


Exact Definition Fallacy: A New Logical Fallacy

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Abstract

It is certain to happen in every debate that one of the debaters will ask for the definition of a certain word from the other debater, not in order to know what the other debater meant, but in order to make the other debater stuck to show their inability to give the exact definition from a source that the one who asked for it considers an authority to give the definition. In Speakers Corner in the United Kingdom, Muslim debaters face this question a lot as a tactic by Christians, atheists, Jews, etc. Asking for a definition is not a way to allow all sides of the debate to know what is meant by stating a specific word. It is more used in order to show that the other side of the debate could not give the definition as a sign of ignorance, which is a fallacy. It becomes a clear fallacy when one debater keeps asking to define every word.

Keywords: Logical Fallacy, Definition, Debate, Argument, Philosophy.

Introduction

There is a rule in debates: the first proposition gets to define the motion and the debated topic must be defined in order to clarify the concepts behind the terms. The issue is that defining terms is being misused by debaters, not to understand what this word means but to make the other side of the debate stuck by asking them to define some or all words. No debater is expected to be a walking dictionary. Definitions themselves differ from one dictionary to another. If the debater provides a reasonable personal definition, then the other debater will not accept it, but he or she will ask for a dictionary definition or an organization's definition. A fallacy is the use of invalid or faulty reasoning to construct an argument. The wrong reasoning in this fallacy is based on three fallacies: appeal to authority, exact word fallacy, and begging the question (circular reasoning by assuming the conclusion in the question). Let's start from the end. Begging the question is done here by asking to define the word, assuming ignorance of the debater by not giving the same definition that the other debater accepts. The other debater will accept a specific definition from a specific source, which will be an appeal to authority. The debater will expect specific words in the answer or the definition to be wrong, which is known as an exact word fallacy [1]. The exact word fallacy will be if

someone says, Are you single? Then I replay: Yes. Then the same person asks me, Are you single? Then I answer: Yes, I told you. The person replies that you did not say I'm single [1]. This would be an exact word fallacy [1].

The solution

Let's say you gave a definition. Then, if one debater says, "I'm not interested in your definition," then the conditions for making a definition must be: 1) defining the word without using the same word in the definition; 2) do not use a single synonym word; 3) more than one word; 4) give a reasonable acceptable definition by all parties; 5) not agreeing on one definition between two parties will require the intervention of another non-partisan party to choose which definition is more precise; 6) to be concise and not too complicated; and 7) to be used as a principle in the debate. For example, consciousness is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the state of being able to use your senses and mental powers to understand what is happening." The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines consciousness as "the state of being characterized by sensation, emotion, volition, and thought." It is clear that dictionaries have discrepancies among them, so using one while they do not agree on one definition will be illogical. They describe words in a subjective way, not objectively. So, there's no point in using them. They might be

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helpful, but they are not a source of authority. If someone asked “define religion?” and another one responded “having a relation or connection with God,” that would be an acceptable definition. The ultimate definition can be achieved by gathering many definitions and summing them up into one inclusive definition of all aspects. Muslim debaters must be aware of this fallacy and know how to deal with non-Muslim debaters. Muslim debaters should call out this fallacy when they see it as “the exact definition fallacy”.

References

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