**Assignment: Defining**

“The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.” ― Socrates

“If you wish to converse with me, define your terms.” ―Voltaire

**Types of Definitions:**

* *Lexical Definitions:* Lexical, or dictionary, definitions are reports of how a word is used by competent speakers of the language. They are correct or incorrect depending on whether they accurately reflect common usage. Example: ‘Bachelor’ means ‘unmarried man’.
* *Ostensive Definitions:* An ostensive definition attempts to convey the meaning of a word by pointing out instances of it. Example: Green is the color of grass, limes, lily pads, and emeralds.
* *Precising Definitions:* Precising definitions are used to refine the meaning of an established term whose meaning is vague. Example: Red is electromagnetic radiation with a wavelength interval between 700–635 nm and a frequency interval between 430–480 THz.
* *Stipulative Definitions:* Stipulative definitions stipulate how a word will be used. Sometimes, stipulative definitions are used to introduce wholly new terms, but, other times, they are used to co-opt an existing word to mean something other than what it ordinarily means. Example: Let me just stipulate that I’ll use the word ‘person’ to mean ‘self-aware being’, whether that being is human or not.

**What a lexical definition should do:** A lexical definition should make clear and explicit the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to fall into that category. Thus, if ‘bachelor’ means ‘unmarried man’, then it must be that something is a bachelor if and only if that something is an unmarried man. To say that some condition is necessary for, say, being a bachelor (e.g., that being a man is a necessary condition for being a bachelor) is to say that that condition must be met by something for it to be a bachelor. But this leaves open the possibility that this something must also satisfy other conditions for being a bachelor (e.g., must also be unmarried). Thus, necessary conditions needn’t be sufficient. To say that some condition is sufficient for, say, having a doctorate (e.g., that having a PhD is a sufficient condition for having a doctorate) is to say that that nothing besides this condition needs to be met in order to have a doctorate. But it leaves open the possibility that one could count as having a doctorate without meeting this condition (e.g., that one could count as having a doctorate by having an MD instead of a PhD). Thus, sufficient conditions needn’t be necessary.

**Why it’s important to define one’s terms:** Oftentimes, it’s impossible for us to answer a question without understanding the meaning of the relevant words. Consider, for instance: Is affirmative action racial discrimination? The answer depends on what we mean by ‘racial discrimination’—or, in other words, on how we define ‘racial discrimination’. Does ‘racial discrimination’ mean ‘differential treatment based on race’ or ‘unjust and prejudicial treatment based on race’? Thus, a lack of clarity in meaning can obstruct both good reasoning and effective communication. It can lead to people talking past one another or to their equivocating between two different meanings of a word. One way to avoid such problems is to define one’s terms.

**Criteria for Evaluating a Proposed Lexical Definition:** (1) Take any sentence in which a given word is being used as opposed to mentioned, you should be able to replace that word with its definition without changing what that sentence is saying.[[1]](#footnote-1) In making this replacement, nothing should be gained and nothing (but concision) should be lost. Thus, if ‘bachelor’ means ‘unmarried man’, then we should be able to replace ‘bachelor’ with ‘unmarried man’ in any sentence in which the word ‘bachelor’ is being used without changing the meaning of that sentence. (2) It shouldn’t be too narrow. There should be nothing that a competent speaker would find it felicitous to use that word to refer to that is excluded by the proposed definition. Thus, it would be too narrow to define ‘bachelor’ as ‘an unmarried man who would make for a particularly desirable husband’. This would exclude very old unmarried men who might not count as the most eligible of bachelors, but are, nonetheless, bachelors. (3) It shouldn’t be too broad. There should be nothing that fits the definition that a competent speaker would find infelicitous to use that word to refer to. Thus, it would be a mistake to define ‘bachelor’ as ‘unmarried male’. This would be too broad in that it would include unmarried male puppies, which it would infelicitous to refer to as bachelors. (4) If the word is vague, then its definition should also be vague and in exactly the same way. Is a seventeen-year-old boy a bachelor? Well, it’s not clear. This is, perhaps, a borderline case. But the definition ‘unmarried man’ reflects this in that it’s also borderline whether a seventeen-year-old boy counts as a man. (5) It shouldn’t be circular—that is, it should not use the word that’s to be defined (or any variant of it) in its definition. Thus, to define a bachelor as someone who it be appropriate to throw a bachelor party for would be circular. (7) the term being defined shouldn’t be indefinable. Some words cannot be given lexical definitions, because they’re primitive. Arguably, the word ‘red’ is a primitive in that there seems to be no way to give it a non-circular lexical definition. So, we should not try to give a lexical definition for any indefinable words.

**Ambiguity:** Many words are ambiguous, such that the word can mean different things in different contexts. Or it will be unclear what is meant in the given context. Consequently, you’ll find that many words have more than one lexical definition. For instance, the word ‘bank’ is ambiguous. And, thus, in the dictionary, you’ll find more than one lexical definition for it, including these two: (1) bank1 – “the land alongside or sloping down to a river or lake” and (2) bank2 – “a financial establishment that invests money deposited by customers, pays it out when required, makes loans at interest, and exchanges currency.”

ASSIGNMENT: Answer all or some proper subset of the following questions making sure that what you turn in lies somewhere between 500 and 1,000 words long. You MUST include a word count. Your writing must be clear, concise, and precise, and it must not contain many errors in diction, grammar, or punctuation. Your response must indicate careful and sustained thought on the relevant topics.

**(Q1) Evaluate the following proposed lexical definitions. Be sure to defend your evaluations.**

1. ‘Water’ means ‘H2O’.
2. ‘Wrong’ means ‘forbidden by God’.
3. ‘Wrong’ means ‘that which the agent would be blameworthy for doing absent some suitable excuse (such as an inability to do otherwise)’.
4. ‘Good’ means ‘conducive to pleasure’.
5. ‘Good’ means ‘that which is desired’.
6. ‘Good’ means ‘that which ought to be desired’.
7. ‘Happy’ means ‘not unhappy’.
8. ‘Sane’ means ‘not insane’.
9. ‘Human being’ means ‘a being with the power to reason abstractly and communicate using sophisticated languages’.

**(Q2) Tyrant**

Do your best to provide the correct lexical definition of ‘tyrant’.

**(Q3) Omnipotent**

Do your best to provide the correct lexical definition of ‘omnipotent’.

**(Q4) ‘Count not’ and ‘would not’**

Do your best to provide the correct lexical definitions of both ‘could not’ and ‘would not’.

**(Q5) Obligatory**

Consider the following two proposed lexical definitions for ‘S is obligated to φ’:

1. ‘S is obligated to φ’ means ‘φ is S’s only permissible option’.
2. ‘S is obligated to φ’ means ‘it would be wrong for S to perform any alternative to φ’.

In evaluating these two, consider cases like Sophie’s choice, cases where it seems that the subject (that is, ‘S’ or Sophie) will act wrongly no matter what she does.

**(Q6) Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for POTUS**

List some necessary conditions for being the President of the United States. State, in each case, whether they’re also sufficient. List at least one sufficient condition for being the President of the United States. State, in each case, whether this is necessary.

**(Q7) Yellow**

Can you provide an adequate (and, thus, non-circular) lexical definition of ‘yellow’? If you can’t provide an adequate lexical definition for a word, what does that mean?

**(Q8) The Theory of Evolution**

Some argue as follows: The theory of evolution is just a theory. Something that’s just a theory is something that’s just an unproven supposition (i.e., that’s just mere conjecture). We should not be teaching unproven suppositions in our public schools. Therefore, we should not be teaching the theory of evolution in our public schools.

Think about how we might define ‘theory’. Is the word ambiguous? How does this bear on whether we should be convinced by the above argument?

1. To use a word is to employ it to refer to the idea, thing, or concept that it stands for. Example: “A cat is a kind of mammal.” To mention a word is to employ it (often using inverted commas) to refer to the word itself. Example: “The word ‘cat’ has three letters and starts with the third letter in the alphabet.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)