15. a. How does it become a man to behave towards the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.

—Henry David Thoreau, An Essay on Civil Disobedience, 1849

b. With all the imperfections of our present government, it is without comparison the best existing, or that ever did exist.

—Thomas Jefferson

3.3 Disputes and Ambiguity

Many disputes, whether about beliefs or about attitudes, are genuine. However, some disputes are merely verbal, arising only as a result of linguistic misunderstanding. The terms used by the disputing parties may have more than one meaning—they may be ambiguous—but such ambiguity may be unrecognized by the disputing parties. To uncover and to resolve verbal disagreements, ambiguities must be identified, and the alternative meanings of the critical terms in the dispute must be distinguished and clarified.

Disputes fall into three categories. The first is the obviously genuine dispute. If A roots for the Yankees, and B for the Red Sox, they are in genuine disagreement, although they disagree mainly in attitude. If C believes that Miami is south of Honolulu, and D denies this, they too are in genuine disagreement, but in this dispute about geographic facts a good map can settle the matter.

A second category is disputes in which the apparent conflict is not genuine and can be resolved by coming to agreement about how some word or phrase is to be understood. These may be called merely verbal disputes. F may hold that a tree falling in the wilderness with no person to hear it creates no sound, while G insists that a sound really is produced by the falling tree. If a “sound” is the outcome of a human auditory sensation, then F and G may agree that there was none; or if a “sound” is simply what is produced by vibrations in the air, then they may agree that a sound was indeed produced. Getting clear about what is meant by “sound” will resolve the disagreement, which was no more than verbal.

A third category, more slippery, is disputes that are apparently verbal but really genuine. A misunderstanding about the use of terms may be involved in such cases, but when that misunderstanding has been cleared up there remains a disagreement that goes beyond the meanings of the words. For example, should a film in which explicit sexual activity is depicted be considered “pornography”? J holds that its explicitness makes it pornographic and offensive; K holds that its beauty and sensitivity make it art and not pornography. Plainly they disagree about what “pornography” means—but after that
ambiguity has been exposed, it is likely that the parties will still disagree in
their judgment of that film. Whether the film is “pornographic” may be settled
by a definition of that term, but a deeper disagreement is then likely to be ex-
posed. The word “pornographic” plainly carries pejorative associations. J,
who finds the film objectionable, understands the word “pornographic” in
one way, while K, who approves of the film, uses the word “pornographic”
differently. Does the sexually explicit content of the film make it objectionable
and thus “pornographic”? J and K differ in their uses of the word, but for both
of them the emotional meaning of the word is very negative; and they also dif-
fer about the criteria for the application of that negative word, “pornography.”

In summary, when confronting a dispute that arises in discourse, we must
first ask whether there is some ambiguity that can be eliminated by clarifying
the alternative meanings in play. If there is, then we must ask whether clearing
up that linguistic issue will resolve the matter. If it does, the dispute was in-
deed merely verbal. If it does not, the dispute was genuine, although it may
have appeared to be merely verbal.

**EXERCISES**

A. Identify three disagreements in current political or social controversy that
are of the three types described in this section: one that is genuine, one that is
merely verbal, and one that is apparently verbal but really genuine. Explain
the disagreements in each case.

B. Discuss each of the following disputes. If the dispute is obviously genuine,
indicate each of the disputers’ positions with respect to the proposition at
issue. If it is merely verbal, resolve it by explaining the different senses
attached by the disputers to the key word or phrase that is used ambiguously.
If it is an apparently verbal dispute that is really genuine, locate the ambiguity
and explain the real disagreement involved.

1. Daye: Pete Rose was the greatest hitter in the history of base-
ball. He got more hits than any other major league player.

   Knight: No, Barry Bonds deserves that title. He hit more home
   runs than any other major league player.

2. Daye: Despite their great age, the plays of Sophocles are enor-
mously relevant today. They deal with eternally recurring
problems and values such as love and sacrifice, the con-
lict of generations, life and death—as central today as
they were over two thousand years ago.

   Knight: I don’t agree with you at all. Sophocles has nothing to
say about the pressing and immediate issues of our time:
inflation, unemployment, the population explosion, and the energy crisis. His plays have no relevance to today.

3. Daye: Bob Jones is certainly a wonderful father to his children. He provides a beautiful home in a fine neighborhood, buys them everything they need or want, and has made ample provision for their education.

Knight: I don’t think Bob Jones is a good father at all. He is so busy getting and spending that he has no time to be with his children. They hardly know him except as somebody who pays the bills.

4. Daye: Amalgamated General Corporation’s earnings were higher than ever last year, I see by reading their annual report.

Knight: No, their earnings were really much lower than in the preceding year, and they have been cited by the Securities and Exchange Commission for issuing a false and misleading report.

5. Daye: Business continues to be good for National Conglomerate, Inc. Their sales so far this year are 25 percent higher than they were at this time last year.

Knight: No, their business is not so good now. Their profits so far this year are 30 percent lower than they were last year at this time.

6. Daye: Ann is an excellent student. She takes a lively interest in everything and asks very intelligent questions in class.

Knight: Ann is one of the worst students I’ve ever seen. She never gets her assignments in on time.

7. Daye: Tom did it of his own free will. No pressure was brought to bear on him; no threats were made; no inducements were offered; there was no hint of force. He deliberated about it and made up his own mind.

Knight: That is impossible. Nobody has free will, because everything anyone does is inevitably determined by heredity and environment according to inexorable causal laws of nature.

8. Daye: Professor Graybeard is one of the most productive scholars at the university. The bibliography of his publications is longer than that of any of his colleagues.

Knight: I wouldn’t call him a productive scholar. He is a great teacher, but he has never produced any new ideas or discoveries in his entire career.
9. Daye: Betty finally got rid of that old Chevy and bought herself a new car. She’s driving a Buick now.

Knight: No, Betty didn’t buy herself a new car. That Buick is a good three years old.

10. Daye: Dick finally got rid of that old Ford of his and bought himself a new car. He’s driving a Pontiac now.

Knight: No, Dick didn’t buy himself a new car. It’s his roommate’s new Pontiac that he’s driving.

11. Daye: Helen lives a long way from campus. I walked out to see her the other day, and it took me nearly two hours to get there.

Knight: No, Helen doesn’t live such a long way from campus. I drove her home last night, and we reached her place in less than ten minutes.

12. Daye: Senator Gray is a fine man and a genuine liberal. He votes for every progressive measure that comes before the legislature.

Knight: He is no liberal, in my opinion. The old skinflint contributes less money to worthy causes than any other man in his income bracket.

13. Daye: The University of Winnemac overemphasizes athletics, for it has the largest college stadium in the world and has constructed new sports buildings instead of badly needed classroom space.

Knight: No, the University of Winnemac does not overemphasize athletics. Its academic standards are very high, and it sponsors a wide range of extracurricular activities for students in addition to its athletic program.

14. Daye: It was in bad taste to serve roast beef at the banquet. There were Hindus present, and it is against their religion to eat beef.

Knight: Bad taste, nothing! That was the tastiest meal I’ve had in a long time. I think it was delicious!

15. Daye: Don’t ask your wife about it. You ought to use your own judgment.

Knight: I will use my own judgment, and in my judgment, I should ask my wife.