

## Defining a Catch-22

The phrase catch-22 is frequently applied to situations in which neither option is desirable; this is not the true meaning of catch-22 however.

In the book, the original phrase is explained thus:

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.

The summary is essentially this:

- 1) You can stop flying combat missions if you are mentally incompetent.
- 2) Wanting to stop flying combat missions means you are mentally competent.
- 3) Therefore, no one can stop flying combat missions.

In logic terms, it can be expressed as:

C requires (implies) A and B; If A then not B; If B then not A. In this example, in order to leave, you must be both insane and request to leave. If you're insane, then you can't request to leave. If you request to leave, then you're not insane. Therefore, you can never leave. A true catch-22 is a locked loop, where you can be in one of two states, A or B. If you are in A you are allowed to be in B—but by moving to state B, you disqualify yourself from remaining in the original A state.

To some degree all of the following are catch-22s of the novel:

- The only people who can ask questions are those that don't ask questions.
- The only time someone can see Major Major is when he is not in the office. (This creates a particularly perverse problem for his aide Towser who can only get instructions about what to do when Major Major is out).
- All soldiers must follow the orders of their commanding officers even if the orders conflict with orders from higher up.

To escape a catch-22 requires an abandoning of what we consider "rational" behavior. The only way to get out of an absurd situation is to come up with an equally absurd solution. It's rarely desirable, but there *is* a way out. Consider how Yossarian manages to escape the many catch-22s he encounters.