Ambiguity:
Real life examples

Ch 3: Second part of three
What is wrong with this argument?

- Humans bear their offspring alive.
- Bill Clinton is a human.
- \( \therefore \) Bill Clinton bears his offspring alive.
“Humans bear their offspring alive” is ambiguous. It might mean in the human species offspring are born live, a true statement about human offspring.

Or it might mean each and every human bears a living child, a false statement about each and every human.
You need to think clearly to cope with this kind of sophistry.
A famous argument:

- Everything has to have a cause.
- Therefore the universe has to have a cause.
- Therefore the cause of the universe, God, exists.
This is called the “cosmological” proof that God exists.
Everything has to have a cause.

Therefore the universe has to have a cause.

Therefore the cause of the universe, God, exists.

What’s the problem with this?
That everything taken INDIVIDUALLY was caused does not mean that everything taken COLLECTIVELY, as a single unit, was caused.
It’s like arguing:

- Every person has a father...
- Therefore the human species has a father.
A different kind of example:
You often hear people say things like:

“The average price of a new house in Hyde Park is $590,000.”
What’s the problem?

It’s ambiguous.
Is it the Mean, or is it the Median?

For many, the Median price (half the prices are above, half are below) is the more useful.
Yet a different example of how ambiguity enters into real life:

Here’s a snippet from Meet The Press..............>>>>>>>
TIM RUSSERT: But why don’t you support gay marriage?

JOHN EDWARDS: Well, I guess it was the way I was brought up.

See anything ambiguous here?
“Why don’t you support gay marriage?” is ambiguous.

It might mean:

- **What CAUSED** you to not support it???

Or it might mean:

- **What’s your ARGUMENT** for not supporting it???
Edwards used this ambiguity to avoid having to support his position with an argument!

- (Politicians use this technique a lot.)
The U.S. Constitution!
It has a lot of ambiguity…

One example is the Second Amendment.
“A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”
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- Grouping ambiguity: is it a collective right or an individual right?
- Semantic ambiguity: “keep and bear”: does this include, say, bringing a pistol to this class?
“A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”

■ Semantic ambiguity: “arms”: does this include, say, surface to air missiles? Grenade launchers?

■ Vagueness: “infringed”: does licensing, say, count as infringement? (more about vagueness in a moment!)
You can see from these few examples:

- Ambiguity is something you find in real life.
- As a critical thinker, you watch for it!