The Concept of Meaninglessness
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the category mistake argument

So far, I have argued that two widely used criteria of meaninglessness, the operationalist and verificationist criteria, are unreliable: neither can be used to prove that a statement is meaningless. I shall now discuss a third kind of criterion—a “type” or “category” criterion, ¹ employed in what I shall call the “category mistake argument.”

¹ The terms “type” and “category” will be used interchangeably. Moreover, I shall speak of statements rather than sentences as being meaningless. In chapter IV I shall defend the claim, which many philosophers would find controversial, that statements can be meaningless.
cable of subjects belonging to more than one type, Whitehead and Russell took that as proof that the term was ambiguous.

The category mistake argument, then, is used in either of two ways. It is used to demonstrate that a statement is meaningless and to prove that a term is ambiguous.

In using the argument to demonstrate that a statement is meaningless, a philosopher usually (although not always) begins by stating that two terms, say X and Y, belong to different logical types. He then concludes that a third term, Z, cannot (significantly) be predicated of both terms, although it may be predicatable of one. A critic of the ontological argument, for example, might argue that the terms “proposition” and “being” belong to different types; hence, the term “necessary” cannot be predicated of both of them. Since it is obviously correct to speak of necessary propositions, it must be meaningless to speak of a necessary being.

Gilbert Ryle, who has probably done more than anyone else to popularize the category mistake argument, uses the argument to show that minds cannot “exist” in the same sense that bodies “exist.” To say that both minds and bodies exist, according to Ryle, is to utter nonsense. More recently, Thomas Szasz, who has been influenced by Ryle, has used the argument in a similar fashion to show that mental illness is a “myth.” Szasz is a psychiatrist who has been influential in the movement to replace what is sometimes known as the “disease” or “medical” model of mental illness with a “psychological” model. Dr. Szasz writes as follows:

I submit that mental illness is a myth. Bodies are physical objects; minds whatever they may be, are not physical objects. Accordingly, mental diseases (such as depression or schizophrenia) cannot exist in the sense in which bodily diseases (such as broken bones or ulcerated skins) exist.

My disbelief in mental illness does not mean that I reject any facts of human behavior. ‘A myth,’ says the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle, ‘is not a fairy story. It is the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idiom belonging to another. To explode a myth is accordingly not to deny facts, but to reallocate them.’ To say that mental illness is a myth is

2 For the details of Ryle’s argument, see his Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949), p. 16.
therefore not to deny facts (such as sadness or fear) but to reallocate them (from the category of mental illness to the category of personal conduct).³

Szasz does not explicitly use the terms “meaningless” or “absurd,” but his use of the term “cannot” and his reference to Ryle indicate that he is arguing that the term “mind” does not belong to the same type as “body.” Diseases of the body (such as ulcerated skins) obviously do exist; therefore, diseases of the mind (such as schizophrenia) cannot exist. That is, it is absurd or meaningless to say, using “exist” in the sense in which bodily diseases exist, that mental illness exists. Mental illness, therefore, is a “myth.”

As I noted earlier, the category mistake argument is used to prove ambiguity as well as nonsense. In this second use, the first step of the argument is usually the same: two terms, X and Y, are said to belong to different types. From this, it is concluded that a third term, Z, must be ambiguous, since it is predicable of both X and Y. Thus, someone might argue that “odd” must be ambiguous, since it can be predicated (significantly) of such hetero-typical terms as “number” and “person.” This would, however, be a relatively uninteresting application of the argument. Of more interest and importance is the use of the argument to demonstrate, for instance, that “exist” is ambiguous.⁴

P. F. Strawson, in an interesting employment of the argument, suggests that what he calls “M Predicates” (material object predicates, such as “weighs 10 stone” and “is in the drawing room”) are ambiguous because they apply to two different types of things: material objects and persons. He writes:

Indeed, if we want to locate type-ambiguity somewhere, we would do better to locate it in certain predicates like ‘is in the drawing room,’ ‘was hit

by a stone,' etc. and say they mean one thing when applied to material objects and another when applied to persons.  

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I shall now consider the soundness of the category mistake argument. In using it, a philosopher moves from the assumption that two terms, X and Y, are of different types to one of two conclusions: that predicking some third term, Z, of both X and Y is nonsense or that Z is ambiguous. What justifies this movement? Does it follow, for example, that "Some numbers are odd" is nonsense, or that "odd" is being used in a sense different from its sense in "Some persons are odd," merely because "number" and "person" belong to different types? Clearly it does not follow without the aid of at least one additional assumption: that terms of different types cannot share predicates (in the same sense). If it were possible for hetero-typical terms to share predicates (in the same sense), then it might be possible for "odd" to be predicable, both significantly and univocally, of "person" and "number," even if these latter two terms were distinct in type. Without at least the implicit use of this additional assumption, therefore, neither the conclusion concerning ambiguity, nor the conclusion concerning nonsense, will follow. Ryle, in fact, makes this assumption explicit in a passage in which he tries to show that "thinking" and "doing" are of the same type. He writes:

It also helps to upset the assumed type-difference between thinking and doing, since only subjects belonging to the same type can share predicates. But thinking and doing do share lots of predicates, such as 'clever,' 'stupid,' 'careful,' 'strenuous,' 'attentive,' etc. (Italics added)

Suppose, then, that we follow Ryle here and assume that different types cannot share predicates. Can we now reach either of the conclu-

5 P. F. Strawson, Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 101. Strawson, it should be noted, may not wish to argue that M-predicates are ambiguous. He does preface his comment with the phrase "... if we want to locate type-ambiguity somewhere." He may not, in fact, wish to locate type-ambiguity anywhere.

sions we want? Again, we cannot. If we suppose that X and Y are of different types, it still does not follow that if “X is Z” is significant, then “Y is Z” is nonsense—nor does it follow that Z is ambiguous. All that does follow, even given Ryle’s assumption, is that either “Y is Z” is nonsense, or Z is ambiguous. Neither conclusion follows separately. Precisely because the category mistake argument is used in attempts to demonstrate both nonsense and ambiguity, it cannot be successfully used to demonstrate either alone, except in one way. It may at least be concluded, given Ryle’s assumption, that predicking Z of X and Y together leads to nonsense. Ryle apparently recognizes this when he concludes only that “Minds and bodies exist” is nonsense; he does not insist that “Minds exist,” or “Bodies exist,” taken as separate statements are absurd (“exist,” of course, would have to be used in a different sense in each statement).

In the context of other philosophic disputes, Ryle’s maneuver would be of little help. The defender of the ontological argument, for example, might very well concede that “necessary” cannot be significantly predicated of “being” and “proposition” together, but all he need insist is that taken separately the predications are significant. And he can do that. All that can be proven using the category mistake argument is that either “necessary” is used in a nonpropositional sense in the sentence “God’s existence is necessary,” or the statement is absurd. Such a conclusion can easily be accepted by the theist; he need merely agree that “necessary” is being used in a nonpropositional sense when predicated of “God” (or “being”).

So, too, an advocate of the “disease” model of psychopathology might agree that mental disease cannot exist in the same sense that physical diseases exist. He might reply, however, that just as minds exist in a different sense from that in which bodies exist, mental diseases exist in a different sense from that in which physical diseases exist. That is not to say that mental diseases do not exist at all (in any sense).

The point, then, is that in using the category mistake argument we can conclude at most that one of two defects is present: either a term is ambiguous, or a statement is absurd. To conclude further that one defect rather than the other is present, a supplementary argument must be supplied. I shall return to this objection later, but another objection needs to be made first.
So far, I have accepted Ryle’s assumption that terms of different types cannot share predicates (in the same sense). But is the assumption true? If it is false, then the category mistake argument cannot be used even to demonstrate the disjunction: that either a certain term is ambiguous, or a certain statement is meaningless. If terms of different types can share predicates, then we can agree, for example, that “mind” and “body” belong to different types and nevertheless reject the conclusion that either “exists” is ambiguous, or “Minds exist” is nonsense. It is crucial for the soundness of the category mistake argument, then, that Ryle’s assumption be true. Yet, it seems to me to be clearly untrue. Consider the following cases:

1. A term such as “interesting,” for example, can be predicated of many different types of things. For instance, parades, paradoxes, and people can all be said to be interesting.

2. A number of different kinds of things can be said to be “dark”—such as soaps, skies, and sheep.

3. So, too, predicates of more philosophic interest can be shared by subjects of different types. Take, for example, “observation” and “description.” Events and material objects (such as automobiles and automobile accidents) can both be “observed.” They can also be “described.”

4. Finally, to refer back to Strawson’s argument, “persons” and “material objects” can also share predicates. Gilbert Ryle and a gatepost, for instance, can both be said to “weigh 10 stone”; so, too, both can be “six feet tall.”

Either of two kinds of replies might be made to the above cases.

First, it might be argued that because the subjects cited are not really of different types, Ryle’s assumption is not actually violated. In reply, however, I would claim that if we are to make type distinctions at all, then, on intuitive grounds, at least some of these terms (such as “paradoxes” and “parades,” or “skies” and “sheep”) surely seem to belong to different types. For the present, I shall merely assume that at least some of the subject-terms (within a single group) belong to different types. I shall justify this assumption later.

Second, it might be objected that although the above subjects do belong to different types, the predicates employed are ambiguous; hence, in the cases cited, hetero-typical subjects are not really sharing the same
predicates. Sheep and skies are dark, for example—but in different senses. I doubt that this objection could be sustained in even one of the above cases. Since I only need a single counter-instance to refute Ryle's general assumption, I shall confine my discussion, at least for the moment, to the case of M-predicates.

Strawson, it should be pointed out, does not argue that we must say that M-predicates are ambiguous. He merely says that we should "if we want to locate type-ambiguity somewhere." That he should recommend this at all, however, suggests that he thinks it plausible to assume that terms of different types cannot share predicates. Apart from this assumption, there is nothing in his argument concerning persons that would imply that M-predicates are ambiguous. If his argument did imply that, we would have a good reason for rejecting it. So, too, if we can retain the assumption that hetero-typical terms cannot share predicates only by saying that M-predicates are ambiguous when predicated of persons and physical objects, then we shall have a good reason to renounce this assumption concerning hetero-typical predication. Consider what is involved in accepting Strawson's suggestion.

Suppose, for example, that we examine the M-predicate "is six feet tall." We might say that Gilbert Ryle (a person) is six feet tall and that a gatepost (a physical object) is six feet tall. Even if each assertion is true, it will still not be true that Gilbert Ryle and the gatepost are of the same height, for "six feet tall" will have a different sense in each case. In fact, it will now be nonsensical to say that they are of the same height, for the expression "are of the same height" is itself an M-predicate which cannot be significantly predicated (in the same sense) of both persons and material objects. It might be thought that we could show that Ryle and the gatepost are of the same height by showing that they are equal in height to a third item, say a measuring rod. If we accept Strawson's suggestion, however, we will have to conclude that it is absurd to say "We have shown Ryle and the measuring rod to be of the same height," for a measuring rod is itself a physical object and hence cannot share the predicate "is of the same height" with Gilbert Ryle, a person. Nor will the absurdities end here. For instance, if Gilbert Ryle weighs 10 stone and the gatepost weighs 10 stone, they will not be of the same weight. "Weighs 10 stone" will mean
something different in each case. And, again, it will be absurd to predicate “is of the same weight” of both of them.

Such apparent absurdities could be multiplied; but there is little need to do so. The single conclusion that “weighs 10 stone” must be ambiguous when predicated of “person” and “material objects” is by itself a reductio ad absurdum of the belief that subjects of different types cannot share predicates.

Let me now re-state the two objections I have made:

1. If Ryle’s assumption that terms of different types cannot share predicates in the same sense were true, this assumption, and the premise that X and Y are of different types, would still not warrant the conclusion that “if ‘X is Z’ is significant, then ‘Y is Z’ is absurd.” Nor would it warrant the conclusion that “Z is ambiguous.” What might be established, if Ryle’s assumption were true, is that either absurdity or ambiguity is present; but to show that one rather than the other disorder is present, an additional argument would be required.

2. Ryle’s assumption, apart from which the entire argument is invalid, is false. It is false to say that terms of different types cannot share predicates in the same sense.

My first objection, even if it is sound, would not in itself show that the category mistake argument is of no possible use. I shall explain why in a moment. What the objection does show is that, as the category mistake argument is actually used, it is unsound. Take, for example, the following case. In discussing John Dewey’s philosophy of language, Max Black writes:

It seems to me that Dewey’s theory of meaning is marred by two large mistakes. First, it is disconcerting to realize, as one follows his discussions, that he treats the meanings of words and the meanings of sentences as if the two belonged to the same logical category. . . . To suppose that the same formula of ‘the total consequent system of social behavior’ (EN191) applies equally to a statement and to a word is to overlook, in a way that is bound to lead to trouble, the radical differences in logical type between the
two. Obviously, all sorts of assertions that can be made of the one generate nonsense when made of the other: it is absurd to speak of verifying or refuting a word—or, for that matter, of its social consequences.\(^7\)

Black seems to be arguing that Dewey was speaking nonsensically—that is, he was committing a type mistake—when he spoke of words, as well as statements, as having social consequences. A statement—which is the kind of thing that can have social consequences—is not the same type of thing as a word, as is shown by the fact that some assertions about statements become nonsensical when they are made about words. If Black is arguing from the difference of types to the conclusion that Dewey's assertion is nonsense, then his argument is unsound, based on my first objection. (Although I do concede that I may be misinterpreting Black here.) Even granting that "statement" and "word" belong to different types—and conceding that this prohibits them from sharing predicates (in the same sense)—all that follows is either that "social consequences" is ambiguous, or that "Words have social consequences" is absurd. That Dewey was speaking absurdly—does not follow by itself, however, and Dewey could always reject Black's conclusion by admitting that he was using the phrase "social consequences" in two distinct senses. It is wrong, then, to use the category mistake argument (without the aid of any additional premises) to conclude that some statement is absurd or to conclude that some term is ambiguous. My first objection, I believe, demonstrates that.

What the objection does not demonstrate is that the argument is of no use at all. In some philosophical disputes, it may be quite useful to be able to conclude with the disjunction: either ambiguity or nonsense. Consider Black's discussion once more. Black seemed to be arguing that Dewey was speaking nonsensically in saying that words have social consequences; as I pointed out, the conclusion fails to follow from Black's premises. To be fair, however, Black seems to be well aware of this for he hedges his conclusion in the same paragraph. He goes on:

Hence, any account of meaning that is presented as applying to statements and their components is bound to be at least systematically

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ambiguous. Recognition of the relevant differences in type would have led Dewey to see that he was using such key words as 'idea' in at least two different senses.8

Black seems aware, then, that Dewey could have replied that, instead of uttering nonsense, he was using "social consequences" in two senses. Black could always counter in turn, however, that at least an unclarity in Dewey's thought has been exposed, for Dewey failed to indicate his original intention. Moreover, I think that an even stronger counter-reply could be made by Black, and I assume that this stronger reply is the one that he would make. He might ask Dewey to show that "social consequences" has two senses, since it is not obvious that it does. I think it can be plausibly argued that—in any case where it is not self-evident that a term is ambiguous—ambiguity has to be proved and not merely assumed. Suppose I were to claim, for example, that only events, and not physical objects or persons, could be "causes"—that Hume, for example, was making a mistake when he spoke of billiard balls (physical objects) as being causes. You might reply here that my claim is false, pointing out that your brother, for example, was the cause of your mother's grief. This reply by itself, however, might not be sufficient, for while conceding that your brother was a cause of your mother's grief, I could argue that this is a different sense of "cause." The point is, however, that I would have to argue that "cause" is used in two senses. I could, of course, merely stipulate that I wish to use "cause" in two different senses when referring to people or physical objects and when referring to events. It would be irrelevant, however, to my original claim that only events can be causes and that Hume was guilty of a mistake in implying otherwise. I shall assume, then, that except where it is self-evident that a term is being used, or could be used, in two senses, ambiguity has to be proved and not merely assumed.

In order to answer Black, therefore, Dewey would have to show that "social consequences" does have two senses. So, too, it would not be enough for the defender of the ontological argument to say, as I said earlier, that "necessary" is used in two senses when predicated of "being"

8 Ibid., p. 519.
and "statement." He would also have to show that "necessary" does, in fact, have this second sense.

I conclude, then, that my first objection alone is not decisive in showing that the category mistake argument is of no possible use, even though it does show that as the argument is actually used (at least in some cases), it is unsound. It is unsound when the conclusion is either that ambiguity is present or that nonsense is present. My first objection is not decisive, however, because it allows that a different conclusion may be reached—namely, the disjunction: either ambiguity or nonsense. To be able to prove this disjunctive conclusion is often of considerable philosophic interest in itself.

If my first objection is not decisive alone, it does help to strengthen the second objection, as I shall shortly demonstrate. First, however, I should make clear that it is not a weakness of the second objection to assume, as I did initially, that at least some of the pairs of terms that I mentioned fall into different types. That assumption seems obviously true, unless we refuse to draw type-distinctions at all. Even if it is not, the type-differences can be demonstrated by appealing to Ryle's definition of "type-difference." Consider the terms "automobile" and "automobile accident." We can say that "An automobile is parked in the garage." If we replace "automobile" with "automobile accident," however, we obtain the nonsensical result: "An automobile accident is parked in the garage." Since the first statement becomes nonsensical when "automobile" is replaced by "automobile accident," then, according to Ryle's definition, the two terms belong to different types. In the same way we can show that "person" and "gatepost" belong to different types. If we substitute the second for the first in "This person suffers from feelings of remorse," the

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9 Ryle defines "type-difference" such that two expressions are of different types if substituting one for the other turns a significant statement into a nonsensical one. See his "Categories," in Logic and Language, ed. Anthony Flew (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961).
result is the obviously absurd statement, "This gatepost suffers from feelings of remorse."

It might be objected that the above statements are not obviously nonsensical because no statement is obviously nonsensical. If we say that, however, we have no way of showing that any two terms are of different types (unless, of course, we have some additional criterion of nonsense or meaninglessness—some criterion in addition to a type criterion—and I am assuming here that we do not). If it is argued that we have no need for a way to determine type-differences because we can simply see that two terms are type-distinct, I would reply as follows. If it is obvious that "mind" and "body," "Saturday" and "John," and "statement" and "word" belong to different types, it is equally obvious—no more, no less—that "person" and "gatepost" and "automobile" and "automobile accident" also belong to different types. So, too, it might be argued that although some statements are obviously nonsensical, the examples that I have cited are not. If "Saturday is in bed" (Ryle) and "Words are verifiable" (Black) are obviously nonsensical, then the statements I have cited—"An automobile accident is parked in the garage" and "The gatepost is suffering from feelings of remorse"—are also obviously nonsensical. Moreover, even if these statements were not obviously nonsensical, other statements could be used in their place to demonstrate the differences in type. Finally, it would not help Ryle's assumption very much even if all of the subject-terms (in each group) were of the same type. At least one of the predicate-terms I used (and there are others) can be predicated of any subject whatsoever. Anything whatsoever can be significantly said to be "interesting," although, of course, not everything is interesting. Hence, almost every subject-term in the language will belong to the same category and, therefore, the category mistake argument will be almost useless, or Ryle's assumption will be false. I conclude, then, that it is safe to claim that at least some of the pairs of terms I mentioned belong to different types.

The durability of my second objection, therefore, depends upon the strength of my claim that the predicates I used were univocal. Even granting that at least some of the subject-terms belong to different types, I would not have shown that Ryle's assumption is false if the predicate-terms I used were being predicated ambiguously. Ryle's assumption merely states
that terms of different types cannot share predicates *in the same sense*. To show that automobiles and automobile accidents can be "observed" in different senses of "observe" would not be incompatible with Ryle's assumption. Nor would Ryle deny, for example, that pretty girls and logical paradoxes are "interesting," if they were "interesting" in different senses. Are the predicates I used, therefore, ambiguous? If they are, my second objection fails; if not, this objection shows that Ryle's assumption is false and, consequently, that the category mistake argument is unsound.

I have already argued that at least one of the predicates I used, namely, "weighs 10 stone," is *not* ambiguous, for to say that it is ambiguous, I argued, leads to conclusions which seem to be absurd. It seems to be absurd (not meaningless, but obviously false) to say that if Gilbert Ryle weighs 10 stone and a gatepost weighs 10 stone, then they are not of the same weight. Although this certainly *seems* to be absurd, perhaps it is not. Perhaps Ryle or Strawson, or some other philosopher who wishes to defend the use of the category mistake argument, would refuse to admit that such a conclusion is absurd because, they might argue, we have failed to realize that the predicate "weighs 10 stone" is actually used in different senses. If Ryle, or anyone else, were to reply in this manner, I would need to argue further. But here my first objection serves to support the second, for what my first objection brings out is that the category mistake argument is useful (if it is sound) only if it is useful to be able to prove the disjunctive conclusion: either absurdity or ambiguity. It is useful to be able to prove a conclusion of this kind precisely because ambiguity must be proved and not merely assumed (except, of course, where its presence is obvious). The same reasoning applies here. Thus, even if I have failed to prove that "weighs 10 stone" is *not* ambiguous, it still remains to be proved that it *is* ambiguous. Could that be proved? I have already given a reason for thinking it could not, but let us try.

How, in general, can we prove that a predicate is ambiguous? One way that might suggest itself is the following. Any term, C, is ambiguous if it is significantly predicable of two other terms, A and B, which are of
different logical types. As I pointed out earlier, a rule of this kind has often been appealed to in past attempts to prove ambiguity. In a reply to Max Black, for example, Russell seemed to appeal to this rule.\(^\text{10}\) Black had challenged the assumption that terms of different types cannot share univocal predicates by pointing to the predicate "is thought about." The terms "Continuity" and "Bertrand Russell" seem to belong to different types, yet we can say (significantly), "Bertrand Russell is thought about" and "Continuity is thought about." Russell replied, however, that "thinking" was being used in different senses in these two predications. His response, of course, is unsatisfactory, for in appealing to the rule that terms of different types cannot share predicates in the same sense, Russell is relying on the very assumption that Black is challenging. For the very same reason, moreover, we are prohibited from relying on this rule or assumption in trying to prove that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous—for this predicate, I have argued, is significantly predicable of terms of different types. Since this predicate is not obviously ambiguous, it would seem that Ryle's assumption—that terms of different types cannot share univocal predicates—is false. We may yet save Ryle's assumption by demonstrating that "weighs 10 stone," contrary to appearance, is ambiguous, but we cannot rely on his assumption to do it. We must, therefore, look for some other way to prove ambiguity.

There is another kind of rule that philosophers and laymen have relied on, at least since the time of Aristotle, in making distinctions of sense. \(\text{Roughly, the rule is this: if } B \text{ can be both affirmed and denied truly of } A \text{ within the same statement, then } B \text{ is ambiguous. This rule (although it needs to be stated more precisely) is nothing more than a version of, or at least an implication of, Aristotle's statement of the rule of noncontradiction. (Probably, the closest Aristotle comes to explicitly stating this as a separate rule or criterion is in Book IV, Chapter IV, of the } \text{Metaphysics: "And it will not be possible to be and not be the same thing, except in virtue of an ambiguity."})\) In applying this rule, we might say that a dark feather, for example, is both light and not light, and thus we might conclude that "light" is ambiguous. That is, "light" can mean "not heavy" or "not dark";

\(^{10}\) See Bertrand Russell, "Reply to Criticisms," in \textit{The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell} (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1944).
hence, a dark feather is "light" (not heavy) and not "light" (not dark). This rule, however, would be of little use in our case because it applies only to predicates which are affirmed and denied of the same subject. We are interested in a predicate that is predicatable of different subjects which belong to different types. It would not help, for example, to show that a man could both weigh 10 stone and not weigh 10 stone. We would prove at most that "weighs 10 stone" can be used in different senses when predicated of "man"; we would not show that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous when predicated of, say, a man and a gatepost. This rule, therefore, is of no more help than a rule of types for proving ambiguity in the case that interests us. Hence, we need to look further.

Is there a third way, then, to prove ambiguity? That is, is there another rule or criterion that we might use in attempting to prove that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous? One answer which has won some support among philosophers is given by Quine: there is none. Apart from a special class of cases, Quine argues, we cannot get evidence for ambiguity; and the special class of cases consists of only those in which, as with "light," the predicate can be both affirmed and denied of the same thing. Thus, in referring to the trait of "being true and false of the same thing," Quine writes: "This trait, if not a necessary condition of ambiguity of a term, is at any rate the nearest we have come to a clear condition of it."\textsuperscript{11} I shall argue, however, that there are other criteria of ambiguity.

Take as an illustration a term that Quine cites. Is the term "hard" ambiguous? If we were permitted to use the type criterion, we could conclude that it is. Different types of things, namely, questions and chairs, can be said to be "hard"; but, of course, we cannot use this criterion. The "contradiction" criterion is of no help either, for it would be useful only if the same thing, say, a question, could be said, both significantly and truly, to be hard and not hard at the same time. That is not, however, the case. There are feathers that can be light and not light, but there are no questions

that can be both hard and not hard. Thus, if Quine is right in saying (or implying) that there is no third way of proving ambiguity, then he must say that we cannot show that “hard” is ambiguous. And that is just the position that Quine does take. He writes:

As remarked, ambiguity may be manifested in that the term is at once true and false of the same things. This seemed to work for ‘light,’ but it is useless for ‘hard.’ For can we claim that ‘hard’ as applied to chairs ever is denied of hard questions, or vice versa? If not, why not say that chairs and questions, however unlike, are hard in a single inclusive sense of the word? There is an air of syllepsis about ‘The chair and questions were hard,’ but is it not due merely to the dissimilarity of chairs and questions? Are we not in effect calling ‘hard’ ambiguous, if at all, just because it is true of some very unlike things?12

In reply to Quine, I think that if we look at the way “hard” is actually used, we shall see that it is in fact used in different senses. Take the following three cases.

1. Suppose an examination is held in a professor’s house. Now suppose that all of the chairs the students are given to sit in are hard. This implies that the chairs are not soft. Suppose the exam questions are hard as well. Should we also say, as it seems we must if “hard” means the same thing here, that because the questions are “hard,” it follows that they are not soft? What would a soft question be like?

2. Suppose once more that the professor does ask hard questions. If he does, then he asks difficult questions. If the chairs are hard, does it follow that they, too, are difficult?

3. Finally, suppose that some questions are hard and some are not. Then, we can ask, for example: “Is the first question harder than the second?” “Is the fourth question, the question about the Athenian Constitution, harder than the fifth question, the question about Sparta’s system of military training?” Suppose, now, that the chairs are all hard. Can we then ask: “Are all the chairs harder than the test questions?” “Is the first chair harder than the fourth question, the question concerning the Athenian Constitution?” If such questions made sense, how could they be answered?

12 Ibid., p. 130.
Should we say, for example, that the first chair is less difficult than the fourth question? Or should we say that it is softer?

I think the above shows that “hard” is used in different senses when predicated of questions and chairs. Quine, then, is wrong when he says, or at least implies, that we can show that a term is ambiguous only when the term can be both affirmed and denied of the same thing. Quine might object to each of the above three cases, but many other similar cases could be found. Moreover, many other such cases could be found for other terms besides “hard”; that is, other terms besides “hard” could be shown to be ambiguous by using the above procedure. Instead of citing other examples at this time, it might be more useful to see if any general criteria of ambiguity can be extracted from the above three cases. I think that there can. Further, I think that similar criteria can be found in the writings of Aristotle. Hence, it is to his writings that I shall now turn.

It is in his *Topics* that Aristotle mainly talks about ambiguity criteria. He lists there, and explains the use of, a number of criteria for detecting ambiguity—15 or 16 in all, depending on whether some very similar criteria are interpreted as being the same or different. Many of the criteria seem to be quite technical and would, I think, have little practical value. There are, however, at least three such criteria which seem to me to be useful.

Before introducing these criteria, however, a new distinction should be made and explained here. Some philosophers and lexicographers distinguish between two kinds of ambiguity: a stronger kind, in which a term has two meanings, and a weaker kind, in which a term has two senses. For example, Paul Ziff writes in his *Semantic Analysis*: “It is not the case that ‘brother’ in (10) has a different meaning from ‘brother’ in (11): it is the case that ‘brother’ in (10) has a different sense from ‘brother’ in (11).” Ziff tries to explain this distinction in terms of a “tree” metaphor. To say

that a term has different senses is to say that it \textit{branches} off: now in one direction, then in another. To say that a term has different meanings is to make a stronger claim. It is to say that the tree has not merely different branches, but also different trunks. For example, the word “division” can mean either “an army group” or “a procedure in arithmetic.” Since these meanings are quite distinct, we can think of “division” as being a tree with two separate trunks. How helpful this explanation is, or even how useful the distinction is, I shall not inquire. The point I wish to make is merely this: even if a term is not obviously ambiguous in the way that “division” is—that is, even if it does not have two distinct meanings—that does not imply that the term is unambiguous. There may be present a more subtle ambiguity—the term may have two senses rather than two meanings.\footnote{Perhaps when a term has two distinct but related senses, but not two different meanings, we should not speak of “ambiguity” at all. I am using “ambiguity,” however (perhaps in a technical way), to cover both cases: the case of two different but related senses and the case of quite different meanings.}

Aristotle also distinguishes these two kinds of ambiguity. In Book IV, Chapter II, of the \textit{Metaphysics}, for example, he writes: “For a term belongs to different sciences not if it has different senses, but if it has not one meaning and its definitions cannot be referred to one central meaning.” Although Aristotle makes the distinction, however, he does not always observe it. He sometimes speaks of different “meanings,” when it seems clear that different “senses” would be more appropriate. In the \textit{Topics}, in particular, he speaks of criteria for determining when a term has different meanings; yet, most of his examples fail to illustrate this phenomenon. The terms cited have different senses but only one meaning. Hence, in interpreting the following passages, it might be more appropriate—against the background of Aristotle’s own explanations elsewhere—to read “different meanings” as “different senses.”

In stating his first criterion for detecting ambiguity, Aristotle advises us “to look and see if its contrary bears a number of meanings,” (\textit{Topics} 106a). To illustrate, he uses the term “sharp.” Is “sharp” being used in two senses when we speak of a sharp note and a sharp knife? To find out, we should ask if the contrary of “sharp” is different in each of the two uses. Aristotle answers that it is: the contrary of a sharp note is a flat note; the
contrary of a sharp knife is a *dull* knife. He concludes, therefore, that "sharp" is ambiguous.

Aristotle's first criterion suffers from the following defect. He advises us to look for the "contrary" of a term, but he fails to tell us how "contraries" are to be identified. What, for example, is the contrary of "democracy"? Is it "oligarchy," "monarchy," "aristocracy," or something else? Or take "sharp" once more, as it is used in "sharp knives." Is "dull" its contrary or its contradictory? Either answer seems arbitrary. I think, then, that employing the troublesome notion of a "contrary" involves Aristotle in certain difficulties. I think that these difficulties are unnecessary, however, and can be avoided by deleting the notion of a "contrary." In its place, we can substitute the notion of "incompatibility relations." Instead of looking to see if a term has more than one contrary, therefore, we can merely look at the implications of using the term in different contexts to see if different things are incompatible with its different uses. For example, we don't need to ask whether "flat" is the contrary of "sharp" in "sharp notes." All we need to notice is that in saying that a *note* is sharp, we rule out the possibility of its being flat; for a *note's* being sharp is incompatible with its being flat. The same is not true of knives. A knife can be both flat and sharp; that is, it can have a blade which is flat and yet have a sharp cutting edge. When we say, therefore, that a *knife* is sharp, we imply that it is not dull, but we do not imply—as we do when we say that a *note* is sharp—that it is not flat. Thus, in one of its uses (its use with "knife") "sharpness" is incompatible with "dullness"; but in another of its uses (its use with "note"), "sharpness" is incompatible with "flatness." Hence, we can conclude that "sharp," when applied to notes and knives, is used in two senses.

A second test that Aristotle suggests is this: he tells us to look at "the classes of the predicates signified by a term" to see if they are the same. If they are not the same, Aristotle claims, the term is ambiguous (107a). What Aristotle means can be understood by looking at his examples. He points out, for instance, that "sharp" can again be seen to be ambiguous by this test. To say that a *note* is sharp is to say that it is swift, but to say that an angle is sharp is to say not that it is swift but that it is acute or less than a right angle. Roughly put, Aristotle is telling us to check whether a term in
two different uses has two different synonyms (just as in using the first test, we are to see if the term has different contraries or contradictories).

As a third way of testing for ambiguity, we are told to see if a term can be compared as "more or less" or "in like manner." For two univocal uses of a term, Aristotle argues, are always comparable (107b15). For example, it seems clear that "short" is being used univocally in "This man is short" and "This tree is short." We can check this by using Aristotle's criterion: we can say, "This man is shorter than the tree." But when we use "short" ambiguously, as in "This man is short" and "This play is short," we cannot say, "This man is shorter than this play." If we could (correctly) say this, we could always sensibly ask, "How much shorter than the play is he?" But the question is without sense, for how could it be answered—in minutes and seconds, or in feet and inches?

It seems, then, that Aristotle has constructed at least three useful tests for detecting ambiguity. They are particularly useful because their employment can be justified <em>a priori</em>—which is not true of criteria in general. Where it is not true, the criteria have a limited value. Take, for example, the verifiability criterion of meaninglessness. As I pointed out in chapter II, it has proved difficult to state this criterion in such a way that it would rule out as meaningless neither too much nor too little. Even if this problem were solved, I went on to argue, another would remain. How do we justify appealing to such a criterion in any controversial case? Without such a justification, the verifiability criterion will be of limited value. In just those kinds of cases in which the criterion is designed to be used—namely, the cases in which a dispute has arisen—its employment will be prohibited. That is not true, however, of Aristotle's three ambiguity criteria. The authority of each of those criteria can be certified <em>before</em> they are appealed to in attempts to settle disputes concerning ambiguity.

The justification for using the first <em>two</em> criteria is simply this: if the implications of using a term in two different contexts are different, then we must say, in order to avoid contradiction, that the term is being used in two different senses. Take the first criterion. Suppose I wish to explain to
someone what "hard" means. I might say truly, "The term 'hard' means 'not soft.' For when I say that a professor's chairs are hard, I imply that they are not soft." But I might also say truly, "The term 'hard' does not mean 'not soft.' When I say that a professor's examination questions are hard, I do not imply that they are not soft. (If it is true of any question whatsoever that it is not soft, then, of course, a hard question is not soft. That does not mean that I imply that a question is not soft when I say that it is hard; for even a question that was not hard would be not soft.)" I cannot say truly both (1) that "hard" means "not soft" and (2) that "hard" does not mean "not soft"—unless "hard" is being used in (1) and (2) in two different senses. If "hard" were not being used in different senses, we could say that "hard" both means and does not mean "not soft." That, of course, would be self-contradictory. Hence, we are forced to conclude that "hard" has two senses. Moreover, in general, and not just in the case of "hard," if the negative implications of using a term in two different contexts are different—i.e., if different things are incompatible with the different uses of the term—then the term is used in different senses.

The same kind of justification can be given for use of the second criterion. If the positive implications of using the term are different in different contexts—that is, if the term has different synonyms—then the term is ambiguous. Look at "hard" once more. In explaining what this term means, I might say truly, "The term 'hard' means 'difficult,' for when I say that a professor's examination questions are hard, I imply that they are difficult." I might also say truly, "The term 'hard' does not mean 'difficult.' When I say that a chair is hard, I do not imply that it is difficult." Using the same reasoning as before, then, we can conclude once again that "hard" has two senses. If it did not, then it would be true that "hard" both does and does not mean "difficult."

The third test, the comparison test, can be justified in the following way. In the first place, if a term passes the test, then it need not be ambiguous (at least not in the uses being considered). Of no term whatsoever is it true that it both must be ambiguous when used with two other terms and yet can be used comparatively with these two terms. It is easy to see why. Assume, for the moment, that the term "short" must be used in different senses when used with "pygmy" and "lifespan." "Short" must,
therefore, have different senses in (1) “This pygmy is short” and (2) “This lifespan is short.” Using subscripts, we can mark these two senses as “short$_1$” and “short$_2$.” Now, suppose we try to use “short” comparatively. If we say, for example, that “This pygmy is shorter than his lifespan,” we must be using either “short$_1$” or “short$_2$”—assuming that “short” has no third sense. If we are using “short$_1$,” however, it is false that “short” must be ambiguous when used with “pygmy” and “lifespan,” for it is used in a single sense in the statement. The same result will occur if we are using “short$_2$.” Moreover, it will not matter even if there is a third sense of “short,” for at least in this third sense, “short” will be employable with “pygmy” and “lifespan”—and that is sufficient to falsify the assumption that “short” must be ambiguous when used with these two subjects. In general, then, if a term, C, can be used comparatively with two other terms, A and B, then it is false that C must be ambiguous when used with these two terms. So far, all this shows is that a term is not ambiguous—or at least need not be ambiguous—but that at least provides a test for univocality. If any term, C, can be used comparatively with A and B, then the term is, or can be, univocal when used with A and B. Thus, if it does make sense to say, “This pygmy is shorter than his lifespan,” then “short” is, or can be, used in a single sense in both “This pygmy is short” and “This lifespan is short.” Moreover, if a term fails the test in some context, and yet can be used comparatively in other contexts, then the failure can be explained in terms of ambiguity (assuming no other explanation is available). The term “short,” for example, can be used comparatively in some contexts. We can say, for example, that Joseph Stalin was shorter than Charles DeGaulle. Yet, it cannot be so used in certain other contexts. For example, it cannot—contrary to my earlier assumption—be used comparatively with “pygmy” and “lifespan.” It makes no sense to say “This pygmy is shorter than his lifespan.” If we could say that (significantly), then we could sensibly ask, “How much shorter than his lifespan is he?” But this question is obviously nonsensical. If it is not nonsensical, then how is it to be answered: in years and days, or in feet and inches? Where no other explanation is available, then, it seems reasonable to explain the failure of a term to function comparatively by saying it is ambiguous. It seems reasonable to explain, for example, why “short” cannot be used comparatively with
“pygmy” and “lifespan” by saying that it is predicable of these two subjects only in different senses.

I conclude, therefore, that use of the first two tests for ambiguity can be justified a priori. The use of the third test as a univocality, rather than an ambiguity, test can be given a similar justification. Moreover, as an ambiguity test, this third test can be given some justification, even if the justification is weaker than it is in the other cases.

Contrary to what Quine claims, then, there are tests for determining ambiguity besides the one test he allows, the “contradiction” test. What we now need to see is whether these tests can be used in demonstrating the ambiguity of “weighs 10 stone.”

I argued earlier that two different types of things, a person and a gatepost, could both be said to “weigh 10 stone.” If “weighs 10 stone” can then be predicated of each subject in the same sense, Ryle’s assumption—that terms of different types cannot share univocal predicates—is therefore false. If Ryle’s assumption is false, then the category mistake argument is unsound. What needs to be determined, therefore, is whether “weighs ten stone” is being used in the same sense in such statements as “This person weighs 10 stone” and “This gatepost weighs 10 stone.”

Using the first test, to say that a person weighs 10 stone is to imply that the person does not weigh seven stone, and it is also to imply that the person does not weigh 13 stone. This, however, will not help. The negative implications of predicating “weighs 10 stone” of a gatepost are exactly the same. Thus, to say that a gatepost weighs 10 stone is to imply that the gatepost does not weigh seven stone and also that it does not weigh 13 stone. Moreover, I think this will be found to be true of all of the negative implications of using “weighs ten stone”: those which hold when “weighs 10 stone” is predicated of a person will also hold when “weighs 10 stone” is predicated of a gatepost. The first test, then, will not show that “weighs 10 stone” is ambiguous.

Moreover, I think that the same is true of the second test. To say that a person weighs ten stone is to imply that the person weighs 140 pounds,
for in the British system of weights and measures, "1 stone" is equivalent to "14 pounds;" hence, "10 stone" is equivalent to "140 pounds." To say that a gatepost weighs 10 stone is also to imply that it weighs 140 pounds. Once more, I think the same will be found to be true of all of the positive implications of using "weighs 10 stone": those which hold when "person" is the subject will also hold when "gatepost" is the subject. The second test, therefore, will also fail to show that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous. One test remains, the comparison test.

Can "weighs 10 stone" be used comparatively? I think that it obviously can. We can say that if King Farouk weighs 20 stone and John Foster Dulles weighs 10 stone, then King Farouk weighs 10 stone more than John Foster Dulles. The expression "weighs 10 stone," therefore, is the kind of expression to which our third test can be applied. To apply the test, then, we need to determine whether "weighs 10 stone" can be used comparatively with "person" and "gatepost." If it is obvious that it cannot, or if we can show that it cannot, then we will have reason for concluding that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous. Neither alternative, however, seems plausible. It is not obviously nonsensical to say that "This person weighs 10 stone more than this gatepost." We might, in fact, make such a statement if we wished to compare the weight of King Farouk to the weight of a 10-stone gatepost. If the comparison is not obviously nonsensical, I do not think it could be shown to be so either. We could bring out the absurdity of our earlier comparison—that a pygmy is shorter than his lifespan—by asking, "How much shorter is he?" Such a procedure in this case fails to exhibit any such obvious absurdity. We can sensibly ask: "How much more than the gatepost does King Farouk weigh?" Someone might, in fact, ask this question if he were unfamiliar with the use of the expression "weighs 10 stone." Moreover, the correct answer to the question does not seem at all problematic. It is not obviously nonsensical—although I am not saying that such a reply is significant—to say that King Farouk weighs 140 pounds more than the gatepost. Since it is not obviously nonsensical, then it cannot be used to show that "This person weighs 10 stone more than this gatepost" is meaningless. If this latter statement is not obviously nonsensical, and if it cannot be shown to be nonsensical, then the third test will also
fail to show that "weighs 10 stone" is ambiguous. We still have no reason, therefore, for holding that this expression is used in different senses when predicated of "person" and "gatepost." Moreover, I think we now have positive reason for saying that the expression is being used here in a single sense and that the statement "This person weighs 10 stone more than this gatepost" is significant. Suppose, for example, that we were to use a balance to weigh King Farouk. We might place a 10-stone gatepost plus a 10-stone weight on one end of the balance and place King Farouk on the other end. If the scale were to balance, we would know that the 10-stone weight plus the gatepost were equal in weight to the weight of King Farouk. We might then conclude (referring to King Farouk): "This person weighs 10 stone more than the gatepost." If we can significantly say this, then we can apply our third test to show that "weighs 10 stone" must be univocal (in this context). Our third test tells us that if an expression can be used comparatively with two terms then it must be possible to use this expression with these two terms in a single sense. We may conclude, then, that "weighs ten stone" is not (or at least, need not be) ambiguous when predicated of "person" and "gatepost." I have already argued that "person" and "gatepost" belong to different types, if we accept Ryle's definition of "type difference." Hence, Ryle's assumption—that terms of different type cannot share univocal predicates—is false; and since this assumption is false, then the category mistake argument, which employs this assumption as one of its central premises, is unsound. We cannot show that a statement is meaningless, therefore, by use of this argument.

The fatal weakness of the category mistake argument is its essential reliance on the central assumption that terms of different types cannot share predicates in the same sense. The assumption is crucial, as I have already argued, because without it even the disjunctive conclusion "ambiguity or absurdity" could not follow from the premise that two terms are of different types and a third term is being predicated of both of them. Reject this assumption, then, and the whole argument collapses. Once we are
allowed to reject this assumption, we can allow, for example, that “mind” and “body” are of different types, and yet still not be forced to the conclusion either that “exist” is ambiguous, or that “Mind exists” or “Bodies exist” is nonsense. If this central assumption is crucial, it is also false, and, hence, deserves to be rejected. I have tried to show that this is so by presenting one convincing case of two hetero-typical terms sharing a univocal predicate: the case of “person” and “gatepost” sharing “weighs 10 stone.” I think there are many similar cases, as I indicated earlier, including “interesting” (which can be predicated of almost every possible subject) and “observed” (which can be predicated of both events and physical objects). It appears, then, that the category mistake argument needs the above assumption and that the assumption is false.

Even the most unhealthy arguments can be saved if we are willing to offer the required remedies. One remedy in this case might be to substitute a weaker assumption for the above false assumption and to restrict the scope of the argument. I should now like to consider briefly one interesting attempt to apply such a remedy.

Fred Sommers, in an interesting series of articles, has tried to show that the “strong” assumption of Russell and Ryle is false and that a weaker version can serve as its replacement. The strong assumption, once more, is that there is no predicate, P, which can be predicated in the same sense of two subjects of different types. Moreover, given Ryle’s definition of “type-difference,” if some other predicate, Q, can be applied (significantly) to one subject and not the other, then these two subjects are of different types. If we combine the strong assumption with Ryle’s definition of “type-difference,” then we get the following rule, Rule R:

(R) If P and Q are univocal predicates, then there are no two things, a and b, such that P applies to both while Q applies to one and not the other.

What this rules out, for example, is “exist” applying univocally to “mind” and “body” while, say, “is heavy” applies to “body” but not to “mind.”
What Sommers does is to replace Rule R with a weaker rule, Rule T, which reads:

\[(T)\] If P and Q are univocal predicates, then there can be no three things, a, b and c such that P applies to a and to b but not to c while Q applies to b and to c but not to a.\[15\]

Rule T retains the same notion of type-difference: a and b are of different types if any predicate, c, makes sense with a but not with b. It rejects, however, the "strong" assumption "that hetero-typical terms can never share univocal predicates" and substitutes a weaker version under which there are some univocal predicates that can be shared by hetero-typical subjects. The term "interesting" is such a predicate. What T does, in effect, is to allow one to rule in advance which predicates can cover subjects of different types and which cannot. The term "interesting," for example, can be applied to subjects of different types simply because we cannot find three things, a, b, and c, such that "interesting" makes sense with a and b, but not with c. We cannot because there is no such c: anything at all can be significantly said to be "interesting." In cases such as this—in which a predicate can be significantly applied to any subject whatsoever—the rule cannot be invoked; moreover, the rule tells us that in advance. This restricts the scope of the rule, and, hence, restricts the scope of any argument which makes use of the rule. This restriction also makes the rule much more difficult to refute.

The following example illustrates how the rule might be applied. Suppose we have three subjects: buildings, men, and arguments. Now we need to find two predicates, such that one applies to the first two subjects but not to the third, and the other applies only to the second two subjects. For example, "tall" applies to buildings and men, but not to arguments; and "rational" applies to men and arguments, but not to buildings. In that case, all of the conditions for applying the rule are fulfilled. We are forced to conclude, then, (in order to avoid violating the rule) that one of the terms involved, either a subject-term ("men," "arguments," or "build-

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nings”) or a predicate-term (“tall” or “rational”), is ambiguous. For example, we might “split”—that is, describe as ambiguous—the subject-term “man.” We might say that when we speak of “rational men” and “tall men,” we are using “men” in different senses. In this particular case, however, it would seem more reasonable to split “rational” instead of “men” and conclude that “rational” has two senses in “rational argument” and “rational man.” This is, in fact, the choice Sommers makes when he discusses this case.

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I think it must be conceded that Rule T is much more reliable than Rule R, which breaks down in many cases. It is difficult to find cases in which Rule T does fail to work properly. Nevertheless, although Sommers’ rule is certainly superior in some ways to Rule R, I think it, too, is defective. For lack of space, I shall not attempt to discuss in detail what I consider to be both its merits and its weaknesses; instead, I shall simply list three objections.

1. In using Sommers’ rule (Rule T), we have to employ five terms: three subject-terms and two predicate-terms. Under certain initial conditions, the rule tells us that one of these terms is ambiguous, but it fails to tell us which is the guilty term. For example, assume that at least one of the following is ambiguous: “rational,” “tall,” “building,” “man,” or “argument.” How do we decide which one? Sommers chooses the first term, “rational”; moreover, his choice may be obviously correct. In other cases, however, where a live dispute about ambiguity exists, the choice may not be obvious at all. It is precisely because the answer is not obvious that a rule is most often needed, and in such cases, appeal to the rule will not settle the dispute. Nor are these the only such cases. For the rule is also

16 This assumes that the initial conditions are as I described them; however, we could re-describe these conditions if none of the ambiguity options seemed attractive. By “re-describing the initial conditions,” I mean declaring that one of the predicators is not significant but is meaningless. For example, I said that “rational” applies to arguments; rather than say this, we might decide that it is meaningless to speak of “rational arguments.”

used, just as the category mistake argument is employed, to enforce claims about meaninglessness as well as ambiguity. New options and new escape routes are thereby created for any disputant. For example, in the above case, the rule can be invoked to prove ambiguity only if the following initial conditions are met: we must agree that it is significant to speak of a rational man and of a rational argument, but nonsense to speak of a rational building; and we must also agree that it is significant to speak of a tall building and a tall man, but nonsense to speak of a tall argument. But a disputant may not agree that all of these conditions hold: he may say, instead, that one of the assumed significant predications is not significant, or that one of the supposed absurd predications is not absurd. Such an option may not be a live option in a case where there is no disagreement in the first place; but that will not be so in cases in which a dispute has arisen. Take the case of “exist.” Ryle claims that this term is ambiguous and Quine claims that it is not. Moreover, Sommers agrees with Quine because he claims that Rule T cannot be invoked to show that “exist” is ambiguous.18 The reason, Sommers thinks, is that “exist” is like “interesting”: we cannot find three things, a, b, and c, such that “exists” makes sense with a and b, but not with c, because any subject whatsoever can be said to “exist.”

The question at issue, however, is whether anything whatsoever can be said to “exist” in a single sense of “exist.” Why could not Ryle argue in the same manner Sommers does with “rational?” There are three subjects—buildings, men, and arguments—and two predicates—“exist” and “rational.” “Rational” makes sense with “men” and “arguments,” but not with “buildings”; and “exists” makes sense with “men” and “buildings,” but not with “arguments” (it makes no sense to speak of arguments existing in the same sense in which men and buildings exist). We can now invoke the rule, and split not “rational” but “exist.” We can say, therefore, that “exist” is ambiguous in “men exist” and “arguments exist.” Quine, of course, would not be convinced by the argument, for he would simply deny that it makes no sense to speak of both arguments and buildings “existing” in the same sense.

Rule T, in short, is much too weak to resolve disputes in which there

would be disagreement either about the initial conditions or about which of the five terms is ambiguous. Sommers, in fact, claims only that his rule is a "coherence rule"—if you accept such and such conditions, then you must accept such and such a result. The rule does not by itself determine that a given statement is meaningless or that a particular term is ambiguous. Nevertheless, Sommers claims that use of his rule does provide both a "powerful technique for doing 'logical geography'" and "a satisfactory clarification procedure for enforcing ambiguity at the type level." Given the many escape routes that his rule allows, however, I think that both claims are open to doubt.

2. Rule T, then, is too weak to be relied on in many disputes about either ambiguity or meaninglessness. I am not asserting, however, that there are no disputes at all in which Rule T would be useful, assuming that the rule is valid. What I now want to show is that even in cases where the rule might be applied, its use entails certain difficulties.

Sommers claims that his rule can be applied in certain disputes about the mind-body problem. In fact, he claims that if we grant that there are minds or egos, then use of his rule forces us to accept Cartesian dualism. This conclusion in itself should tell against our using the rule if—as I think is the case—there are independent good reasons for not accepting Cartesian dualism. Even apart from this, there are other difficulties, for Sommers thinks we can argue for Cartesian dualism in the following manner. Rule T, once more, tells us that "there are no three subjects, a, b, and c, such that of two univocal predicatures, P and Q, P applies to a and b but not to c, and Q applies to b and c but not to a." We now have to find three subjects and two predicates which can meet these conditions. Sommers suggests the subjects: an ego (or alternatively, a pure spirit, such as God), Smith, and a stone. Now the P-predicate, "is thinking about Vienna," applies to the ego and to Smith, but not to a stone. Further, an M-predicate, such as "is heavy" applies to Smith and a stone, but not to an ego. Under these conditions, Rule T can be applied, and will instruct us that one of the five terms is ambiguous. The question then becomes: which of the five is ambiguous? P. F. Strawson, whose views I referred to earlier, thinks that

the Cartesian error is to designate the wrong term, or kind of term, as ambiguous. Thus, he writes: "That is, if we are to avoid the general form of this error, we must not think of 'I' or 'Smith' as suffering from type ambiguity."²⁰ Strawson suggests, instead, that we pick a term such as "is heavy" (or "weighs 10 stone"), and say that it has different senses when applied to a person and a material object. I have already argued against accepting Strawson's suggestion. Sommers also thinks that Strawson's suggestion is wholly unacceptable and thus concludes that the "Cartesian error" is not an error at all: we should say that "Smith" is ambiguous. Further, the fact that we should split "Smith" rather than "is heavy" shows, Sommers contends, that Descartes' doctrine is true and that Strawson's doctrine is incoherent.²¹

Saying what Sommers says, however, generates new difficulties—apart from those that trail along with Cartesianism. For example, Sommers' rule is designed to help us make ambiguity judgments, but in what sense can "Smith," or any other proper name, be "ambiguous"? If we agree that proper names have no meaning (or connotation) in the sense that words do, then how could "Smith" have even one meaning, let alone two? Of course, we may want to claim in the first place that proper names do have meaning in the same sense that words do; however, there are some seemingly obvious difficulties which would have to be faced if we were to say that proper names have meaning. For example, a word such as "stone" has a correct use, but does "Smith" have a correct use? It would be a mistake to refer to D. H. Lawrence as "Smith," since that was not Lawrence's name, but would it be a linguistic mistake? Would a mistake of this kind even tend to show that I did not know how to use a term in the English language? Moreover, if I learn enough English, I learn how to use the word "stone," but in learning English do I, or need I, also learn how to use the name "Smith"? If so, what is its correct use? Maybe these difficulties are only apparent difficulties and would succumb to a proper analysis. Still, any rule that forces us to say that proper names are ambiguous should be viewed with suspicion until those difficulties can be eliminated.

There is a further difficulty. Suppose we substitute "I" for "Smith" in

the above case. The result will be the same. Use of Rule T will lead us to
the conclusion that the term "I" is ambiguous (assuming, as Sommers does,
that the other alternatives are even more unacceptable). Now what does
this mean? The term "I" might, perhaps, be described as "referentially
ambiguous," which is a gaudy way of saying that the term "I" can be used
to refer to many speakers. That is also true of the term "speaker" and does
not mean that "speaker" is ambiguous. Apart from pointing out that "I"
can have more than one referent, I am not sure what would be meant by
saying that "I" is ambiguous. If what is being said is that "I" has different
senses, in the same way that "light" does, then I think we should simply
reject the claim. If we do, then we must also reject the rule that would force
this conclusion upon us.

3. Even if we can make sense of saying that "Smith" and "I" are
ambiguous, however, I think there is a further, decisive reason for rejecting
Rule T: what the rule tells us is simply not true. It is not true that "there
are no three subjects, a, b, and c, such that of two univocal predicates, P
and Q, P applies to a and b but not to c, and Q applies to b and c but not to
a." In just the case in which Sommers tries to apply the rule, the mind-body
case, there are three such subjects: the ego, Smith, and a stone. Sommers
claims that one of these subjects, "Smith," does not qualify because
"Smith" is ambiguous. It can be shown, however, that this is not so. If it
were, we would have to say that a statement such as "That fat boy, Mr.
Smith, is a boy who thinks a lot" is meaningless, when it is obviously not
meaningless. "Smith" is therefore not ambiguous.

Professor Sommers anticipates the above kind of argument, and his
remarks are worth quoting:

Of course this argument against Descartes is an ordinary language
argument. Descartes is recommending that we reconstrue all statements
about fat thoughtful people. He would say that such statements—if they
are taken to be about individuals—have as little meaning as the one about
the young lady who came home in a sedan chair and a flood of tears.22

I am puzzled about why Sommers thinks the above kind of argument
deserves to be called "an ordinary language argument," while he apparently.

22 Ibid., p. 270.
does not think that is true of his own arguments against Pyle's "strong" type assumption. But this is relatively unimportant. What is important is that statements about fat, thoughtful people are not meaningless; and since they are not, Sommers' rule—which implies that they are—is defective. Sommers' rule incorporates an assumption about the inability of heterotypical terms to share certain univocal predicates. Although this assumption is weaker than the "strong" assumption that "hetero-typical subjects can never share univocal predicates," it is false.

We may, of course, wish to accept Descartes' recommendation that we reconstrue statements about fat, thoughtful people. We might do this, for instance, if Descartes could provide some independent and convincing argument to show that such statements, contrary to appearances, really are meaningless. Until some such argument is provided, it is not the statements that will be rejected, but rather the rule whose use entails that such apparently meaningful statements are really meaningless. Moreover, it is not just statements about fat, thoughtful people which will have to be "reconstrued" if we accept Descartes' recommendation. Statements such as "Losing a great deal of weight affected his ability to think" and "I wish it were easy for me to gain weight" will also have to be "reconstrued" as meaningless. Accepting such a recommendation, then, will not be easy.

There are, moreover, other cases to which Rule T does not apply. For example, consider the three subjects: a headache, a parade, and a pretty girl. The predicate "started at 3 p.m." applies to the first two but not to the third; and the predicate "was watched" applies to the second two but not to the first. All of the conditions of Rule T are fulfilled, and yet none of the five terms is ambiguous. Once again the rule breaks down. Given what Sommers says elsewhere about perceptual terms, I suppose he might reply here that "watch" should be considered ambiguous. He might say that we do not watch parades in the same sense in which we watch pretty girls. This kind of reply, however, fails to work in this case, even if it does work in the case of other perceptual terms. For in this case, we can show that "watch" is univocal by using the comparison criterion discussed earlier. Assume, for example, that we are watching an American Legion parade consisting only

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23 Ibid.
of male marchers. Suppose, however, that although there are no pretty girls in the parade, there are a number of them standing on the sidelines. In that case, we might “spend more time watching the pretty girls than the parade.” If we can do this, then “watching” can be used univocally with both “parade” and “pretty girl.”

The same is true of “began at 3 P.M.” My head may begin to hurt at the very same time that the parade begins—for example, at 3 P.M. In that case, I might say “My headache and the parade both began at 3 P.M.” So, too, I might say that “My headache and the parade both lasted for an hour.” This shows that the second predicate, “began at 3 P.M.,” is also univocal, just as “watch” is univocal.

I have not tried to show that Sommers’ technique for detecting type mistakes could not be developed further, just as Sommers has developed further the techniques of Russell and Ryle. If it could be developed further, then perhaps Rule T could provide a satisfactory method of settling disputes about meaninglessness and ambiguity. I do doubt, though, that this could be done. In order to improve a rule such as Rule T, it would have to be made more and more complex, just as Russell’s and Ryle’s original rule (or assumption) that “hetero-typical terms can never share predicates” was improved upon by replacing it with a more complicated rule. As the rule becomes more and more complex—as the number of conditions for applying the rule are increased—the cases to which the rule can be applied become fewer and fewer. I have already indicated that Sommers’ rule cannot be applied in many disputes, such as the dispute about the alleged ambiguity of “exists,” simply because agreement could not be reached about the conditions for applying the rule. To render the rule more complex still would be to diminish further its range of application, perhaps to the point where the rule would be useless.

Nevertheless, perhaps a rule could be developed which would be both practical and reliable. I have not tried to show a priori that this could not be done. What I have tried to show, instead, is this: (1) The category mistake argument, which is the standard argument used in proving the
presence of category mistakes, is unsound. It is unsound because it employs Ryle's assumption that no hetero-typical terms can share univocal predicates, an assumption which is demonstrably false. (2) The most sophisticated attempt that I am aware of to improve upon the category mistake argument also fails for various reasons. One of these reasons is that the assumption which Sommers substitutes for Ryle's type-assumption is also false.

I think we are justified in concluding, therefore, that at present—regardless of what may come later—we do not have a satisfactory technique for identifying category mistakes. What, then, becomes of the concept of a category mistake? Should we abandon its use? Or does such a notion still have a useful role to play in philosophic discourse?

The basic insight, I think, of Russell, Ryle, and Sommers concerning category mistakes is that very often we do use a term in different senses when we predicate it of radically different kinds of things. We do, for example, use "odd" in different senses when we predicate it of numbers and persons. Moreover, I would like to suggest that quite often it is because the items are of a radically different kind that we say that the term predicated of them has two senses. It is because numbers and persons are so radically different that it is hard to see how they could both be "odd" in the same sense. If this hypothesis is correct (not necessarily in this particular case, but in some cases), then we might explain why either ambiguity or nonsense is present in some cases by pointing out that hetero-typical predication is involved. We cannot argue simply from a difference in type to a conclusion that either ambiguity or nonsense is involved, for that is not true in all cases. Terms of different types, as I argued earlier, can share univocal predicates in at least some cases. Once we know that ambiguity or nonsense is present (once we have established this on independent grounds), then we may be able to explain the presence by using the notion of a type mistake. I cannot prove, for example, that an accident has occurred merely by pointing out that careless driving is present, for careless driving does not always cause accidents. Nevertheless, I might explain why a certain acci-
dent has occurred, once I know that it has in fact occurred, by pointing out that the driver was driving carelessly.

This is one possible use, then, of the concept of a category mistake. After it has been argued on independent grounds that a term is ambiguous or that a statement is meaningless, we might be able to explain the presence of ambiguity or of nonsense by pointing out that hetero-typical predication is involved.

Moreover, I think that the notion of a category mistake has a second useful function. Even if it cannot be used to demonstrate that either ambiguity or nonsense is present, I think it can be used to provide some evidence, though not conclusive evidence, for such a conclusion. Perhaps this is what Ryle has in mind, when he writes in one of his later works:

I think it is worthwhile to take some pains with this word 'category,' but not for the usual reason, namely that there exists an exact, professional way of using it, in which, like a skeleton-key, it will turn all our locks for us; but rather for the unusual reason that there is an inexact, amateurish way of using it in which, like a coal-hammer, it will make a satisfactory knocking noise on doors we want opened to us. It gives the answer to none of our questions but it can be made to arouse people to the questions in a properly brusque way.24

We can, for example, at least create a suspicion that "necessary" has two senses in "necessary being" and "necessary statement" by pointing out that a being and a statement are very different kinds of things. Once the suspicion has been created, further argument will be needed; but at least in trying to establish the initial doubt, use of the notion of a type or category mistake can be helpful. I conclude, therefore, that the concept of a category mistake does have a useful role to play in philosophic discourse, even though it cannot be used in any simple or decisive way to settle disputes about meaninglessness or ambiguity.

Where does this leave us in our search for adequate criteria for

24 Gilbert Ryle, Dilemmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 9. The quotation suggests that Ryle no longer accepts the assumption that only subjects belonging to the same type can share univocal predicates. Thus, even if he did employ the category mistake argument in The Concept of Mind (and even here I may be misinterpreting him), he would probably not accept such an argument today.
"meaninglessness"? I have examined the three kinds of criteria that have most often been appealed to in claims about meaninglessness: the operationalist, the verificationist, and, finally, the category or type criterion. Each of these has proved defective. It seems, then, that we still do not have an adequate technique for locating and identifying nonsense. Should we abandon our use of this concept? Should we cease speaking of "meaningless statements?"

I shall attempt to answer these questions in the final chapter, where I shall also attempt to answer other general questions about the concept of meaninglessness. In anticipation, however, I might point out that, although none of the usual criteria of meaninglessness have proved adequate, it is not true that we have been unable to find any criteria at all. The three criteria of ambiguity which I tried to develop when discussing the term "hard" can also serve as criteria of meaninglessness because of the relation between meaninglessness and ambiguity. I shall have more to say about this relation, and about the use of these criteria, in the last chapter.