

In the Light of Logic

Equivocation: The Art of Changing the Rules in the Middle of the Game

With this issue of the Contender we will begin acquainting our readers with the basics of logic. “Logic,” from the Greek word *logos*, is the science of correct reasoning, and provides tools for analyzing the form and content of arguments. Logic addresses the relationship of premises to conclusions, and helps us determine whether our reasoning is straight or crooked. The disciplines of logical reasoning are fast becoming a thing of the past, an artifact of a classical education. Feelings, emotions and rhetoric (persuasive speech) are most often the basis of what passes for “reasoning” today. If we are ever to “*correctly* handle the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), we are going to have to learn to *think* correctly. We trust that this regular feature of *The Contender* will encourage you along these lines.

One of the best ways to understand and apply the basics of logic is by becoming familiar with logical fallacies, that is, examples of faulty reasoning. In each issue we will highlight a particular fallacy that has been used to introduce doctrinal error.

The fallacy of *Equivocation* is using the same word in two or more different ways in the same argument. Words have various usages, or a semantic range, and to switch meanings in the middle of an argument is called equivocation. For example: “The end of a thing is perfection; death is the end of life; hence, death is the perfection of life.” This argument is fallacious because two different senses of the word “end” are confused in it. The word “end” can mean either “goal” or “last event.”

For another example, consider the following argument:

Major premise: Every square is four-sided.

Minor premise: Your jaw is square.

Conclusion: Your jaw is four-sided.¹

The reason the conclusion is invalid is that it distributes an inaccurate meaning of “square” from the two premises to the conclusion. In geometry, a square is a four-sided polygon with equal sides. In popular usage, a “square” jaw means something closer to “angular.” It is crucial in the reasoning process that words be used precisely in the same sense when reasoning from one premise to another to a conclusion. Even a slight equivocation of a term can result in an invalid conclusion and the muddying of an argument.

The following argument is another example of equivocation:

All men are liars.

Jesus Christ was a man.

Therefore Jesus Christ was a liar.

This is a logically sound argument, but reaches a false conclusion because it equivocates the term “man.” The first use of the term “man” refers to man in his sinful, fallen, condition. Jesus Christ, however, was a man in the sense Adam was a “man,” yet without sin. When a key term

upon which the argument hinges is used in two different ways, equivocation is being employed. Equivocation involves the changing of the meaning of a term in the middle of an argument.

At the Council of Chalcedonia in 451 A.D., the orthodox Christian church established the doctrine of the “two natures” of Christ. This doctrine asserts that he was “fully God and fully man.” But to arrive at this formula, these early Christians *equivocated* both terms, “God” and “man.” To see the equivocation in the Chalcedonian formula, we will begin by looking at the basic argument:

Major premise: Jesus Christ is God.

Minor premise: God cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

Conclusion: Jesus Christ was tempted in all ways (Hebrews 4:15 – NIV).

It should be clear that there is something wrong with the argument, because the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The logical conclusion that should be drawn from the premises is that Jesus Christ cannot be tempted. Let’s restate the argument in proper syllogistic form.

Major premise: Jesus Christ is God.

Minor premise: God cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

Conclusion: Jesus Christ cannot be tempted.

But now the logical conclusion of these premises creates a biblical dilemma, because it contradicts Hebrews 4:15, which says that Jesus Christ *was tempted in all ways*. One possible solution is that the term “tempted” is being used in an equivocal sense. We must therefore look at the definition of the word “tempted” and see if it is being distributed throughout the argument in the same sense. We find that the word “tempt” in the minor premise and the conclusion is the same concept, based on the Greek word, *peirazo* (to pierce or cut). To tempt is to present an opportunity to sin that actually penetrates the heart as a real possibility. God cannot be tempted because He is absolutely holy and incapable of being “pierced” with even the remotest possibility of sinning against His own nature and ethical standards.

The only other possibility is that the term “God” is being equivocated:

Major premise: Jesus Christ is God [“God the Son” who became a human being while retaining his divine nature].

Minor premise: God [the Father] cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

Conclusion: Jesus Christ was not tempted in his divine nature, but he was tempted in his human nature because he became a “man” with a “human nature.”

In the major premise, “God” is used in the sense of divine, deity, sharing the attributes of God, etc. In the minor premise, “God” refers to the Creator and the Father of Jesus Christ. This standard orthodox argument also equivocates the term “man.” Jesus Christ is not a *true* man in this argument, because “a man” does not have “a divine nature” as he had, but only has a “human nature.” Therefore to stretch the meaning of “man” to include a person who has the essence of both man and God is possible only through equivocating the term “man.”

Consider the following argument, another example of the way Trinitarians have equivocated the term “man:”

Major premise: Jesus Christ is a man (I Timothy 2:5, Acts 2:22).

Minor premise: God is not a man (Numbers 23:19).

Conclusion: Jesus Christ is God.

The word “man” does not have the same meaning in both premises. In the first case, “man” is only descriptive of the part of his being that was human. It is argued that he was a man and God at the same time – a “God-man.” So anything that is asserted about Jesus being a “man” is qualified by saying that he was also “God.” In equivocating the terms “man” and “God,” Trinitarians create a separate category of being for Jesus Christ and remove him from the normal and customary meaning of the terms as understood both biblically and experientially. And what is asserted about Jesus Christ could not be asserted about Adam, who was truly the archetypal “Man.” Unless Jesus Christ’s nature is completely comparable to Adam’s before his fall, he cannot properly and without equivocation be categorized as a “man.” 100% man and 100% God is 200% illogical equivocation.

ⁱ Cited from Kreyche, Robert J. *Logic for Undergraduates*
N.Y. Holt, Rinehart Winston 1961 p. 192.