# Is Saruman a "Peacemaker," and Abortion "Murder"?
## Report from the Debate

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On November 8th, 2024, another of the online debates organized periodically by Ignatianum University in Cracow took place. The subject of the discussion was the book *Argumenty Semantyczne: Pojęcie, Podział, Kryteria Oceny* [*Semantic Arguments: The Concept, Classification, and Criteria for Assessing*] by Jakub Pruś, published by Ignatianum University Press in 2023. The main idea of the book is that semantic arguments should be distinguished as a special type of argument, with a separate scheme and critical questions for assessing them. The book was debated by three invited guests: Prof. Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin), Prof. Adam Jonkisz (Ignatianum University in Cracow), and Dr. Szymon Makuła (University of Silesia in Katowice).

In the book, a "semantic argument" is defined as "an argument in which the meaning of a given term is established in order to support the persuasive goal of the speaker." Pruś explains that he has borrowed this term from the Polish logician Teresa Hołówka, but has elaborated it in terms very different to those she originally had in mind. To illustrate this type of arguing, he provides several examples supporting the conclusion that "Julius Caesar was a criminal." One appeals to historians' opinion (argument from authority), another compares Caesar to Stalin (argument from analogy), and the final one is constructed by establishing the criteria for correct employment of the term "criminal" (e.g., "if someone kills or orders the killing of many thousands of people, then he is a criminal"). This last argument would

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count as semantic, since it fixes the meaning of a particular term in order to support its claim.[1]

The debate started from a short presentation of the book, falling essentially into two parts that were concerned, respectively, with argumentation schemes for semantic arguments and criteria for assessing semantic arguments. Once the presentation had finished, each of the invited guests presented a short review of Pruś's work and made some critical comments.

## 1. Semantic Arguments: Argumentation Schemes and Critical Questions

Pruś distinguished two basic schemes for semantic arguments: arguments using definition (including Peter of Spain's distinction between arguments *to* and *from* definition) and arguments from classification.

Arguments to definition aim to include certain objects within the extension of a given definition, with this sometimes being the very end served by the reasoning in question ("this is racism"). Obviously, the semantic modification will be introduced through persuasive definition,[2] via the definition's premise:

- *Individual Premise*: *A* possesses some property *F.*
- *Definition Premise*: For all *x*, if *x* possesses some property *F,* then *x* fits definition *D* (where such a definition is, in the given context, controversial).
- *Conclusion*: *A* fits definition *D.*

It may happen that the argument can start out from a definition, and include a certain property in it, in order to attribute this property to a certain object ("All forms of racism should be prosecuted, therefore this given action also should be prosecuted"). Thus, the arguments to definition and from definition can be used together.

- *Definition Premise*: *A* fits definition *D.*
- *Classificatory Premise*: For all *x*, if *x* fits definition *D*, then *x* is classified as having the property *G* (where such a classification is, in the given context, controversial).
- *Conclusion*: *A* has the property *G.*

However, persuasive definitions are not the only way of modifying meaning: one may also modify meaning simply by linking two properties

1. The first formulation of the concept of semantic argument, and its definition, were presented in (Pruś 2019, 2020). The first typology of semantic argument was presented in (Pruś 2021), and the criteria for assessing semantic arguments in (Pruś and Macagno 2024).

2. "Definition is persuasive if it is put forward to support one"s claim in the discussion and there is an alternative definition of a given term" (Pruś and Aberdein 2022, 33).

together,[3] and then attribute a new property to a given object ("if something is prosecuted, then it is morally wrong, therefore racism is morally wrong").

- *Individual Premise*: *A* possesses some property *F*.
- *Classificatory Premise*: For all *x*, if *x* possesses property *F*, then *x* can be classified as possessing property *G* (where such a classification is, in the given context, controversial).
- *Conclusion*: *A* possesses property *G*.

These are the three most common types of semantic argument. Pruś provided three examples of such arguments. The first one refers to Tolkien's novel *Lord of the Rings*:

P1. (Hobbes's definition): Peace is the absence of war.
P2. (by definition): A warmonger is one who seeks to bring about acts of war.
P3. (by definition): A defender of peace is one who seeks to avoid acts of war.
P4. Théoden seeks to bring about acts of war.
P5. Saruman seeks to avoid acts of war.
C. Therefore, Théoden is a warmonger, and Saruman is a defender of peace.

The fixed meaning of "peace" in P1 (which implies P2 and P3) serves here to support the main conclusion, which seems rather controversial. This argument parallels a similar debate over whether Chamberlain or Churchill should be classified as a peacemaker (see: Harold 2013). In this case, one can clearly see that there is something wrong with that definition.

Another example is provided by a debate between three medical doctors in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. In the article "A Consideration of Therapeutic Abortion," Samuel A. Cosgrove and Patricia A. Carter state:

> The fetus is a human individual with all the potentialities of every human being, and that its destruction is murder, only justifiable in the most extreme circumstances involving direct and imminent threat to the mother's life. (1944, 299)

In the next issue of the journal, T.W. Jones responded with the following:

> In my belief, murder is an unpleasant and ugly word. His [Cosgrove's] definition of murder, premeditated destruction of human life, is excellent as far

3. Douglas Walton calls this an *Argument from Verbal Classification* (Walton 2008, 2005; Walton and Macagno 2009).

> as it goes, but it does not go far enough. One word is needed for completion, namely, malice. (1944, 895)

He then went on to offer the dictionary definition of murder to support his view:

> I substantiate my viewpoint with definitions from Webster's International Dictionary: "Murder—n—The offense of killing a human being with malice, pretense, or aforethought, express or implied; intentional and unlawful homicide." (1944, 895)

In his reply, Cosgrove arrives at the opposite conclusion, albeit starting from the same definition of murder. He argues that while murder does indeed require malice, abortion itself entails an implied form of malice. To substantiate this claim, he appeals to the same dictionary definition of "malice" used by Jones. On this basis, Cosgrove concludes that abortion does, in fact, fall under the definition of murder.

So what do these two arguments, one on peace (and war) and the other on murder and abortion, have in common? In both of them we encounter a fixing of meaning (via persuasive definition), which latter is used to support the conclusion. How to assess such arguments? Pruś described the six main criteria for evaluating semantic arguments, presenting these in the form of critical questions:

1. The transparency criterion: "Is the person establishing the meaning doing so in a transparent way?"
2. Consistency with usage: "Does the established meaning correspond to some common linguistic practice? Are we in some way violating established usage?"
3. Consequences: "Does the established meaning support acceptable values and interests? What will happen if we adopt such a meaning?" (This refers to social, political, and moral consequences.)
4. Authority: "Does the person establishing the meaning have the authority to do so? Is this required by some relevant office or document?" (This is especially important in legal definitions.)
5. Alternatives: "Are there any alternative ways of understanding the meaning in question, or could the given meaning be understood differently?"
6. Individual premise criterion: "Does the given object really have the property that qualifies or disqualifies it from falling

within the scope of the definition?" (e.g., in the case of a ban on vehicles in a park, is the given object actually a vehicle?).

In the wake of the presentation (summarized above) of the general notion of semantic arguments, along with their types and critical questions, the debate commenced.

## 2. Key Themes and Discussions

Instead of presenting its contents in their original chronological sequence we will group the comments made by the invited guests and the author himself into a few key themes.

### *2.1. Rationality in Argumentation and the Pragmatic Assumption*

Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik asked whether considerations pertaining to argumentation presuppose the rationality of the subject. Pruś responded that he did not believe argumentation contains rationality in its definition, although reasoning (a part of argumentation) may of course be flawed. He stressed that the pragmatic definition of a semantic argument, with the added note about the controversiality of the definition, is essential. Without it, even the Socratic syllogism could be wrongly classified as a semantic argument.

### *2.2. "Getting at the Essence of Things" vs. Language Manipulation*

Lekka-Kowalik raised the problem of distinguishing "uncovering the essence of things" from manipulating language. Referring to Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (about "true freedom" and "true abstinence"), Pruś noted that adding adjectives such as "true," "real," or "authentic" can serve manipulative purposes. He argued that those who manipulate concepts (by subtly altering meanings under the guise of citing dictionary definitions) are essentially reshaping arguments in a way that makes them tautological. For Pruś, definitions should be treated as arguments subject to critical evaluation, not as unquestionable "revelations."

### *2.3. Rational vs. Irrational Justifications for Changing Definitions*

In the debate about Pluto's planetary status, Pruś pointed out that the "irrationality" of the justification lay in weighing pragmatic consequences. The International Astronomical Union's decision to redefine "planet" stemmed from the discovery of many celestial bodies larger than Pluto. The choice boiled down to whether to recognize 9, 12, or perhaps 20+ planets. The decision, though not "rational" in the sense of capturing the "essence of a planet," was pragmatic, focusing as it did on the largest and most important bodies in the Solar System. He called this approach "soft

pragmatism," encompassing both essentialists and constructivists, since ultimately both appeal to consequences. Even appeals to the "essence of things" can be reframed as consequences (e.g., the consequence of being inconsistent with the cognitive value of truth).

*2.4. The Problem of Defining Eristic and Terminological Consistency*

Adam Jonkisz identified a terminological inconsistency in the book: namely, that certain concepts were defined in terms of activities—such as *argumentation* and *persuasion*—whereas *eristic* was characterized as an art or skill. This discrepancy, he argued, undermines the internal coherence of the conceptual framework. In response, Pruś acknowledged the inconsistency and conceded that defining *eristic* as an activity would have been more appropriate. Such a redefinition ensures uniformity across the set of terms, thereby enabling the substituting of these concepts in more complex definitions. This, in turn, makes it possible to assess whether the terms mutually correspond, and whether the resulting system of definitions yields a comprehensive and coherent theoretical framework.

*2.5. The Strength of Semantic Arguments and Critical Questions*

Szymon Makuła raised the issue of the lack of a theory of "argument strength" in argumentation studies. He proposed using critical questions as a tool for assessing argument strength and asked why these particular questions, and not others, were chosen. He suggested that critical questions should be designed so that their answers also address other questions, thereby maximizing informational value. Specifically, he proposed replacing the first critical question ("Was the change in meaning made transparently?") with "Does the argument provide justification for the change in meaning?" Justification implies transparency, but not vice versa. Pruś agreed that this proposal was "elegant," stressing that changes in meaning (e.g., of the word *Negro*) require justificatory reasons, and that without justification the argument will be weak. He also added that in cases of unsettled meanings (e.g., abortion, gender), unjustified semantic arguments may still be considered, though his framework focuses on usefulness.

*2.6. Pragmatism vs. Essentialism: Reality and Definitions*

Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik repeatedly raised the following issue: if definitions do not reach as far as reality, are we condemned to a "battle of definitions," with disputes settled by force rather than by reality itself?

The "wetlands" example: Pruś noted that in the case of "wetlands," the decision to narrow the definition was political, it being aimed

at enabling development. Even if scientists provided factual information, the final decision was political.

The "woman" example: Lekka-Kowalik countered with the example of defining "woman" as "a sexual object serving to provide men with pleasure." She questioned whether such a definition can be accepted if it lacks any connection to the "essence of things."

Pruś maintained that agreement or disagreement with such a definition stems from rejection of exploitation of one half of humanity by the other half, not from appeals to "essence." He stressed that reality "speaks to us" through science and through others' voices, and that his framework aims to furnish evaluative criteria that will prove useful across a range of philosophical positions (be they essentialist or constructivist).

Makuła added that definitions are logical tools for resolving disputes about meaning or regulating ambiguity. Language changes for various reasons, including the discovery of new phenomena (e.g., depression, gender issues). This does not imply abandoning reality, but acknowledging its presence in usage, scientific data, or empirical testing of operational definitions. He noted that in everyday life people often act without strict definitions (e.g., of "trash").

In conclusion, Pruś emphasized that his proposal was not a theory of truth, but a practical tool for evaluating arguments—analogous to evaluating arguments from authority, which also do not require adopting a specific theory of truth or metaphysics. The focus should be on "applicability" and "usefulness."

The debate revealed the complexity of semantic arguments, which underlie many disputes—scientific, political and social. The key insight that emerged was that definitions have consequences, and their acceptance often stems from pragmatic considerations, interests and values, rather than from uncovering the "essence of things." Pruś's proposal offers tools for the systematic evaluation of these arguments, taking into account their context and consequences, and linguistic usage. The challenge is to find a way to balance pragmatism with appeals to reality, in order to avoid purely power-based resolutions in debates.

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