete "equivocation" in very different ways, which explains the resulting confident disagreement.

What I'm doing with the theses of this paper is more like drawing attention to several closely related phenomena and making suggestions on one reasonable way to precisify 'equivocation'—although I'm confident there are other comparably reasonable ways. Although some of the story-driven arguments for my theses are straightforward—analogous to how we use stories to show that true belief is distinct from knowledge—others are as just described: stories useful for revealing the phenomena in and around our use of 'equivocate' and then making suggestions for how to draw the boundaries for 'equivocate'.

As a consequence, I'm not at all willing to fight to the death over counterexamples. For instance, I would have almost no quarrel with someone who insisted that 'equivocate' was restricted to what I have been calling 'equivocation in word'. She would not be disagreeing with me; she would just be offering a quite different precisification. Let a thousand of them bloom.

This is *my* take on the stories. Others may feel as though there is a unitary phenomenon in human activity that 'equivocate' latches onto—like in the case of 'electron', albeit with the difference that 'equivocate' latches onto a human cognitive activity. They will be willing to fight over counterexamples. Yet others will have yet other ideas regarding how my thought experiments should be interpreted. My goal is to present the stories and offer some arguments and theses those stories suggest without the "meta" philosophizing about methodology—with the exception of this section.

5. Empty Equivocation in Thought and Word

Virtually everyone will agree that when one equivocates, one uses a term at least twice with different meanings, either truth-conditionally relevant meanings or non-truth-conditionally relevant meanings/mental files/conceptual roles. However, as we are about to see if we want to save the truth of this idea, then we will have to be careful how we understand 'meaning'.

Suppose the string 'Vulcan' has two uses, one intended for a planet and one intended for a star. This probably means that there are two English words (word-types) spelled the same (cf. Kaplan 1990). There are two entirely separate

[3] I set aside views such as epistemicism which suggest that such incompleteness does not exist. But even if such a view is true, different tokens of 'equivocation' may have slightly different truth-conditional values depending on contextual factors. So 'equivocation' may behave as if it has multiple, more or less equally good, precisifications. The remarks of section 4 will apply in modified form.

Kripkean chains of reference transmission—or *attempted* transmission—that just by accident employ the same string of letters. We could have them originate in remote areas of different countries.

With that setup, one can end up equivocating on 'Vulcan' even though neither the planet nor the star exists. Sirius begins by thinking of the planet: 'Vulcan is hotter than liquid lead'. He then proceeds to think of the star: 'Vulcan is in the Andromeda galaxy'.[4] Let's assume he and everyone else has long thought that they are distinct astronomical objects and the planet is in our galaxy. But on this occasion, he forgets those alleged facts and equivocates in thought when he concludes with 'Something in the Andromeda galaxy is hotter than liquid lead.' If we fill out the story appropriately—no hidden premises (as in the Hermione enthymeme case), no misremembering, no phone calls, et cetera—then we have a case of equivocation in thought without reference, as the protagonist is equivocating on empty terms.[5] That's the *Sirius story*. This is *empty equivocation.*

The Vulcan case also seems to be a case of equivocation *in word*, but without the use of words with different *referential* meanings (or, perhaps, truth-conditional meanings). The 'Vulcan' words are distinct, in part because they have entirely different origins and Kripkean reference transmission chains, but have identical referential properties (none). The fact that the protagonist used two words as one, knowing the words are different but temporarily treating them as the same (and the same in meaning and reference), is enough here to produce equivocation in word.[6]

> Thesis **T5** (keeping in mind that some of these Ts—*especially* this one—might be theses only by courtesy, as per §4): *a person can simultaneously equivocate in thought and word with empty terms.*

6. Empty Equivocation in Word but not Thought, and in Thought but not Word

By constructing a phone-call case with the two referentially empty terms spelled 'Vulcan' we can manufacture a case of empty equivocation in word but not thought.

Luna writes 'Vulcan is hotter than liquid lead', meaning the planet and consciously keeping in mind that she is not talking about the star. She answers a phone call. She goes back to read what she had written. She mistakenly thinks that she was talking about the star. She then writes 'Vulcan is in the Andromeda galaxy' while thinking of the star and once again reminding herself not to equivocate. She then concludes with 'Something in the Andromeda galaxy is hotter than liquid lead'. She has equivocated in word—but without any reference—even though she has not equivocated in thought. That's the *Luna story*.

> Thesis **T6**: *a person can equivocate in word but not thought with empty terms.*

Again, I'm not insisting that **T6** is "already true" (as per §4). It helps draw the boundaries of equivocation.

In the Luna story there are *two* names, with different origins and Kripkean chains of communication, coincidently spelled the same, 'Vulcan'. But we can have empty equivocation with one name and chain, as we can combine the Paderewski and Vulcan cases to arrive at a situation in which there is just *one* "public" and empty name 'Hulcan' that Hagrid and everyone else mistakenly thinks is ambiguous in the sense that 'Aristotle' is. 'Hulcan' is for them exactly

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[4] Roughly, for the first sentence, Sirius's occurrent thoughts, context, and immediate cognitive history demand that we interpret his use of 'Vulcan' as a use of the word with chain C1. So 'thinking of the planet' comes out roughly as 'employing 'Vulcan' grounded with C1'. For the second sentence, his use of 'Vulcan' is a use of the word grounded with C2.

[5] The names are not from fiction, but if they were, then on some theories of fictional discourse some tokens of the names would have referents. It is less plausible to hold that ordinary *non-fictional* empty names have referents. At the least, they fail to have *ordinary* referents, such as planets, stars, and people.

[6] Whether Sirius's argument was valid—or even a complete argument—is controversial, due to the alleged lack of referent.

what ‘Paderewski’ is for Neville and his community. If ‘Paderewski’ were empty then Neville would present the same kind of case as ‘Hulcan.’ Hagrid can equivocate on ‘Hulcan,’ at least in the truth-conditionally-irrelevant mental file sense, thereby generating a case of equivocation in thought without linguistic ambiguity, reference, or equivocation in word. That’s the *Hagrid story*.

Thesis **T7**: *a person can equivocate in thought but not word with a single empty term.*

The Hagrid story works here, as does the Neville story if ‘Paderewski’ is empty.

7. Deep, Superficial, Clueless, Ground-breaking, and Accidental Equivocation

In this section I advocate a more complex thesis.

Thesis **T8**: *one can equivocate in any of five ways:*

(i) In a deep way, indicating some important lack of understanding (Draco story, below).

(ii) In a superficial way, indicating a mere slip or stupid mistake (Harry story, given above).

(iii) In a “clueless” way, indicating utter lack of understanding (Ginny story, below).

(iv) In a way unique to those who are doing ground-breaking work (Percy story, below).

(v) As a result of an accidental change in linguistic meanings (Dobby story, below).

When Harry’s dual use of ‘externalism’ is revealed to him, he reacts with ‘Oh shit! You’re right of course. I can’t believe I made such a mistake.’ Contrast Harry with Draco, who has only a weak grasp on the distinction between the anti-supervenience and dependency theses. If asked whether Burge 1979 and Burge 1982 were talking about the same philosophical position, he would be confused. He knows that the words one uses to articulate the externalism of Burge 1979 are quite different from those used to describe the externalism of Burge 1982, but upon being asked he also realizes that he has been a least a little disposed to think they are “generally the same idea”, which of course is ridiculously vague. It will take some work for him to hit on the differences in the two kinds of content externalism, which shows he is quite different from Harry. This is the *Draco story* (there is no phone call episode; fill in the details as you feel appropriate to generate a case of equivocation, in word, thought, or both).

In Harry’s ‘I made a stupid mistake’ case, although he may have equivocated, it is not a *deep* case of equivocation. There are two kinds of phenomenon here, whether or not we classify them as kinds of equivocation: one in which we make a stupid mistake, or “slip”, as in the case of the *expert* Harry who is perfectly familiar with the two meanings in question, and one in which someone has only a very weak grasp of the two meanings, as in the case of Draco. The difference lies in the degree of the protagonist’s understanding of the two meanings. The expert can easily distinguish them; the novice is just barely competent enough with the two meanings so that different uses of the term in question express just one of the meanings.

The deep sense of equivocation indicates a rather serious, non-trivial error, especially in philosophy. It typically indicates an embarrassing kind of *confusion*, and not merely a *slip*. If you have equivocated in the deep and interesting sense, it requires a *transformation in your understanding* in order to even grasp the fact that you’ve equivocated, since deep cases are defined by the lack of a clear view of the two “meanings” had by the term you’re equivocating on (‘meanings’ appears in scare quotes because of the George, Neville, Hagrid, and Sirius stories). Draco’s understanding of the two meanings of ‘externalism’ was perched on the fence between competence and incompetence. It’s only when you’re on that fence that you may deeply equivocate.

It’s tempting to think that one cannot equivocate in thought or word if one has *no* ability to see that there is any distinction to be made. To see this, suppose that from the perspective of the metaphysics of the 22nd century there always have been two independent notions tied to the noun ‘chair’. Any halfway decent 22nd century metaphysician can tell you that ‘sitting in a chair’ obviously invokes a concept corresponding to ‘chair’ quite different from that invoked by ‘napping in a chair’—even in ordinary 21st century uses of those phrases. But even if the 22nd century

metaphysician is right about the conceptual distinction, she could not correctly accuse Ginny, in the 21st century, of equivocating on 'chair' when she argues 'Sometimes I sit in my chair; sometimes I nap in my chair; thus, there's a piece of furniture I use for sitting and napping.' The accusation is mistaken because Ginny hasn't the slightest idea there is any such distinction in notions—nor is she in any position to form such an idea even with significant instruction in metaphysics courses. This is the *Ginny story*. (Another case could be constructed with 'mass'.)

In contrast, the confused PhD student Draco definitely has *an inkling* of the dependency/anti-supervenience distinction. He has fooled around with both theses and seen things about one thesis that he hasn't seen about the other thesis; he just hasn't put this all together properly in his mind.

I'm not sure that's right. That is, I'm not sure that the "clueless" case, with Ginny and 'chair', isn't a case of equivocation. Equivocation *seems*, to a great many of the people I've discussed these issues with, to entail blame to some degree, and the Ginny story seems to involve a blameless protagonist. Perhaps 'equivocation' is semantically incomplete enough that the story presents a borderline case of equivocation. In any case, even if it is equivocation, it is very different from the *deep* cases (in which one has an inkling of the relevant distinction, as was the case with Draco) and *superficial* cases (in which one has made an admittedly stupid mistake, as in the Harry story). I'll include the clueless Ginny case as exemplifying a type of equivocation, merely for the sake of providing a target view.

Thus far, I've discussed deep (Draco), superficial (Harry), and clueless (Ginny) equivocation. To introduce the fourth type of equivocation, involving ground-breaking work, pretend that Percy had wrote (1)-(4) in a 1968 work. This requires us to change the story slightly from that of the PhD student Harry, as the student appealed to Burge 1979 and Burge 1982 in (1), (3), and (4), but let's assume the details of the story can be worked out so that it's clear that Percy's (1) is about anti-supervenience, and his (3) and (4) are about dependency.

We can assume that neither Percy nor anyone else in the history of the universe hit on the dependency/anti-supervenience distinction until 1977, say. By that I mean that until 1977 no one had said anything akin to, 'You know what? There are two concepts here, not just one. We've been mixing them up.' With the benefit of several decades of investigation into supervenience and dependency, when *we* look back at Percy's 1968 notes we can see perfectly well that his (1) is crying out to be interpreted with 'anti-supervenience'. For similar reasons his (3) and (4) are screaming for dependency interpretations. This is the *Percy story*. Is Percy *epistemically blameworthy* in writing (1)-(4)?

It doesn't seem so. When one is breaking new ground accusations of equivocation seem untoward at best.

So perhaps Percy is blameless in writing (1)-(4). Now suppose that in 2025 high school student Cho wrote exactly what Percy wrote in 1968, without knowing the first thing about Percy or 20th or 21st century philosophy. This is the *Cho story*. Once again, we cannot say 'She should have known better'; blame is out of place since she is in high school and knows nothing of philosophy. On the other hand, if a professional philosopher subject to the advances since 1968 *today* wrote what Percy wrote in 1968 (but still in the fiction), then she would be blameworthy: she should know better. If a PhD student wrote it today, they would be blameworthy but less so.

However, even though there are these distinctions in blameworthiness, I think all four characters—the 1968 Percy, the high school student Cho, the confused PhD student Draco, and the 2025 professional philosopher—have all made the same mistake of equivocation. By writing (1)-(4) they have danced all over the dependency/anti-supervenience distinction but without seeing it (this characterization isn't an *account* of equivocation!). That's what they have in common. What separates them is the existence and quality of their excuse in so dancing without seeing. The high school student Cho has the excuse that she hasn't read a word about these matters. Percy has the excuse of breaking new ground. He and the high school student Cho are on par; the student is breaking new ground with the unfortunate fact that someone in her intellectual community already did it (Percy was luckier). The PhD student Draco is partly blameworthy because he has read material that should have given him the ability to spot the distinction, but he has the excuse of being an amateur. The 2025 professional philosopher has no excuse at all, as she is epistemically responsible to the literature, which she has read and understood, and the literature makes the anti-supervenience/dependency distinction perfectly clear (we're pretending here).

Finally: if one unknowingly switches linguistic communities (e.g., dialects), then one might equivocate by accident. The Twin-Earth switching cases provide the most vivid illustrations, although there are many more humble ones. Dobby on earth thinks that the cans that some food comes in are made of aluminum. He doesn't know that many baseball bats are made of aluminum. Overnight he is unknowingly whisked to Twin-Earth. Several years later (being on Twin-Earth the whole time) he is told 'Those metallic baseball bats in the trunk of the car are made of aluminum', where on Twin-Earth 'aluminum' picks out twalum, some alloy superficially similar to aluminum. Dobby reasons: 'Canned corn is stored in aluminum cans; baseball bats are made of aluminum; thus, some substance makes up food cans as well as baseball bats'. This is the *Dobby story.* On some reasonable accounts, Dobby's first statement is about aluminum, as it's a memory with a stable content. But his second assertion picks out twalum. So it looks like a case of equivocation (cf. Gerken 2009 and 2011).

I'm not interested in defending this last category of equivocation. One can deny that there are any such cases, even hypothetical. Instead, I want to tentatively grant the equivocation but marginalize it in the same way I set aside the clueless cases with Ginny. Indeed, the switching cases don't seem importantly different from the clueless cases.

8. Lucky Equivocation

It's reasonable to think that the nature of equivocation lies in some lack of warrant the agent has for her premises. Harry has good warrant for (1) disambiguated one way (anti-supervenience), good warrant for (3) disambiguated the other way (dependency), but no good warrant for the pair of claims that result from a *consistent* disambiguation of (1) and (3). Thus, we have thesis T regarding equivocation: *if an expressed inference involves equivocation, then on no consistent disambiguation does the speaker reasonably believe all the premises.* Or so Tom Stoneham has argued (2003). My claim on this matter:

Thesis **T9**: *Stoneham's T is false*.

Before defending T9, it's worth seeing that it may be the case that equivocation can happen without any argument (this doesn't touch Stoneham's thesis T). Suppose Severus says 'I'm going to talk about Aristotle for the next two minutes', he spends the next minute talking about the philosopher, and then spends the final minute talking about the rich shipping guy. Furthermore, if you had asked him, after the two minutes had passed, 'Did you stick with your intention to talk about Aristotle the whole time?', he would have answered affirmatively. And if you had later pointed out to him that he had switched the meanings of 'Aristotle' after one minute, he would have reacted exactly as if he had discovered himself equivocating in an argument. That's the *Severus story*. It seems that he has done something *tremendously similar* to equivocation, even if it isn't equivocation proper. He has equivocated in conversation if not argument.

Then again, I suppose that some philosophers will say that Severus has yet to equivocate: he is *disposed* to equivocate, but that's all. For the sake of providing a target, we have another claim.

Thesis **T10**: *one can equivocate (in either or both of thought and word) without making any argument*.

Returning to Stoneham, I think that in virtually all situations in which someone has equivocated, T is true. However, the relation between equivocation and warrant is not what it appears. Take your favorite case of equivocation in which the protagonist's argument boils down to the following. First, Minerva utters (something of the form) 'Ft' and it is clear from the context that 't' refers to *a* but not *b.* Second, she utters 'Gt' and it is perfectly clear that this use of 't' refers to *b* but not *a.* (It should not be difficult to supply the details.) Finally, she utters (something of the form) '$\exists$x (Fx & Gx),' basing it on her previous utterances in the usual way. Minerva has a significant amount of justification for her belief that *a* is F, and the same holds for her belief that *b* has G. Thus, her argument is:

17. Fa (uttering 'Ft')
18. Gb (uttering 'Gt')
19. $\therefore \exists$x (Fx & Gx) (uttering 'So, something is F and G')

Fill in the details so it's a paradigm case of equivocation, however you like to characterize that. Now suppose that years ago Minerva came to justifiably believe Fb and Ga (not: Fa and Gb). Those old beliefs have not been dropped; neither has their epistemic status. It's just that she hasn't thought about *b*'s having F or *a*'s having G for a long time. If we had asked her in 2025, 'Hey Minerva: is *a* G? And what about *b*: is it F?' she would have replied with, 'Oh wow! I haven't thought about those issues in ages. Well, yeah I guess I've believed both those claims for some years now.' In the circumstance in which she still believes Fb and Ga but has not been thinking about them, we have to say that even *while* giving her argument 'Ft; Gt; so, ∃x (Fx & Gx)' in 2025 she had warrant for both premises under both disambiguations. If so, then she falsifies Stoneham's T. This is the *Minerva story*.

I won't bore you with the details, but we can use the 'externalism' case to fill out the Minerva story. Call these cases of equivocation in which the protagonist has good reasons for all the premises under all consistent disambiguations, *lucky equivocations.*

One might object that even though Minerva had good reasons for both premises (17) and (18) under both disambiguations, *the reasons for which* she uttered her two premises, in 2025, support just Fa and Gb, and not Fb and Ga. That is, reason R1 justifies and is the reason for which she uttered 'Ft' in 2025; but R2 and not R1 is the reason for which she has believed Fb for many years. If this were right, we could say that *the reasons for which Minerva asserted each of the premises do not double as good reasons when 't' is read univocally*, which is pretty close to saying that Minerva didn't have good reasons for any univocal reading of her premises.

No. The warrant she has for Fa and Fb (or Ga and Gb) might be the same if the warrant is general enough and Fa and Fb are similar enough. One can use the externalism story to make this possibility realistic: perhaps the primary reason why 'If anti-supervenience is true, then P' is true also is the primary reason why 'If dependency is true, then P' is true; similarly for (3). Thus, no matter how we interpret the sentences she uses in her argument, the result is a good argument.

And yet Minerva equivocated in both thought and word—assuming that none of the equivocation-ruining features discussed earlier (e.g., phone call) are present. That's partly because her Fb and Ga beliefs weren't psychologically active during the argument. In fact, when after hearing her argument, we point out to her that when she said 'Ft' she meant Fa and when she said 'Gt' she meant Gb, she will, if this is a mere "stupid mistake" kind of equivocation, probably reply with 'Oh my goodness! You're not going to believe this! You're right of course; I did equivocate. But what's *really* funny here, is that for years I've held that Fb and Ga as well! I wasn't thinking of it at the time though, which is why I equivocated.' We could get the same result with deep cases of equivocation.

9. Conclusion

Philosophers often argue that regarding some philosophically interesting notion, one of the alleged platitudes associated with the notion is actually false. I have gone much further: virtually every platitude associated with equivocation is false. Hence, we need to start over when trying to come to a complete understanding of equivocation.

The primary contribution of this essay is the data set: the fifteen stories. The secondary contribution is the pack of story-centric arguments for theses **T1**-**T10**. If one is out to develop a theory of equivocation (however that is to be understood; cf. §4), then examining the stories, theses, and arguments will be an excellent, if not the best, way to proceed. Hence, even if one disagrees with the theses or their supporting arguments, they will be well worth examining.

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