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J Anthony Blair

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Author: J. Anthony Blair
Commentary on: J. van Laar's "The Charge of Ambiguity"

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In "The Charge of Ambiguity," Jan Albert van Laar presents us with a criterion for the fallacy of ambiguity. I take him to mean by a criterion a set of identifying conditions (necessary and sufficient) for the occurrence of the fallacy. As far as I can see, he succeeds quite well in this aim. My worries are more about the theoretical framework he uses than about the details of his analysis.

Notice, that the paper begins with a commitment to one particular theory of fallacy. Van Laar tells us he adopts van Eemeren and Grootendorst's requirement of an adequate theory of fallacies, namely that it provide criteria for distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable moves in an argumentative discourse. This requirement presupposes that a fallacy is an unreasonable *move* (as opposed to, say, a mistaken *inference*) and that fallacies occur in argumentative *discourse* (as opposed to, say, in reasoning, or in *products* thereof). Other theories of fallacy do exist. Considering fallacies from different theoretical perspectives is not like looking at the countryside now through green-tinted lenses, now through brown-tinted lenses, with the same phenomenon observed in every case. It is more like understanding social life now with Thomas Aquinas's mind and now with Thomas Hobbes's mind. The very nature of what is observed is mediated and shaped by the theory. So a different theoretical perspective might produce quite a different criterion for the fallacy of ambiguity.

Recall that van Laar undertakes five tasks. 1st: explain what constitutes a dialectical perspective. 2nd: distinguish fallacious from non-fallacious ambiguity. 3rd: produce a criterion of fallacious ambiguity. 4th: compare his story with that of van Eemeren and Houtlosser. 5th: confess to shortcomings. I leave unexamined point 4, van Laar's claim that results of the immanent dialectic and the pragma-dialectic approaches tend to converge in their accounts of ambiguity. Nor will I discuss point 5, the danger of a possible infinite regress of fallacies in the meta-discussions of whether a fallacy was committed in some ground level discussion.

Though he doesn't say so, van Laar gives us a stipulative definition of 'dialectic.' He characterizes dialectic *as a method of discussion that helps parties who disagree to resolve their disagreement*. Now, there could just as well be dialectical rules that help discussants who disagree to maintain their disagreement (think of the Tories and Labourites in Britain), or that help discussants arrive at the truth, even if that means both (or all) parties have to abandon their initial assertions. Another day we might ask van Laar why we should adopt the version of dialectic he is using.

I think it is important to be clear that van Laar does not have in mind a discussion aimed at one party's simply accepting the standpoint of the other, but instead a discussion aimed at both parties' agreeing to what is worthy of acceptance. Recall the two sorts of aims. Each participant has the goal of persuading the other to accept his/her standpoint. But also, each participant has the "main" goal of resolving the dispute by means of the dialogue. The latter, van Laar says, implies an obligation on both parties to offer only "genuine" arguments, and not arguments that hinder or obstruct reaching the main goal, which is the resolution of the disagreement. Van Laar

contends that the main goal will induce the discussants to tend to use good arguments and offer good criticisms—the good and the effective will merge, he says. I am not clear whether for van Laar a good argument is by *definition* one that contributes to and does not obstruct conflict resolution, or whether there is an *independent* criterion of argument goodness, so that it is an empirical truth, and not a matter of definition, that good arguments contribute to, and do not obstruct, conflict resolution. If the former, then it is no happy consequence that the main goal encourages the parties to abstain from breaking down the process of conflict resolution: it is true by definition. If the latter, then we may ask what the criterion of good argument is, and why it is the case that the goal of conflict resolution promotes good arguments.

In his account of ambiguity, I think van Laar repeats a mistake that many make, though his doing so does not harm his argument. He calls “semantic ambiguity” the fact that almost all English expressions (I take it he means words or phrases, and not their uses) are capable of having different meanings in different contexts of their use. I think he borrows this point from Walton, but if so, then Walton is mistaken too. That is not *semantic* ambiguity because it is not *ambiguity* at all; it is simply a fact about the parsimony of the English language: it makes many words do multiple-duty. *Semantic ambiguity* is, rather, the property of almost all expressions that they are capable of being used in contexts in which it is not clear which of two or more of their alternative possible meanings is intended. The key idea of ambiguity is obscurity or doubt, not multivocalness.

Thereafter van Laar gets it right. When an expression *is* used in a context in which it expresses more than one possible meaning in that context, it is *contextually ambiguous*. [Example: In a cartoon, a defendant in a criminal trial is portrayed standing before a judge and the judge is saying, “I’m not going to send you to prison for attempted robbery. I’m going to give you a second chance.”] Here we recognize two different kinds of “second chance” (a second chance to live a crime-free life, and a second chance to succeed at robbery), but we understand that the ambiguity is intentional, and that it is a joke. As van Laar notes, none of this is troublesome. What is troublesome is *covert contextual ambiguity*, which occurs when the interlocuter fails to make clear that the contextual ambiguity is intended. Covert contextual ambiguity is an un-activated time-bomb. It becomes a problem in argumentation when an argument relies on it in some way, at which point it becomes an activated time-bomb, and is called *active ambiguity*.

A niggler: van Laar speaks of “covert and contextually ambiguous expressions” as if it were the expressions and not their uses that are ambiguous. Presumably that is just a *façon de parler*.

Van Laar sees two ways covert contextual ambiguity can cause problems in arguments. One is that it contributes to equivocation. Consider an old example. I write it out in two ways, that seem logically equivalent, first non-dialectically and then dialectically.

(1) The example written out non-dialectically

(1) A grade of “C” is better than nothing.

(2) Nothing is better than an grade of “A+”.

So, (3) a grade of “C” is better than a grade of “A+”.¹

Inference license #1 {From: “aRb” and “bRc” one may infer “aRc”.}

Inference license #2 {From: “aRb” and “dRc” one may infer “aRc”.}

(2) The example written out dialectically

Turn	Black	White
1	Do you agree that (2) nothing is better than a grade of "A+"?	What could be better?
2	And isn't (1) a grade of "C" better than nothing?	Yes, of course.
3	But then you are committed to agreeing that (3) a grade of "C" is better than a grade of "A+"!	Oh dear, so I am. How can that be?

Here are two descriptions of what has gone wrong in this case. The first one follows van Laar's dialectical account of equivocation.

D(2) In the example, if 'nothing' is disambiguated, one of the following will be true. (a) 'Nothing' is given the same sense in all its occurrences, in which case it uses the acceptable inference license (#1), but (1) is acceptable and (2) is unacceptable; or conversely, (b) 'Nothing' is given a different sense in its occurrences, in which case both (1) and (2) could be acceptable, but the argument must rely on inference license #2, which is unacceptable. So the argument is dialectically flawed.

Second, a logical account of equivocation:

D(1) In the example, the premises are true only if 'nothing' has a different sense in each, but the conclusion follows only if 'nothing' has the same sense in each premise. Hence, it is false both that each premise is true and that the conclusion follows from them. An argument is logically sound if and only if it has true premises and the conclusion follows from them. So the argument is not logically sound.

Are D(1) and D(2) logically equivalent? If so, then how does a dialectical analysis differ from a logical one. If not, then why prefer the dialectical analysis to the logical analysis?

The other way that covert contextual ambiguity can be activated is by causing misunderstanding, thereby leading to pseudo-agreement or pseudo-disagreement. In dialogues, these can result in undeserved concessions (though useful ones from the point of view of winning), or denied opportunities. Here, I think, the dialectical model provides a straightforward explanation that is unavailable to the logical model.

Van Laar's immanent dialectical criterion for the fallacy of ambiguity goes as follows:

Of two people, Black and White, engaged in a dialectical discussion, White commits the fallacy of ambiguity iff Black wins a meta-discussion about the acceptability of the standpoint that White has used an expression that is actively ambiguous.

In other words, White commits the fallacy of ambiguity just when Black convinces White that White used an actively ambiguous expression in their argument. This sounds a bit like saying that White lied just in case Black convinces White that White lied. What stands behind this strange way of talking is the doctrine of so-called "immanent dialectics," according to which the status of an argument must be decided by the participants. I would object to this doctrine by noting that an onlooker can sometimes be a better judge of an argument's soundness than the participants in the dialogue in which it is used. A reply sometimes given to this objection is Hamblin's point that by critiquing the argument, the onlooker becomes another participant, but this reply is disingenuous. To be sure, in *some* sense there is no appeal regarding the status of an argument beyond an appeal to some person's judgement. In the same sense, though, there is no appeal regarding *anything* beyond an appeal to some person's judgement. Taken this way, the reply is empty, and so not available to van Laar. Presumably the proponents of "immanent dialectics" mean this claim not to be empty, and so when they say the status of an argument is to be decided by the participants, they mean by "the participants" the original discussants. But then nothing in principle prevents any two discussants from just getting things wrong, and agreeing when they shouldn't. In fact, in his example, van Laar does not rely on the participants' agreeing about the status of the argument. In deciding whether White committed the fallacy of ambiguity in her use of 'euthanasia,' van Laar has both Black and White appealing to available linguistic evidence about the possible meanings of the word. So I'm confused about how immanent dialectics is supposed to provide the identification of the fallacy.

I haven't discussed the decision tree van Laar lays out for responding to an ambiguity criticism. It seems to me to work. It covers all the possibilities and provides the right rulings, so far as I can tell. My only question is about the appeal to linguistic evidence that one of the meanings of an expression is linguistically inadmissible in the current context of utterance. Black accuses White of ambiguity and White's defence is that one of the meanings of the expression in question is linguistically inadmissible in the context, so it cannot be confused with the meaning that is linguistically admissible and hence there is no contextual ambiguity, hence there can be no active ambiguity. I'm just not clear what counts as "linguistic evidence" here.

To sum up, the gist of my critical comments is that there seem to me to be some places in the paper where it would have been helpful for van Laar to have explained or justified more than he did the approach and analysis that he provides. In fairness, however, one can ask only so much of a time- and space-limited paper. On the whole, I think this analysis of ambiguity is illuminating and helpful.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Hans V. Hansen for this version of the old saw.