What the "is water is wet?" debate reveals about how we interpret and argue about definitions –and how those interpretations shape and distort public discourse

In November of 2017, a sensational debate took over the internet on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and gained widespread attention in schools and workplaces: Is water wet? At the core of the debate, there are two differing perspectives and hardly any in between. On one side, people believe that water is wet, the other believes that water is not wet. However, it is much more complicated than that. While it seems like a joke, the debate reveals how people argue with each other about definitions. This essay will examine how the debate uncovers the rhetorical nature of definitional arguments and how a pragmatic approach helps explain why these misunderstandings persist and what's at stake.

One side claims that water is "wet." They assume that "wet" means "covered in water," and since water makes things wet, it therefore is wet itself. Even George Orwell, while not particularly known as a philosophical pragmatist, mentioned in his popular dystopian novel "1984," "Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth's center." Many believe that if you cannot acquiesce to scientific and logical appeals, then let the truth of a lauded novel satisfy you. This side applies a more common and experiential understanding of the debate. Their audience is assumed to be the general public that uses accessible logic and informal reasoning. The other side claims that water is not "wet." They believe that water means a condition caused by contact with water, and that water cannot wet itself. This side uses more scientific and technical language for an audience that values precision or correction. This side argues that water is not wet because of the fallacy of division where what is true for the whole, must be true for all its parts. They believe that just because water makes things wet, that doesn't make water itself

wet because that's a logical fallacy. Both sides operate their arguments with completely different definitions of "wet" and neither side dares to probe their presupposition.

This argument is hardly scientific but semantic. One side is practical with a common sense definition and the other is more technical with a context-specific definition. At the core, they are answering incompatible questions: "What feels true in use?" vs. "What is logically precise?"

It's easy to run on a hamster wheel with this debate but a pragmatic lens might create middle ground. Through William James' perspective, the question "is water wet?" is less about figuring out a true answer and more about understanding how definitions function in context. Pragmatism focuses on the practical consequences of ideas and what a statement can do in real life, without concern if it's logically concrete. Normally, when we say that something is "wet" that usually means that something has been touched by water. But when we think about whether water itself is wet, the term becomes disconnected from everyday use and the conversation turns more abstract. The debate becomes misunderstood with one side using practicality and the other uses logic or science. A pragmatic approach helps us see that maybe neither side is necessarily wrong, rather they are using language for different purposes. Instead of trying to "solve" a debate like this, a pragmatic approach allows us to see why an argument like this exists. It encourages us to ask: What do we gain or lose by defining things this way?

Pragmatically, the debate only matters when it serves a real-world function, such as maybe teaching a little kid the difference between dryness and wetness. Once the term loses that context, the debate just turns into a rhetorical performance. And yet, even that performance teaches us something: How people argue with each other, how we misunderstand each other, and

how difficult shared meaning can be to obtain. What's at stake isn't the nature of water, it's how we define everyday words and who decides.

The "is water wet?" debate is a miniature example of how rhetorical misunderstandings work. Definitional assumptions are everywhere–news, science, politics, media, and even memes. By using a pragmatic lens we can focus less on asking what is "right" and ask "what's at stake, what do we mean, and what difference does it make?" Whether or not water is wet doesn't really matter but understanding how we define "wet" and why we even care about it does.

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