2.4: Cognitive and Emotive Meaning - Abortion and Capital Punishment

Types of Meanings

Cognitive meaning is when words are used to convey information and emotive meaning is when words are used to convey your own beliefs (your emotions). These relate back to the discussion of subjective and objective claims back in Chapter 2, but they are not the same thing. For example, you might want to say,

Coconut is disgusting.

This is a claim phrased as an **objective claim** (it’s declarative and is subject to being true or false) and has cognitive meaning since it is communicating information. When someone says this, what they actually mean is something like this,

I believe that coconut is disgusting.

This claim is now phrased as a **subjective claim** with emotive meaning since the truth value of it is based upon the reality of whether or not I actually believe this and it is conveying my own feelings on the topic. Additionally, it is cognitive because it is conveying information. Every single emotive statement will also be cognitive because anything that is said conveys at least a minimal amount of information. The issue then is when something also (or only) conveys emotive meaning.

Why does this matter? Because if we’re using a lot of emotive meaning, we might be muddling up the facts and the importance of what we’re trying to say. For example, if I say, “those people are mean jerks,” I might not be as convincing as if I say, “those people were just bullying that person in a wheelchair, which is not a nice thing to do.” The hope is that we avoid emotive meaning as much as we can, but it’s unavoidable in any argument: by taking a side and defending it,
you will be using your own beliefs and emotions. That’s just fine, but your goal should be to be as impartial and fair in
your claims as you can be, remembering to defend each and every belief you have as much as is necessary to convince
your reader that your viewpoint is justified.

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**Framing Language**

One of the ways that your intellectual environment and your world view expresses itself is in the use of framing
language. These are the words, phrases, metaphors, symbols, definitions, grammatical structures, questions, and so on
which we use to think and speak of things in a certain way. We frame things by describing or defining them with certain
interpretations in mind. We also frame things by the way we place emphasis on certain words and not on others. And we
frame things by interpreting and responding selectively to things said by others. As an example, think of some of the
ways that people speak about their friendships and relationships. We say things like “We connected”, “Let’s hook up”,
“They’re attached to each other”, and “They separated”. We sometimes speak of getting married as “getting hitched”.
These phrases borrow from the vocabulary of machine functions. And to use them is to place human relations within the
frame of machine functions. Now this might be a very useful way to talk about relationships, and if so, then it is not so
bad. But if for some reason you need to think or speak of a relationship differently, then you may need to invent a new
framing language with which to talk about it. And if this is the only framing language you’ve ever used to talk about
relationships, it might be extremely difficult for you to think about relationships any other way. As a thought experiment,
see if you can invent a framing language for your friendships and relationships based on something else. Try using a
framing language based on cooking, or travel, or music, or house building, as examples. Here’s another example of the
use of framing language. Consider the following two statements:

"In the year 1605, Guy Fawkes attempted to start a people’s revolution against corruption, inherited privilege, and social
injustice in the British government."

"In the year 1605, Guy Fawkes planned a terrorist attack against a group of Protestant politicians, in an attempt to install
a Catholic theocracy in Britain."

Both of these statements, taken as statements of fact, are true. But they are both framed very differently. In the first
statement, Fawkes is portrayed as a courageous political activist. In the second, he is framed (!) as a dangerous
religious fanatic. And because of the different frames, they lead the reader to understand and interpret the man’s life and
purposes very differently. This, in turn, leads the reader to draw different conclusions. In other situations, the use of
framing language can have serious economic or political consequences. Consider, as an example, the national debate
that took place in the United States over the Affordable Health Care Act of 2009. The very name of the legislation itself
framed the discussion in the realm of market economics: the word ‘affordable’ already suggests that the issue has to do
with money. And most people who participated in that national debate, including supporters and opponents and
everything in between, spoke of health care as if it is a kind of market commodity, which can be bought or sold for a
price. The debate thus became primarily a matter of questions like who will pay for it (the state? individuals? insurance
companies?), and whether the price is fair. But there are other ways to talk about health care besides the language of
economics. Some people frame health care as a human right. Some frame it as a form of organized human compassion,
and some as a religious duty. But once the debate had been framed in the language of market economics, these other
ways of thinking about health care were mostly excluded from the debate itself. As noted earlier, it’s probably not
possible to speak about anything without framing it one way or another. But your use of framing language can limit or restrict the way things can be thought of and spoken about. They can even prevent certain ways of thinking and speaking. And when two or more people conversing with each other frame their topic differently, some unnecessary conflict can result, just as if they were starting from different premises or presupposing different world views. So it can be important to monitor one’s own words, and know what frame you are using, and whether that frame is assisting or limiting your ability to think and speak critically about a particular issue. It can also be important to listen carefully to the framing language used by others, especially if a difference between their framing language and yours is creating problems. And speaking of problems: this leads us to the point where the process of critical thinking begins.

### Problems

Usually, logic and critical thinking skills are invoked in response to a need. And often, this need takes the form of a problem which can’t be solved until you gather some kind of information. Sometimes the problem is practical: that is, it has to do with a specific situation in your everyday world.

For example:

- Perhaps you have an unusual illness and you want to recover as soon as possible.
- Perhaps you are an engineer and your client wants you to build something you’ve never built before.
- Perhaps you just want to keep cool on a very hot day and your house doesn’t have an air conditioner.

The problem could also be theoretical: in that case, it has to do with a more general issue which impacts your whole life altogether, but perhaps not any single separate part of it in particular. Religious and philosophical questions tend to be theoretical in this sense. For example:

- You might have a decision to make which will change the direction of your life irreversibly.
- You might want to make up your mind about whether God exists.
- You might be mourning the death of a beloved friend.
- You might be contemplating whether there is special meaning in a recent unusual dream.
- You might be a parent and you are considering the best way to raise your children.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers described a special kind of problem, which he thought was the origin of philosophical thinking. He called this kind of problem a **Grenzsituationen**, or a “limit situation”.

Limit situations are moments, usually accompanied by experiences of dread, guilt or acute anxiety, in which the human mind confronts the restrictions and pathological narrowness of its existing forms, and allows itself to abandon the securities of its limitedness, and so to enter new realm of self-consciousness. (Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy, online edition, entry on Karl Jaspers.)

In other words, a limit situation is a situation in which you meet something in the world that is unexpected and surprising. It is a situation that more or less forces you to acknowledge that your way of thinking about the world so far has been very limited, and that you have to find new ways to think about things in order to solve your problems and move forward with your life. This acknowledgement, according to Jaspers, produces anxiety and dread. But it also opens the way to new and (hopefully!) better ways of thinking about things. In general, a limit situation appears when something happens...
to you in your life that you have never experienced before, or which you have experienced very rarely. It might be a situation in which a longstanding belief you have held up until now suddenly shows itself to have no supporting evidence, or that the consequences of acting upon it turn out very differently than expected. You may encounter a person from a faraway culture whose beliefs are very different from yours, but whom you must regularly work with at your job, or around your neighbourhood. You may experience a crisis event in which you are at risk of death. A limit situation doesn’t have to be the sort of experience that provokes a nervous breakdown or a crisis of faith, nor does it have to be a matter of life and death. But it does tend to be the type of situation in which your usual and regular habits of thinking just can’t help you. It can also be a situation in which you have to make a decision of some kind, which doesn’t necessarily require you to change your beliefs, but which you know will change your life in a non-trivial way.

Observation

Thus far, we have noted the kinds problems that tend to get thinking started, and the background in which thinking takes place. Now we can get on to studying thinking itself. In the general introduction, I wrote that clear critical thinking involves a process. The first stage of that process is observation. When observing your problem, and the situation in which it appears, try to be as objective as possible. Being objective, here, means being without influence from personal feelings, interests, biases, or expectations, as much as possible. It means observing the situation as an uninvolved and disinterested third-person observer would see it. (By ‘disinterested’ here, I mean a person who is curious about the situation but who has no personal stake in what is happening; someone who is neither benefitted nor harmed as the situation develops.) Although it might be impossible to be totally, completely, and absolutely objective, still it certainly is possible to be objective enough to understand a situation as clearly and as completely as needed in order to make a good decision. When you are having a debate with someone it is often very easy, and tempting, to simply accuse your opponent of being biased, and therefore in no position to understand something properly or make decisions. If someone is truly biased about a certain topic, it is rational to doubt what someone says about that topic. But having grounds for reasonable doubt is not the same as having evidence that a proposition is false. Moreover, having an opinion, or a critical judgment about something, or a world view, is not the same as having a bias. Let us define a bias here as the holding of a belief or a judgment about something even after evidence of the weakness or the faultiness of that judgment has been presented. We will see more about this when we discuss Value Programs. For now, just consider the various ways in which we can eliminate bias from one’s observations as much as possible. Here are a few examples:

- Take stock of how clearly you can see or hear what is going on. Is something obstructing your vision? Is it too bright, or too dark? Are there other noises nearby which make it hard for you to hear what someone is saying?
- Describe your situation in words, and as much as possible use value-neutral words in your description. Make no statement in your description about whether what is happening is good or bad, for you or for anyone else. Simply state as clearly as possible what is happening. If you cannot put your situation into words, then you will almost certainly have a much harder time understanding it objectively, and reasoning about it.
- Describe, also, how your situation makes you feel. Is the circumstance making you feel angry, sad, elated, fearful, disgusted, indignant, or worried? Has someone said something that challenges your world view? Your own emotional responses to the situation is part of what is ‘happening’. And these too can be described in words so that we can reason about them later.
- Also, observe your instincts and intuitions. Are you feeling a ‘pull’, so to speak, to do something or not do something in response to the situation? Are you already calculating or predicting what is likely to happen next? Put these into words as well.
- Using numbers can often help make the judgment more objective. Take note of anything in the situation that can be
counted, or measured mathematically: times, dates, distances, heights, shapes, angles, sizes, monetary values, computer bytes (kilobytes, megabytes, etc.), and so on.

- Take note of where your attention seems to be going. Is anything striking you as especially interesting or unusual or unexpected?
- If your problem is related to some practical purpose, take note of everything you need to know in order to fulfill that purpose. For instance, if your purpose is to operate some heavy machinery, and your problem is that you’ve never used that machine before, take note of the condition of the safety equipment, and the signs of wear and tear on the machine itself, and who will be acting as your “spotter”, and so on.
- If other people are also observing the situation with you, consult with them. Share your description of the situation with them, and ask them to share their description with you. Find out if you can see what they are seeing, and show them what you are seeing. Also, try to look for the things that they might be missing.

Separating your observations from your judgments and opinions can often be difficult. But the more serious the problem, the more important it can be to observe something non-judgmentally, before coming to a decision. With that in mind, here’s a short exercise: which of the following are observations, and which are judgments? Or, are some of them a bit of both?

- That city bus has too many people on it.
- The letter was delivered to my door by the postman at 10:30 am.
- The two of them were standing so close to each other that they must be lovers.
- The clothes she wore suggested she probably came from a very rich family.
- The kitchen counter looked like it had been recently cleaned.
- He was swearing like a sailor.
- The old television was too heavy for him to carry.
- There’s too much noise coming from your room, and it’s driving me crazy!
- The latest James Bond film was a lot of fun.
- The latest James Bond film earned more than $80 million in its first week.
- I hate computers!
- The guy who delivered the pizza pissed me off because he was late.

Two case studies: Abortion and Capital Punishment

We can apply all of these uses of language in two controversial topics: abortion and capital punishment. These two topics are full of claims and meanings of all kinds. Things to look at are:

- What type of language is used?
- How are terms defined?
- Which statements are more emotive and more cognitive?
- Which claims are subjective and which are objective?

There will be a lot more to keep in mind, but the next time you see an argument about one of these, consider all these things when you weigh the strength of the argument. I have four brief arguments below (one on each side of each of...
these arguments), so assess these for flaws because of the ways the “facts” and beliefs are being presented.

Argument One:

“Abortion is wrong because it’s murder. You are killing a tiny human being, and that’s just bad. It’s disgusting how they cut up the little person and suck them out of the womb. It’s evil because the bible says so, too.”

Argument Two:

“Abortion needs to be an option for every woman to have. It’s her body and she can do with it whatever she wants. I would hate it if someone told me what to do with my own body, so no one has the right to say people can’t get abortions.”

Argument Three:

“Capital punishment is wrong because it makes us as bad as the murderer. Just because they killed someone doesn’t mean we have to stoop to their level. It’s also cruel and no one should have to be murdered in the ways that they are, especially by the government. We should be ashamed of the practice.”

Argument Four:

“Capital punishment is the only fair punishment for murder. If someone kills another person, then they need to be killed, too. If you owe someone money, we make you pay it back. If I were murdered, I would want that person to die, too. Anything else is too lenient.”