4/A Fair Exchange:
Definition
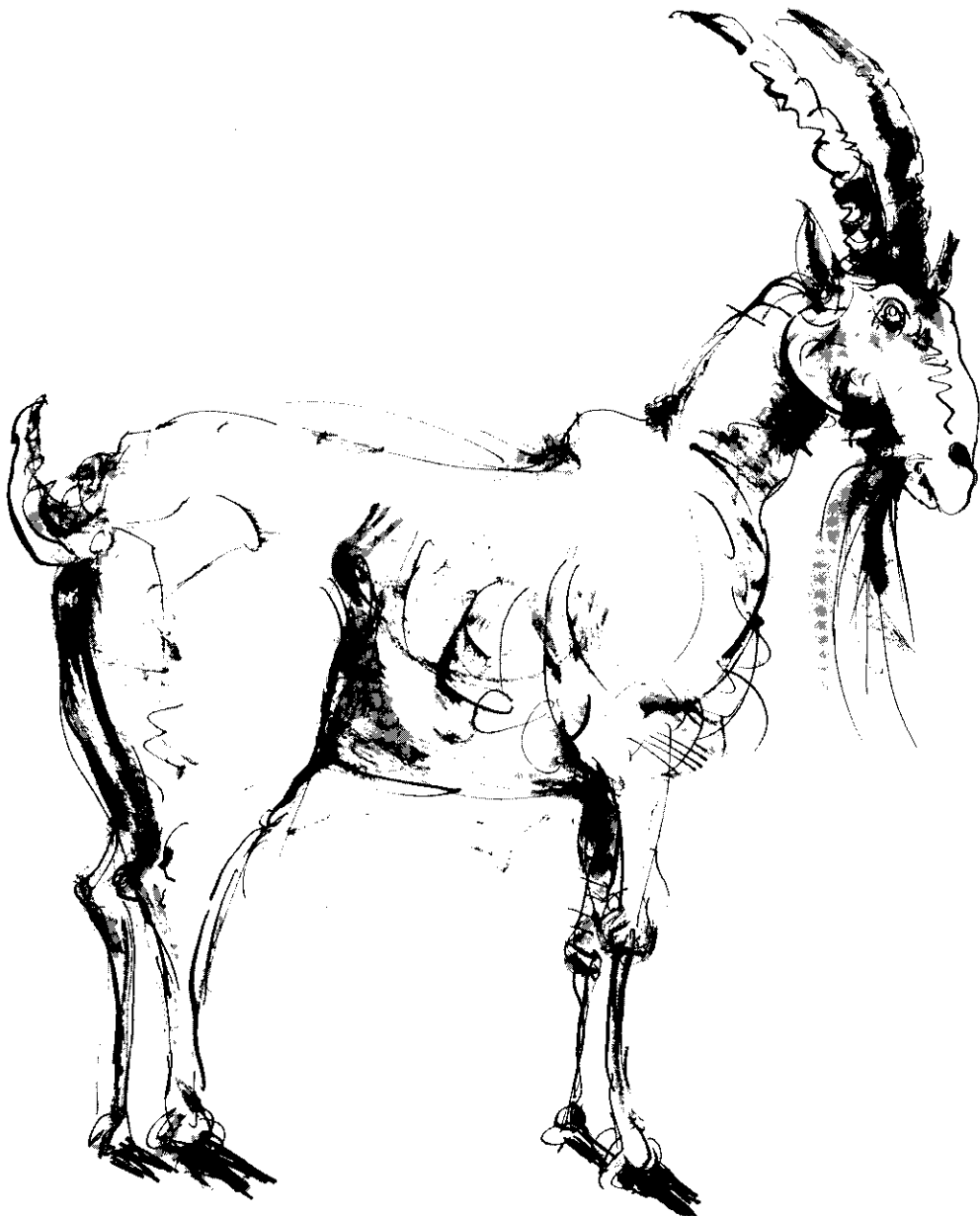
GOAT: Antique garbage disposal unit

IN THE last chapter, we witnessed the dangers of connotation and forged weapons from the fires of reason to fight those dread creatures, ambiguity and vagueness. In this chapter, we'll continue our battle against the dark forces of language. We'll devote ourselves to becoming more self-conscious and critical about definitions. In the process, we'll acquire some more sophisticated knowledge about how to avoid the puzzles and confusions of language, and we'll also acquire the tools necessary to present and evaluate definitions.

In "Oil and Water," we'll make a beginning by dividing definitions into two categories. These categories are based upon whether we are reporting what a word means or laying down a rule for using it. "They Laughed" will be our workshop section, and there we'll develop several methods or techniques for defining. At the end we'll see that they are all just variations on a single prime technique that is connected with the view of meaning that we accepted in Chapter 2.

Definitions, like apples and eggs, can be good or bad. But in order to evaluate them we need to have in mind some criteria or standards against which they can be measured. We'll devote "Separating Sheep from Goats" to presenting standards for criticism and evaluation.

In the last section, "Dirty Definitions," we'll talk about the ways in which definitions can be used as tools by the Kingdom of Darkness, about how they can deceive and mislead. There we'll discuss two illegitimate types of definition, persuasive and loaded.

Before doing any of this, though, there is a matter that has to be tended to. We need to say what a definition is before we start talking about definitions. In short, we need a definition of "definition."

A blatant fact that is easily ignored because it causes so few practical difficulties is that definitions are of *words*. They are, of course, also of expressions, phrases, terms, symbols, and so on, but we can easily stretch "word" to cover these as well.

Definitions are *not* appropriate for the things that words refer to, name, describe, characterize, or whatever. Thus we define the word "table" and not the object from which we ate breakfast. No one can eat

large disposal unit

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breakfast at a word, and no one can define a table. We can eat off tables, pound on them, carve our initials on them, or throw them on bonfires, but we cannot define them.

We can define "table," but we can't do any of the things with it that we can do with a table. There are, of course, other things we can do with "table." We can grave it in bronze, shout it from the rooftops, whisper it gently, or write it in blood. We can do none of these things with the objects to which the word refers.

In sum, then, definitions are appropriate only for words and not for the objects or states of affairs that words refer to. And to say this is only to acknowledge the use-mention distinction. (See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the distinction.) To define a word involves talking about the word. That is, it involves mentioning the word, rather than using it. What we want to say about it, of course, is what it means.

After all this to-do about only words being defined, the plain truth is that people don't usually observe logic-book niceties in asking for and in giving definitions. People rarely say such things as "What does the word 'gazebo' mean?"

Such questions are highly unnatural in most ordinary situations. About the only time that anyone asks them is when the word is a foreign one or when he hasn't got the slightest clue as to whether the word refers to a machine, a way of acting, a tasty dessert, or what.

Contrary to the impression given above, then, when most people want a definition they don't ask about the word. They ask about what the word refers to. The ordinary way to ask for a definition of "gazebo" would be to ask "What's a gazebo?"

The typical response wouldn't be to start out with "The word 'gazebo' means. . . ." Rather it would be something like "A gazebo is a small house where one can sit and enjoy a view." More often than not, then, a definition is presented as if it were only a description of whatever is referred to by the word.

There is nothing wrong about giving a definition in this way. Not only is it common practice, but it's a practice we'll sometimes find it convenient to follow. The only real danger in giving definitions in this way is that it's not always clear whether someone is offering a definition of a word or whether he is just mentioning a few facts about what the word refers to.

Suppose someone says, "A hog is an animal that wallows around in the mud a lot." Is he defining "hog" or just making a casual observation about the habits of hogs?

Making the use-mention distinction has the advantage of guaranteeing that we put our cards on the table. When we say, "The word 'hog' means . . .," then we've made it clear that we are giving a definition of the word. People are then in a position to recognize that we at least claim to be explaining the meaning of a word. They then know how to respond to what we say.

Oil and Water: Stipulative and Reportive Definitions

Oil and water never mix (unless there's detergent present), and neither do the two general types of definition we're going to talk about here. So far as we're concerned, all definitions will be either stipulative ones or reportive ones. That is, they will either lay down a rule for the use of a word or they will report on actual use. Definitions, like people, can't serve two masters. Why this is so will soon be obvious.

Stipulative Definitions

To stipulate is to lay down a condition. Someone might say, for example, "Club regulations expressly stipulate that a dog must wear a collar in order to be served in the dining room." A stipulative definition, then, consists in laying down a condition for using a certain word. It is, in effect, an announcement of the rule that will be followed in using the word.

The word introduced by a stipulative definition may be a newly minted one or it may be one already in common currency that we want to use in a new or special way. Which it is gives us grounds for distinguishing between two kinds of stipulative definitions.

Arbitrary

Let's start by considering a case in which we might want to use a stipulative definition to introduce a brand-new word.

Suppose you were an anthropologist writing a field report on a tribe you had been studying and you found it necessary to refer very often to the last man to return to the village after a hunt who brings no game with him. You might find it convenient to coin a word to refer to the person who is picked out by this long descriptive phrase. Otherwise, you would have to keep using the phrase over and over.

You might, quite arbitrarily, combine a few letters from the description and come up with "lamgam."

Your readers could hardly be expected to know what this means, since you just made it up, so you have to give a definition of the word. You would have to say something like:

> In this report, I shall use the word "lamgam" to mean the same as "the last man to return to the village after a hunt who brings no game with him."

This is, of course, a stipulative definition. It is a resolution or decision to use a certain word in the way indicated by the definition. The definition specifies the rule for using the word. It lays down the condition governing the use of the word "lamgam."

In cases like this, there is a totally free choice as to whether a new term is introduced and, if so, what it is. There is, as we've said, no preexisting standard or rule of use that the definition must report. For this reason, we might call stipulative definitions that introduce wholly new expressions *arbitrary stipulative definitions*.

Newly created technical terms, abbreviations, and symbols are all typically introduced for the first time by means of arbitrary stipulative definitions. Consider these cases:

1. Instead of writing "B.C." after a number, I shall write "−" in front of it to indicate the same thing.
2. By "X" I shall mean "the sum of all values of x."
3. Let "P_1" refer to the first person who enters the room.

Arbitrary stipulative definitions are not reports on standard practices. They can, however, be offered as recommendations to the effect that the expression introduced be *made* a part of standard practice. That is, they can be presented as proposals for general adoption. If a proposal is adopted and the word becomes used, then a report about the meaning of the word ceases to be an arbitrary stipulative definition. It becomes a report about some standard use of the word. In short, the arbitrary meaning of the word becomes a conventional meaning. (See Chapter 2 for further discussion of the distinction between arbitrary and conventional meaning.)

When, for example, Norbert Wiener introduced the new term "cybernetics," he defined it as "the science of communication and control systems." This was an arbitrary stipulative definition. It was an explanation of how he was going to use the term. But in addition to announcing the rule that he was going to follow, Wiener also expressed the hope that others would take up the word and use it in the same way. His hope turned out to be well founded, and a word that began life by means of an arbitrary stipulative definition has now come to have an ordinary or conventional use. Anyone who defines the word nowadays must take the standard meaning of the word into account.

Let's consider a case now in which we might want both to introduce a stipulative definition and to offer it as a proposal for general acceptance. The reason for considering such a case, as we'll see, is to make clear what sort of critical considerations are relevant to evaluating stipulative definitions.

Suppose you were colorblind and couldn't distinguish between red and green. Since both red and green look alike to you, you might see no reason for having the two words "red" and "green." Why have two words to refer to (what would be for you) the same color?

Suppose, further, that you got fed up with linguistic discrimination against the colorblind in our society and formed a CB Liberation group. One of the aims of the group is to get people who aren't colorblind to stop

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using the words "red" and "green," because their use makes CB people painfully aware of their handicap.

To accomplish this aim, you introduce a new word. The word "reg," you explain, refers to both the color red and the color green. Thus, to those with so-called normal vision, something is reg if it is either red or green. For those in the CB group, who can't detect the difference, both colors are simply reg. They don't even have to say to themselves, as others do, "If it is red or if it is green, then it is reg." They simply recognize a certain color as reg.

In the event that you succeeded in getting society to adopt this word, then we would be stopping and going at reg traffic lights, visiting countries on the Reg Sea, and sitting on reg grass.

In introducing the word "reg," you would be making use of an arbitrary stipulative definition. You would be saying, in effect, "This is the rule in accordance with which the word 'reg' is to be used."

Since we are the masters of language and not it of us, we are completely free to introduce any new words that we wish to. No one is going to keep us from it. And, as we've already seen, arbitrary stipulative definitions are just the way that new expressions are deliberately introduced.

But, of course, the CB Liberation group is interested in doing more than merely defining a word by stipulating its meaning. It wants to get its definition accepted by society so that the new word will become one used in ordinary life. It wants the word to be adopted and, by its use, to acquire a conventional meaning, one that is the same as the original arbitrary meaning.

The CB group, then, is making a proposal that the word "reg" be accepted in general usage in accordance with the rule that it laid down. Since a proposal is not something that can be true or false, no one could object that in defining "reg" to mean "red or green" you were saying something that wasn't true. On the other hand, no one could say that you were saying something that *was* true either. Truth and falsity simply don't enter the picture.

A proposal can't be true or false, but it can be ill-considered, silly, a bad idea, or something of the kind. That is, a proposal can be evaluated with respect to certain aims or purposes, and it can be judged in terms of how helpful it would be in achieving them.

The proposal that we use "reg" to replace "red" and "green" can undoubtedly be supported by reasons. It is undeniably true that our society is arranged so as to discriminate against people who are red-green colorblind. To take a trivial case, we think it's peculiar for people to wear one red sock and one green sock, and anyone who does it is likely to be ridiculed. More seriously, our traffic lights are based on red and green signals, and the colorblind must try to make use of cues other than color to know what a light is directing them to do.

On the other hand, compared to the many reasons why we find it

useful to distinguish between red and green, the proposal that we use "reg" to refer to both colors has little going for it. Not only would most people not want to sing "Reg Grow the Lilacs," but they would point out that having two words permits us to give more refined descriptions. An amateur geologist who had been told that garnets were reg, for example, wouldn't know enough to be surprised should he happen to find a green garnet.

It could be argued, then, that the social justice that would be achieved by ending discrimination against the red-green colorblind by adopting the proposal wouldn't be sufficiently great to outweigh the disadvantages of abandoning "red" and "green" in favor of "reg." Furthermore, it could be said, the discrimination could be ended in other ways without having to alter the language.

Whichever side of this controversy one finds convincing doesn't matter for our purposes. The point is that even though it's not appropriate to talk about stipulative definitions being true or false, this does not mean that they are beyond challenge. We are particularly moved to criticize when an arbitrary stipulative definition is presented to us as a proposal recommended for general adoption. We then examine it in terms of its advantages and disadvantages with respect to certain goals or purposes.

We aren't ordinarily as ready to criticize someone who introduces an arbitrary stipulative definition for his own purposes and doesn't recommend that it be made a general convention. We can do so, however, and sometimes there is good reason for us to do so. If, for example, the writer of a textbook introduces a large number of new words or symbols that we regard as unnecessary or confusing, we have a perfect right to object to them in just those terms. Everyone is free to make use of as many stipulative definitions as he likes; there's no law against it. But this doesn't mean that the definitions are a good idea or that we can't criticize them.

Restricting

Let's turn now to the second type of stipulative definition that we'll be concerned with. This is the kind that involves making special use of a word that already has an ordinary or standard meaning.

Anyone who has ever read his insurance policy carefully, examined his income tax instructions, or listened to a court proceeding is well aware of the fact that a number of rather ordinary and familiar words are used in some quite extraordinary ways.

Words like "dependent," "building," "blind," "income," and "damage" are pulled out of ordinary language and redefined for use in a new context. In ordinary language, for example, the expression "head of household" has a rather broad usage, and the boundaries of its application are rather indefinite. A man or woman who makes all the decisions

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in a family might correctly be called the head of the household, even
though he or she contributes no money for its support. For tax purposes,
however, "head of household" is defined as "an unmarried person who
furnishes over half the cost of maintaining a household for at least one
relative."

The meaning given to the expression by this definition is certainly
connected with the ordinary meaning, but the two are not at all the same.
Furnishing a majority of the cost of supporting a household is certainly
one of the conditions relevant to determining, in ordinary life, whether
someone is to be considered the head of a household or not. But it is far
from the only relevant condition, and even when it is met we might still
not consider such a person the head.

Definitions of this kind involve taking an ordinary word and stipulat-
ing what it will be taken to mean in a special context. The redefined word
will almost always have a much more narrow or restricted range of
application than the word's ordinary usage permits. For this reason, we
can call definitions of this sort *restricting stipulative definitions*. (Since the
definitions are intended to make the use of the words more precise, they
are also sometimes called "precising definitions.")

In our example, it's clear that "head of household" will apply to a much
narrower range of cases when the expression is used in accordance with
the condition in the stipulative definition than it ordinarily does. Fur-
thermore, by laying down an explicit condition to govern the use of the
word, the definition does much to eliminate the possibility of vagueness
and ambiguity in the use of the expression. Far fewer problems will arise
about just who is to be considered the head of a household.

Indicators that an ordinary word is going to be given a restricted or
special meaning by stipulative definition are phrases such as "for the
purpose of this contract," "we shall understand a [such and such] to be,"
and "in this book I shall mean by. . . ." Expressions such as these are a
tip-off that the word defined will, in the context, be used in a way that
does not conform in all respects to its ordinary meaning.

Words that are made the object of restrictive stipulative definitions
don't lose their citizenship in the commonwealth of ordinary language.
No matter what the tax laws or the insurance companies say, we are free
to continue using words like "income" and "loss" in the way that we
always have. Restrictive stipulative definitions, in effect, make technical
terms out of ordinary words. Outside of the special situations, however,
the words continue to have their old meanings.

It does happen, of course, that restricting definitions come to alter
the meaning of ordinary words. That is, the meaning assigned to the
word by the definition becomes the generally accepted meaning. In
eighteenth-century biology, for example, the word "fish" was defined in
such a way as to exclude whales. This was a departure from the common
use of the word. (Jonah, according to the Bible, was not swallowed by a

whale, but by a big fish.) Our use of the word "fish" today, then, is a result of the modification that made it a technical term narrower in application than it was in ordinary eighteenth-century usage.

Just because we have talked about restricting stipulative definitions in connection with income tax forms, laws, science, and so on doesn't mean that they don't have their uses in other parts of life as well. In fact, all of us rely quite heavily on restrictive stipulative definitions in presenting arguments and engaging in disputes. In order to make ourselves understood more clearly and in order to make our views more precise, we frequently define key words. The definitions we give are generally not reports about how the words are ordinarily used. Rather, they are announcements of how *we* are going to use the words. The meanings that we attribute to the words are usually closely connected with the words' ordinary meanings. However, we attempt to give the words more restricted and exact meanings than their ordinary ones.

If, for example, you were trying to convince someone that our society should provide basic medical care for all who need it, you would probably find it necessary and useful to define "basic medical care." You might say something like, "By 'basic medical care' I mean the treatment and prevention, if possible, of disabling diseases and defects." This is certainly close to what most people would understand by the phrase, though the phrase probably has a wider range of application than this.

In any case, by offering an explicit definition of this sort, you would put yourself in the position to show that the reasons you present to support your position are relevant ones. And, just as important, you leave no doubt about just how your claim is to be understood.

It would be strange to regard the definition of "basic medical care" in such a case as a technical term. It is, however, something *like* a technical term, for it involves assigning a more precise meaning to an ordinary expression.

The most important thing to remember about stipulative definitions, whether they are arbitrary ones or restricting ones, is that they involve *deciding* to use a certain word in a particular way. The definition is, so to speak, a statement of this intention. It is a stipulation of the rule that is going to be followed in using the word. You may hope or propose that others will use the word in the way that you do, but this is a separate matter. Neither a decision nor a proposal can be true or false; yet either can be a candidate for criticism.

Reportive Definitions

If the meanings of words were the same sort of things as stuffed elephants or narwhal horns, Egyptian statuary or Aztec funeral masks, then they could be arranged in displays. There could be a Museum of Meanings in which the meanings of words could be placed on exhibit so

that people not familiar with them could stroll through and learn what they are.

There could be a Contemporary section, in which the ordinary meanings of words were exhibited. Then there could be a Technical or Science-and-Industry section, which would be devoted to the meanings of words that are technical terms. Finally, there could be a Historical wing, in which the meanings of old-fashioned words or the old-fashioned meanings of contemporary words were exhibited.

But, obviously, meanings can't be displayed in the way that whalebones, crossbows, and suits of armor are. They simply aren't the sorts of things that can be propped up in museum cases or arranged in dioramas.

How, then, can we deal with the meanings of words? We can handle them easily enough by relying on other words. We can provide words with definitions that explain their meanings by reporting how the words are used. Such definitions present an account of the conditions or rules that govern a word's use. (Such an account may, of course, involve describing paradigm cases of the word's use.)

Definitions that attempt to explain how a word is actually used are intended to be reports about the word's meaning. For that reason, they are called *reportive definitions*.

It's important to notice that reportive definitions are as different from stipulative definitions as chalk is from cheese. A stipulative definition is, in effect, a *decision* to use a word in a certain way, whereas a reportive definition is, in effect, a *claim* that a word is *in fact* used in a certain way. A stipulative definition assigns a meaning to a word; a reportive definition reports that the meaning of a word is such and such.

The difference has a tremendously important consequence. We've already seen that stipulative definitions can't legitimately be said to be true or false. Since they are decisions or proposals, it's not appropriate to talk about them in terms of truth. But the opposite is the case with reportive definitions. They are put forward as accounts of how words are actually used, of what their meanings are, in certain situations. Such an account can be a true one or a false one. Furthermore, it can be accurate or inaccurate in specific respects.

Let's consider an example. In his novel *Breakfast of Champions,* Kurt Vonnegut introduces as a character a science fiction writer named Kilgore Trout. Trout is convinced (or says he is) that mirrors are openings to another universe parallel to our own. They are holes through which the other world can leak in. For this reason, Trout decides to use the word "leak" to refer to mirrors.

This is a little odd, but there's nothing objectionable about it. Trout's decision is, in effect, a stipulative definition. (It's true that his use of the word in ordinary conversation creates some difficulties of communication. We might try to convince him to drop his use of the word because of

this. But if he doesn't want to, well . . . it's almost a free country.)

But Trout doesn't stop with his stipulative definition. At one time he tells a truck driver, "Back where I come from we call mirrors *leaks.*" Now this is simply not true. Trout purports to be reporting on how the word is ordinarily used "back where he comes from," but the report that he gives is false. Trout is the *only* one who uses the word this way. His stipulative definition of "leak" may or may not be a good idea, but his report on that word's use in his part of the country is simply incorrect.

There is a big gap between exactly right and completely wrong, and it's quite possible for reportive definitions to fall into this massive crack. A report that "heater" means "a device for producing heat or one who heats something" is quite correct *so far as it goes.* The report is incomplete, however, for the word is also used in another way. As a slang expression, the word refers to a revolver.

Similarly, a reportive definition might be defective, not because it is incomplete, but because it inaccurately describes the conditions governing a word's use. If it is reported, for example, that in biology the term "cell wall " is used to refer to the envelope surrounding a cell, a legitimate objection could be raised. The expression "cell wall" is applied only to the envelope around plant cells. The one surrounding bacterial cells, animal cells, and so on is called a "cell membrane." The definition of "cell wall," then, as a report on the use of the term in biology, is inaccurate in a very important respect.

Reportive definitions are factual descriptions. (Or, better, they are *put forward as* factual descriptions.) The facts they are supposed to report are the conditions that regulate the use of a word—the meaning of the word. Reportive definitions, consequently, are not *prescriptions.* That is, they are not statements about how a word *ought* to be used. They aren't laws that must be followed, but descriptions of practices. The word "bimonthly," for example, means "every two months." But, as a matter of fact, it is also used by a large number of people to mean "twice a month." This may be a regrettable fact, but it's a fact, nonetheless. A complete and accurate reportive definition must faithfully record both meanings of this word. (It must, at least, if it is to be a general report about ordinary usage. If the report is limited to the use of the word by such peculiar groups as members of the Modern Language Association, then it may be that only the first meaning is the ordinary one.)

The importance of stipulative definitions is fairly obvious. Everyone recognizes a need, from time to time, to define a word to suit his immediate purposes or to introduce a new term to make his task easier. The importance of reportive definitions, though perhaps less obvious, is at least as great. In the most general terms, they contribute immeasurably to the improvement of communication and to our understanding of language. None of us knows the meanings of all the words in our language. Consequently, when we encounter new words, we need to

have a way of finding out what they mean. Reportive definitions provide one way. Similarly, if communication is to be successful, there has to be some consistency or regularity in the way that we use words. Reportive definitions, by telling us how words are standardly used, allow us to model our use on that of others. They are, then, instruments that permit us to share a common language that is considerably more extensive than it would be if we were limited solely to those words that we learn and use in ordinary life.

Furthermore, reportive definitions give us access to technical and historical areas. Without a definition of "cell wall," it would be hard to gain an understanding of plant physiology. It would take a long time to learn the word from its use alone. A reportive definition speeds up the process. Similarly, a knowledge that in Victorian England the word "radical" was used most often to refer to followers of Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism makes it much easier to read Victorian history.

We've already suggested by the examples we've used how reportive definitions might be divided into types. Let's become explicit now and separate them into the following three types: lexical, historical, and technical. Enough has been said in connection with other matters to allow us to explain these types in very brief compass.

Lexical

The word "lexical" means "having to do with the vocabulary of a language." The vocabulary of a language is something like the Blob: its pseudopods extend into a variety of places and its outline is indefinite. The vocabulary of a language might, for example, be taken to include the special terms of science, mathematics, grammar, logic, and so on. For our purposes, then, let's make use of a restricting stipulative definition and say that "lexical" has to do with the words of a language *as they are ordinarily used.*

A *lexical definition,* then, is a report on the ordinary meaning of a word. It is an explanation of the ordinary or standard use of a word.

A lexical definition of the word "acute," for example, would include the meanings "having a sharp point," "keenly perceptive," and "of great importance." These are some of the ordinary meanings of the word. It would not include other, more specialized, meanings, which are found in medicine, music, and geometry, to name just three fields.

The use of the word in these fields may be connected with the ordinary meaning of the word, but this is not necessarily the case. In the ordinary use of the word, an acute pain is one that is sharp, but in medical terminology it is a pain of short duration.

When we ask about the meaning of a word, it is most often a lexical definition that we are requesting.

Technical

A technical reportive definition is, obviously, an explanation of the meaning of a word that is used in some special area or discipline. The definition is an account of the use of the word that is standard *in that area*.

Thus, in physics the term "mass" can be defined as "a measure of a body's resistance to acceleration." In terms of a specific version of Newtonian mechanics, "mass" gains its meaning from the equation $F=ma$ ($F=$force, $m=$mass, and $a=$acceleration). In modern relativity physics, mass is no longer regarded as independent of velocity, so in the context of that theory the term takes on a significantly different meaning.

We all speak with many tongues, of course. Our knowledge of words is rarely limited solely to words as they are generally used. Also, we all work at jobs of one kind or another and participate in all kinds of activities ranging from collecting beer cans to skin diving in the Andes, so we get to know the specialized vocabularies in many areas. Consequently, the line between lexical and technical definitions is frequently hard to draw and is sometimes downright arbitrary.

For all that, it is still well to keep in mind the fact that there are many words that have both ordinary and technical meanings. A failure to do this can result in confusions and misunderstandings. An important case of this is the word we used for illustration above: "mass." In ordinary language, we regard "mass" and "weight" as being virtually synonymous. In physics, however, they are quite different. One's mass on the moon, say, remains unchanged, but one's weight is only about one-sixth of that on earth. (This is because the gravity of the moon exerts less force, but one's resistance to change of acceleration remains unaltered.) A failure to realize that "mass" is a technical term in physics that is not equivalent in meaning to the ordinary use of the word, makes it all but impossible to understand even relatively simple physical explanations. In an "age of science" this is a definite handicap.

Though it's true that some words have uses both in technical areas and in ordinary life, this is, of course, not the case for all words. Some words have *only* technical meanings. In either case, a technical reportive definition is an explanation of how a given word is used in some specific area.

Historical

As we've already noticed in discussing theories of meaning, words have a history. Their meanings change over time. Accordingly, a reportive definition of the way that a word is used at present does not necessarily inform us about how it was used in the past. To discover this we must do historical research. We have to read the documents of the time—magazines, court reports, laws, letters, diaries, and so on. In short, we have to try to figure out from the way words were used just what the conditions governing their use might have been.

This kind of knowledge is important for a better understanding of the historical period. Without knowing, for example, that in the eighteenth century the word "flasher" referred to someone of brilliant appearance, it's possible to get a wildly wrong idea about someone who is described by his contemporaries as a flasher. The modern meaning of the term is simply not the one intended.

Similarly, there are words that are now archaic or have passed wholly from use that have to be learned in order to understand the writings of earlier times. If, for example, you don't know what "bathing machine" means, you will not be able to understand the description of one of the "five unmistakable marks" of a snark, because:

The fourth is its fondness for bathing machines.

A historical reportive definition is simply an explanation of the meaning that a word had during some particular historical period. Except for the fact that the period is not the present, the definition does not differ in principle from a lexical definition. (Assuming, that is, that the word is one that was in common use. It is also possible to give an explanation of the past meaning of a technical term. It is important to the history of science to note, for example, that in the eighteenth century the expression "fixed air" was used to refer to what we now call "oxygen.")

What we've said in this section can be briefly summarized. A *reportive definition* is an attempt to explain how a word is actually used. Such a report can be true or false, complete or incomplete, accurate or inaccurate. Since reportive definitions have the status of factual claims, they can be tested against the actual facts of a word's use.

A *lexical* reportive definition is an account of the standard or ordinary use of a word. A *technical* definition is an account of the use of a word that is the standard use in some special area or discipline. A *historical* definition is an explanation of how a word was used during some particular period in the past. The explanation may be of the ordinary or of some technical use of the word.

"They Laughed When I Started to Explain the Meaning of a Word . . ." or How to Define

Nothing can be more embarrassing. You are at a party, or you have to write a report for the boss or even a new textbook on quantum mechanics, and *you have to give a definition*. Perhaps you want to explain the ordinary meaning of a word. Perhaps you want to introduce a special term. You know you must do a good job or face the laughter or derision of your audience.

Here's a promise! If you master the techniques of giving definitions that are described in the pages below, then you will never have to feel embarrassed when you are called on to give a definition.

They may start to laugh, but when they see how well you define, their laughter will turn to smiles of appreciation at a job well done!

AMAZE YOUR FRIENDS! CONFOUND YOUR OPPONENTS!

The promise above is a little too strong, but only a little. Chances are that no one is going to be terribly impressed by the masterful way you give a definition. The truth is, though, that an understanding of some of the more important ways of explaining the meanings of words does make it easier to give clear and precise definitions. And this is undeniably a skill worth acquiring.

We'll discuss only four methods of giving definitions. But in connection with the last method, we'll see that we could multiply this number if we wanted to. In fact, we'll see that all methods of definition can be regarded as no more than variations on one method of explaining the meanings of words by giving an account of the conditions that govern their use. But more of this later.

The specific methods that we'll discuss represent frequent and important ways of defining. They are not wholly free inventions, of course, but are derived from our ordinary practice. Generally speaking, they can be used to give both stipulative and reportive definitions, though we'll mainly be talking of reportive ones.

It's useful to keep in mind that we aren't bound by some universal edict to define words in one particular way. The way we define depends on the reasons we have for explaining a meaning in the first place. Accordingly, there isn't one specific way of defining that's superior to all others and that serves all our purposes.

Methods of defining are thus like methods of transportation. A plane, a bus, or a unicycle may all get you where you want to go, but in a particular situation you will probably have reasons for choosing one way over the others.

Definition by Synonym

Suppose you're reading a novel about life in Greenwich Village that was published in the 1930s. The dialogue, you discover, contains several weird expressions that are completely unfamiliar to you. For example: rubberneck wagon, lip muff, kick the gong around.

As it turns out, these are all slang expressions current in the thirties, and most of them have passed out of use. If you could find somebody who still knows what they mean (can remember how they were used), he might prepare you a list like this:

rubberneck wagon: sightseeing bus
lip muff: moustache
kick the gong around: smoke an opium pipe

The expressions on the right have the same meanings as the ones on the left. That is, they are *synonyms*. *Definition by synonym* consists merely in providing a word that is equivalent in meaning (or nearly so) to the word being defined. The aim, of course, is to supply a word that someone can be expected to know for one that he may not know.

All the slang expressions above have ordinary English equivalents, and their definition is a rather simple matter. In virtually every case, the slang and the ordinary expression are used in exactly the same way. ("He shaved his lip muff" and "He shaved his moustache," for example.) But when it comes to defining ordinary words by providing other ordinary words as synonyms, we run into a bit of trouble. The trouble is this: There seem to be very few, if any, ordinary words that are exact synonyms. Consider the words "trail" and "path," for example. The two are very close in meaning, and we might say either "He strayed from the trail" or "He strayed from the path." Notice, though, that there are some cases in which we wouldn't regard the two as equivalent in meaning. No one would think that "Hansel and Gretel left a trail of breadcrumbs" means the same as "Hansel and Gretel left a path of breadcrumbs." The second sentence makes it sound as though they left a virtual highway of crumbled bread.

This trouble is not terribly serious, though. What we have to keep in mind is that when we define by offering a synonyn, we have to select a word that is used in the same way *in the same context* as the word defined. The synonymy we have to rely on, then, is that that holds between the uses of two words in the same kind of situation. In some other kind of situation, one of the words might apply and the other not.

To define by offering a synonym is to say, in effect, "The word I'm supplying you is used in the same way in this context as the word I'm defining." Accordingly, a standard for judging definitions by synonym consists in requiring that the word offered as a synonym be as close in use to the word defined as possible. Anyone who offered "dwelling place" as a synonym for "flat" would be open to criticism. It's true that flats are dwelling places, and in some cases it would be just as correct to say "I'm returning to my dwelling place" as "I'm returning to my flat." Yet "dwelling place" has a much broader range of application than "flat." It applies to castles and grand hotels, as well as to huts and hovels. "Apartment" is obviously a better choice, for the two words can be used interchangeably in a greater number of cases.

Definition by Enumeration

If you wanted to count the ways you love someone, you would name them off one by one. To count off or name one by one is to *enumerate*. Just as the proof of a pudding is in the eating, the nature of enumerative

definition is in its name. An *enumerative definition* consists in providing a complete list of all the items referred to or named by an expression.

To be successful, an enumerative definition must meet two requirements. First, the list must be a *complete* list. It's not enough merely to provide samples of things referred to by a word. *Everything* denoted by the word must be put on the list. Second, the list cannot contain items that aren't denoted by the word. In sum, then, the list must contain all and only those things that the word being defined picks out or names.

Here are some cases of enumerative definitions:

southwestern state: New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado

solar planet: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto

transuranic element: neptunium, plutonium, americium, curium, berkelium, californium, einsteinium, fermium, mendelevium, nobelium, lawrencium

An enumerative definition explains the meaning of an expression only in the sense that it lists the items the expression picks out or names. The relation between the expression being defined and the definition of it is not like that between "car" and "automobile" or "father" and "male parent." In these cases, the expressions in each pair can be said to have the same meaning. So far as definition by enumeration is concerned, though, the relation between the expression being defined and the definition is more like that between "New York" and "the largest city in the United States." In this case, the two expressions have different meanings, but refer to or denote the same thing. Similarly, the names of all the southwestern states, taken as a group, refer to all the southwestern states, and the expression "southwestern state" likewise refers to each and every southwestern state.

Since the meaning of a word is not identical with the reference of a word, there is a sense in which enumerative definitions don't explain the meanings of words. Yet in another sense they do. They indicate how a word is used by providing a list of those things that it is correctly used to refer to.

The examples that we've considered make it clear that enumerative definition can be of considerable use. But it's important to notice that when it is used there are several assumptions that are generally taken for granted. For instance, it's usually assumed that the items listed are ones that are picked out by the word *at the present time.* Thus an enumerative definition of "transuranic element" in 1939 would not be the same as one given in 1944, for the simple reason that during that period of time additional elements were discovered. This generally presents us with no practical difficulty, for in most circumstances in which we use enumerative definitions it's the current list that we want anyway. Someone doing the history of physics, however, couldn't rely on a present-day enumerative definition of "transuranic element" if he

wanted to understand the expression in the same way as people in, say, 1939.

Also, there are other restrictions on how lists are formed that are usually unstated because of the situation. The phrase "registered voter" might be defined by enumeration by a list of names. Such a list, though, would be for a particular election in a certain state, county, district, and so on. The expression, then, is not given a general definition.

Furthermore, because ordinary words most often pick out things that belong to a potentially unlimited class ("chair," "wolfbane," and so on), the technique is not one that can be used for most words in the language. Its principle use is in supplying stipulative definitions, either of new expressions or of ordinary expressions that are being used in a special or restricted way. This isn't to say that it cannot be used for reportive definitions. It's just that, as a matter of fact, most words don't lend themselves to reportive definition by enumeration.

Definition by Example

Suppose that you are home alone and are comfortably sitting and reading a book when there is a tremendous clap of thunder, a rushing of wind, and a powerful sulfurous smell fills the air. You look up and see standing before you Dark Lucifer. Satan himself!

"I have come to offer you a bargain," he says. "If you can follow the command I shall give you, then I will grant any request that you make. If you cannot, then I shall claim as my property your immortal soul."

After assuring yourself that the command will be one well within the range of normal human abilities, you agree to the offer.

"Very well," his Satanic Majesty says, "I will give you my command. Define the word 'red.' "

"You mean you want me to define it in terms of some theory of electromagnetic radiation—wavelengths in the visible spectrum, stuff like that?"

"No, I don't want a scientific account of the nature of red light. I want a definition of the word as it's ordinarily used. Surely you must be able to do that; after all, the word's been around much longer than these fancy theories."

How could you satisfy Satan's demand? If you could do it, then not only could you save your soul, you could wish for something magnificent—such as the eternal happiness of all mankind.

In this section we'll be considering how such commands can be carried out. We'll be talking about how words like "red" can be defined by making use of examples. We'll find also that many words unlike "red" can be defined by presenting examples.

As we noticed in Chapter 2, the word "paradigm" means "a clear-cut case." Thus somebody who is said to be "a paradigm of virtue" is the

very model of virtue. He is, we might say, a prime example: "If there's such a thing as virtue, he's a case of it." A paradigm case or paradigm example of a word's use is a case in which the word definitely and unhesitatingly applies: "If the word 'red' doesn't apply to that delicious apple, then it doesn't apply to anything." In talking about defining words by making use of examples, then, we are talking about using paradigm cases to explain how a word is used.

Paradigm cases can be presented in different ways. That is, there are various ways of explaining just what sorts of things, situations, or people are the appropriate ones for a word to apply to. In this section, we'll talk about three of the more important ways of presenting paradigm cases. At the end you should be able to beat the Devil at his own game.

Ostensive Definition

To broaden the intellectual horizons of some deserving child, we might drag her down to the reptile house of the zoo. We would, of course, want this to be an educational visit and not one given over solely to pleasure. Let's suppose, then, that we decided to teach her the names of some animals.

We decide to start with the gila monster.

Standing outside the display case, we point a finger at the creature sunning itself inside and say in a definite tone of voice, *"That's* a gila monster." Being even more helpful, we might point to the iguana sleeping in the next case and emphatically say, "That's *not* a gila monster."

In pointing and naming we would be giving an *ostensive definition* of the expression "gila monster." The English word "ostensive" borrows its own meaning from the Latin for "to point." An ostensive definition, then, consists in nothing more difficult than pointing to an object that is referred to by a certain word and pronouncing the word. We might just as well call it "pointing definition," but "ostensive" is too well entrenched to be uprooted.

Like most activities, there's a bit of art or skill in giving ostensive definitions. Not a great amount, though, and most of us pick it up quite naturally in childhood. It's most helpful, for example, to explain how a word is used by pointing to more than one object of the sort that it refers to. ("There goes another one," you might say, as a gila monster scurries across the floor of the reptile house.)

Furthermore, it's also useful to indicate other objects to which the word you're defining does not apply. It's only sensible, of course, to point out those objects that rather closely resemble appropriate objects. It's helpful to tell someone that "gila monster" doesn't apply to an iguana or a gecko, but it's not helpful to say that it doesn't apply to a lamppost or a circus tent.

Ostensive definition is a rather crude but effective way of getting

someone to understand how a word that is strange to him is used. Of all the ways of defining, it's probably the one most commonly employed in everyday life. It explains what a word means by demonstrating how the word is used. Some people prefer to say that it is a way of teaching words, rather than defining them. But so far as getting an understanding of the meaning of words is concerned, this is not a very important distinction.

Ostensive definition is a rather obvious and straightforward process. The truth is, though, there is a rather complex net of assumptions woven together to support the operation of ostensive definition.

We can use it successfully for many words that we don't know, because there are many words that we already know. We can get clear about what someone is pointing to by asking him questions. ("Do you mean that strange animal, or are you pointing to that cactus thing?") If we didn't share the same language and couldn't ask questions, then ostensive definition would be of doubtful effectiveness.

For example, suppose you just arrived on this planet after a long trip from the fourth planet of Tau Ceti. You know no English and the Extraterrestrial Friendship League assigns a teacher to help you learn the language.

He decides to help you acquire a basic vocabulary by providing you with some ostensive definitions. Accordingly, he points to a dog and says, "Dog." He points to a turtle, shakes his head and says, "Not a dog." A fly is buzzing around the room so he points to the fly and says, "Not a dog."

What are you to think? Are you to believe you've been taught a word that corresponds to a word in your own language for "mammal" or "possesses teeth"? Supposing that the dog was a white Yorkshire terrier, have you been taught a word that corresponds in your language to "white" or "furry," or even "Yorkshire terrier"?

Perhaps by extensive comparisons, coupled with approvals and corrections from your teacher, you might eventually learn that the word "dog" refers to dogs. But the process would be arduous and tedious.

We've assumed also that you, a visitor from a strange planet, are already acquainted with such conventions as head shaking for disapproval and pointing. Perhaps this assumption isn't justified, though. How would you know that when your teacher held out his finger to point at the dog and said "Dog," he wasn't using the word to refer to his finger? Or maybe he was telling you what that position of the hand is called— perhaps you might think he was trying to teach you the word "pointing." Or how do you know that pointing is used to suggest a line running from the fingertip to the object indicated? You might believe that the object referred to was the one encountered by an imaginary line extended in the other direction and ending at some object behind the teacher. Besides, is the teacher pointing to a spot on the dog, the whole dog, the dog's color, just what?

Speculating in this way has a bit of fun attached to it, but it has a serious aspect also. For one thing, it makes it obvious that giving ostensive definitions is not really such a simple matter. On analysis, the procedure turns out to be a rather complex one, though we aren't going to attempt a thorough analysis. Defining by ostension seems simple to us because we already know a language and we understand the conventions that are involved in the process of pointing, naming, affirming, and denying. The language and the conventions we assimilated almost painlessly and unconsciously from our culture. For someone from a culture wholly alien to our own, ostensive definitions would be likely to present problems that for us are unreal.

Furthermore, speculation about the difficulties that such a creature might face not only helps us understand what is involved in giving an ostensive definition; it also helps us see why we might sometimes find such definitions misleading. You don't have to be an alien to wonder when someone points to a part of an electron microscope and says, "Electron gun," whether he is telling you the name of the anode or the grid or the assembly of the two. If you're not sure, you can ask. But you can think you're sure and be dead wrong. That's one of the disadvantages of pointing definitions.

Mentioning Examples

Nobody requires much persuading to agree that giving an ostensive definition by actually pointing to an item designated by a word can be quite inconvenient. Chances are there are no movie stars in your living room. Consequently, to give an ostensive definition of "movie star" by pointing out one or two isn't very practical. You would have to travel to Hollywood, Las Vegas, Cannes, or wherever you might expect to find them, and this seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to just to give a definition.

An obvious alternative is merely to *mention some examples* of people to whom the expression can be applied. You might say, for instance, "By 'movie star' I mean somebody like Woody Allen, Humphrey Bogart, Karen Black, and so on." The people named are ones who are definitely referred to by the expression, and the "and so on" indicates that you don't mean the list to be a complete one. You're only giving *samples* of people designated by the expression.

Since names are no more than verbal fingers, the same woes that beset ostensive definition are found here. This means that in defining by mentioning examples, it's a good idea to present a *variety* of examples. It's also wise to indicate some cases that, though similar, aren't appropriate. You wouldn't want to define "novel," for example, by mentioning only the titles of eighteenth-century novels. Also, it might be a good idea

to mention a few biographies or histories to make it clear that "novel" doesn't apply to them.

Defining by mentioning examples is similar to definition by enumeration, but there is one significant difference. In defining by enumeration, it's necessary to list *all* the items to which the word applies. But this is not required of definition by example. It's necessary only to mention *some* of the items. Thus it's possible to define expressions like "odd number" by mentioning only a few numbers. Since there is an infinite series of odd numbers, an enumerative definition of the expression can't be given.

Every silver cloud has its dark lining. The very fact that definition by mentioning examples does *not* involve listing all cases in which a word applies opens up the way for confusion and misunderstanding of the sort discussed earlier. The risk involved is outweighed by the advantages, though, and there are steps that we can take to reduce confusion and misunderstanding. We just have to be prepared to take them.

Defining by Describing Examples

Another obvious alternative to pointing is *describing*. That is, rather than pointing a real finger or a verbal one at an example of a person, place, thing, or situation to which a word applies, you might just paint a verbal picture of an appropriate case.

Suppose, for example, you wanted to define the word "charlatan," and there aren't any charlatans around to point out, and you don't know any you could refer to by name. What can you do? Well, you could describe the sort of person to whom the word applies. You might say something like this: "Do you remember in all those cowboy movies the guy who comes to town to sell snake-oil or some ancient Indian herb medicine? He always claims it's a miraculous cure, but is really lying about it. Well, that sort of person is called a charlatan."

You are saying, in effect, that the word is properly used to apply to a person of this sort. This doesn't mean, of course, that it isn't also used to refer to other sorts of people. You are describing only one kind of case in which it's correctly employed.

Defining by describing cases really has a lot more flexibility than pointing and naming do. After all, life is short and experience is limited, and we can hardly expect actually to be directly acquainted with all the sorts of things, people, and situations to which the words we need to know apply. Descriptions are a pale substitute for experience (as readers of adventure novels know), but they are at least adequate for the purpose of learning many words of a language.

Not all defining by describing is a replacement of experience. We sometimes define words by describing circumstances of the sort in which people typically have certain experiences. The definition is a way

of saying "The word applies to the feeling (or sensation or whatever) you have in this kind of situation."

Suppose, for example, that someone didn't know the meaning of the word "depressed" as it is used in a sentence like "I feel depressed." You might try substituting some more or less equivalent expressions in the sentence, but you might also describe the sort of situation in which somebody might be expected to feel depressed. You might say: "Can you imagine how you would feel if you just learned that your girl friend had died of an incurable disease, you had flunked out of school, and your father had cut you off from your inheritance? If you've had things like this happen to you, then you know how you would feel. That's feeling depressed."

Or, to take an easier case, suppose someone is just learning English and doesn't know what "blue" means. You don't know his language so you can't give him a synonym. You might tell him something like this: "Go outside on a clear day and look up at the sky. The color you see is what we call 'blue.' " In this example, you are describing a set of circumstances under which someone can put himself in the position to have the experience that's necessary to learning what the word means.

Despite the disadvantages and possibilities of confusion inherent in all three ways of defining by example that we've discussed, the technique is of primary importance. Not only is it of considerable practical usefulness, but some words seem to require this sort of definition for a proper explanation of their meaning. For example, no one learns to apply color words like "heliotrope" or "puce" or even "red" and "blue" without having the colors they refer to pointed out to him. Or without being told how he can put himself in the position to have the experiences that an understanding of the words requires. Similarly, words like "sweet," "sour," "bitter," and "tart" can be learned only by tasting the sorts of things that can be said to be such. ("You know the taste you get when you bite into a lemon; well, that's a sour taste.") Also the meaning of words like "loud" and "soft" (as applied to sounds) and "blinding" and "bright" (as applied to light) can only be understood from experience. A definition of these words, then, involves indicating in some way examples of cases in which the words are correctly used.

We have not discussed all the ways of using examples to define. Sometimes, for instance, we explain how a word is used by showing someone a picture of the sort of thing that it refers to. That such a technique is effective is one of the reasons that picture books for children are so popular. We could probably include pointing at a picture in the category of ostensive definition. It simply involves an additional convention. Probably, too, we could include in the same category cases in which we actually ask someone to smell something or feel something with his fingers and then tell him what word applies to what he is smelling or feeling. After all, these are definitions that operate on the same principle as pointing.

In any event, it doesn't really matter what we call the subclasses. The important point is that in all such cases we are indicating a way in which a word is properly used by supplying in some way or other examples of the word's use. It is this that is fundamental. The rest is icing on the cake.

Use Definition

This is the last method of definition that we're going to introduce, and it's going to be a peculiar one. What makes it strange is that we're going to include within it all the other methods of defining and leave room to shove in some others besides. It's almost as if somebody said, "In addition to pears, oranges, and tangerines, we also have fruit."

But an explanation of why we're going to use this odd category is in order.

To make sense of the explanation, let's first recall some basic facts. To give a definition is to explain the meaning of a word. But what is the meaning of a word? Since we spent a lot of time answering this question in Chapter 2, there's no need to go into details here. It's enough to say that the meaning of a word is the set of conditions that govern the way the word is used.

Consequently, to explain the meaning of a word is to give an account of the conditions that regulate the word's use. The uses of words—their meanings—are explained in much the same way that the uses of gadgets like can-openers are explained: by presenting an account of the proper circumstances, features, objects, and so on that are associated with and govern their uses.

With this sort of information in hand, it's possible to view the methods of definition that we've been discussing from a more general perspective. We can now see them as merely aspects of one Grand Enterprise.

The Grand Enterprise is explaining the meanings of words by supplying an account of the conditions that govern their use. *The methods of definition are all ways of revealing features of the way that words are used.* (Or are going to be used, when the definition is stipulative.)

That is, the methods are all ways of indicating relevant and important features that function as conditions regulating use. Thus Definition by Example involves describing or pointing out cases of the type that a word applies to. Enumerative definition consists in providing a list of all the cases that a word picks out. And Definition by Synonym relies on the fact that in some situations the uses of different words are often governed by the same conditions.

We could, if we wanted to, create as many methods of definition as there are kinds of conditions associated with the uses of words. In cases in which a certain sort of feature is the most important one for explaining how a word is used, then the best method of definition would be one that focused on that feature.

For example, when the origin of something is an important condition, we could give a genetic definition. So a genetic definition of "igneous rock" would be "rock formed by great heat." When it's what a thing does or is used for that's the most important feature, we could offer a functional definition. Thus we could define "mordant" as "a substance used in dyeing."

We could obviously go on and on until we ended up with a gross or more of definitional methods. We could have "grammatical role" definitions, "social significance" definitions, "legal" definitions, "literary" definitions, and so on. We could, as we've said, create as many methods as there are kinds of conditions that govern the uses of words.

If we did this, though, we would find ourselves with an embarrassment of riches. We would have so many definitional methods that we would tend to lose sight of the whole point and purpose of definition. It's better to stick to a few significant methods and lump together the more specific and limited ones.

Clearly enough, though, Use definition is the Prime Method. It is the theme upon which all other methods are merely variations.

This raises the question, why introduce other methods at all? Though we didn't talk about all possible methods, we did discuss three besides Use.

In truth, there is no really overpowering reason to introduce the specific methods. We would be on firm footing just to say, "There is one method of definition, and that's the one that consists in explaining the conditions that govern a word's use."

The reason we haven't taken this path is because there is a practical advantage in having several methods of definition at one's disposal. Rather than the general order "Give conditions of use," the various methods tell us what *sorts* of conditions we should look for and mention. Thus they supply us with a framework for thinking about conditions of use. This makes it easier to identify relevant conditions and to explain them to others.

The methods of definition are, in effect, specifications of one general method. The specifications offer an additional practical advantage. As we've already seen, certain methods are more suited to specific sorts of words and purposes than others. A definition of "number" can't be given by Enumeration, for example, but this method may be helpful in explaining that an expression like "Pacific state" applies to just those things on a short list.

The specific forms of Use definition, then, supply us with a number of methods from which we can select one that seems best suited for the job at hand. The methods offer us some structured options, and we don't have to flail around trying to discover the best method to use. That is, we don't have to flail around *as much*, because we still have to choose a method.

Quite apart from specific methods, the major point to be emphasized is that to give a definition is to mention the conditions that govern the use of the word. If this single principle is remembered, then long after the names of all the methods have become lost in the fog of time, it will still be possible to realize what's required of us when we face the task of giving or evaluating a definition.

Separating Sheep from Goats: Standards for Definition

We have no laws that explicitly recognize what is good in human conduct, but we have plenty that point out what we regard as bad. When it comes to evaluating definitions, we are in a similar position. It's a lot easier to supply a list of definitional vices than to compose a hymn of definitional virtues. Since the easy path takes us where we want to go, we'll follow it. In this section we'll point out some of the varieties of definitional sin.

There are two matters we ought to get straight on before we begin. First, not all the vices we'll be discussing are ones that can be shared by all the ways of defining that we've discussed. For example, definition by enumeration is a rather straightforward procedure that's not likely to go wrong in any way that can't be put down to simple error (or deliberate deception). Also, in our discussion of definition by example, we've already noticed some of the ways that defining in this fashion can go wrong or be misleading. We won't bother to repeat those observations here.

Second, definitions are given for different purposes and to different people. Consequently, a definition that's satisfactory for one purpose or to one group might not be for others. Someone reading a popular book on astronomy might want to know only that "parsec" can be defined as "a unit of astronomical distance" so he can understand (at least roughly) what it means to say that something is only four parsecs away from earth. But a student of astronomy needs to be told that a parsec is a unit of measuring astronomical distance that is based on the distance from the earth at which the stellar parallax is one second of arc and that it is equal to 1.9×10^{13} miles, or about 3.258 light-years.

The astronomy student would be likely to object to the first definition as intolerably vague, and the ordinary person would likely criticize the second definition as too technical and obscure.

The upshot of this is that any commandment like "Avoid language that is obscure or vague in giving a definition" is totally useless as an absolute command. It's like giving someone a moral rule like "Always do the right thing."

This observation isn't intended to be a counsel of despair, though. The

point is that the commandments we'll be discussing have to be interpreted in a liberal and sensible fashion. They are merely guides to the conduct of defining, not rules that guarantee success. It's necessary to keep in mind that the standards, expressed as prohibitions, are ones to be followed relative to the purpose at hand and relative to the audience for whom the definition is intended.

You have to proceed in something like the following way. My job, you say to yourself, is to give an explanation of the meaning of the word "extrasensory perception" as it's used in parapsychology. My audience is composed of professional psychologists who don't know anything about parapsychology. All right, I'm free to use technical terms, and I had better try to give a fairly complete explanation of the term. Now, I'm ready to follow the standards of giving a good definition.

It's at this point that the prohibitions we'll talk about below come into play.

Avoid Complete Circularity

A definition can be said to be circular when it explains the meaning of a word by using the word itself or one of the word's grammatical forms. Here are a couple of circular definitions:

chairperson: a person who chairs
bookbinder: one who binds books.

As they stand, these definitions are unacceptable because they are almost totally uninformative. An explanation that doesn't explain is an explanation not worth having. And you would probably be on good grounds if you suspected that anyone who gave you definitions like these was deliberately trying to keep you from finding out what the words meant. Or, at the very least, was trying to put you off from pressing for a real explanation.

There is an obvious and easy way to repair these definitions. All we need to do is to supply other definitions of the words they use. If, for example, you were also given an explanation of what it is to chair a meeting and to bind a book, then the definitions would be informative.

With these additional definitions in hand, the circularity of the original definitions would be harmless. But without them, those definitions would be useless. We can say that the original definitions when they are not supplemented by additional definitions are completely circular. The commandment, then, is to avoid *complete circularity* in defining.

Perhaps the easiest way to avoid complete circularity is simply to give a definition that does not require an additional definition to explain the meaning of the term that makes it circular in the first place. If, for example, "bookbinder" were defined as "a person who encloses and

fastens a book between covers," then there would be no need of the supplementary explanation.

Sometimes, though, it's simply convenient from the standpoint of exposition to give a circular definition and then render the circularity harmless by giving an additional definition. For example, a definition of "welfare recipient" could probably be done most easily by defining the term as "one who receives welfare" and following this with an explanation of what it means to receive welfare. To choose to proceed in this fashion is merely to elect to follow one strategy of explanation rather than another.

A minor warning is in order in connection with circularity. Don't be confused into thinking that a definition is circular because the word being defined is *mentioned* in the definition. This definition is not circular, for example:

damn: The saying of "damn"; a curse.

The word "damn" is mentioned in the definition, but it's not being used. Circularity results only when the word being defined is used in the definition. (Recall that a word in quotation marks is, in effect, a word itself, and it is not the same as the word without those marks. You can't very well have circularity unless some version of the *same* word as that defined appears in the definition.)

Avoid Language That Is Obscure, Ambiguous, or Metaphorical

The primary purpose of a definition is to explain what a word means. Accordingly, anything that gets in the way of a proper understanding of the explanation ought to be avoided. Nothing gets in the way so much as language that is difficult to understand, ambiguous, or not to be taken literally. Let's briefly survey these three sins.

Avoid Obscure Language

The following definition is an excellent example of one that almost dares anyone to understand it:

net: anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.

There isn't anything wrong with this definition in the sense that it contains any errors of reporting on the use of the word. The description it gives of the features that something must have in order for the word "net" to apply to it is perfectly accurate.

From the standpoint of intelligibility, though, there is something terribly wrong with the definition. The language in which it is given is so

recondite and obscure that it's hard to imagine that anyone who could understand the definition would have any use for it.

(By the way, the definition is one of the more famous ones in Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*. Probably the Great Cham was just exercising his sense of humor, not believing that anyone would really need to be told the meaning of such a simple word.)

For contrast with the above definition, consider this one:

net: an openwork fabric with the threads woven, knotted or twisted together at regular intervals, forming meshes of varying sizes.

The clarity of language here is so obvious that this definition might serve as an example of the kind of language that a definiton ought to contain.

Though we mentioned this earlier, it's worth pointing out again that to say that the language of a definition shouldn't be obscure isn't to say that it can't be technical. A definition of "gram molecular weight," for example, will have to be expressed in terms that are used in chemistry. It is a technical reportive definition:

gram molecular weight: the weight of a compound, expressed in grams, that is numerically equivalent to the mass, expressed in atomic mass units, of one molecule of the compound.

It may well be that no one can understand this definition unless he understands what it means to talk about the mass of a molecule of a compound. This doesn't brand the definition as defective, however. The language is clear and precise.

Someone might complain that this really isn't the sort of definition he wanted. He might have wanted only to be told something that would give him a crude idea of what the term means. In which case, a functional (though still reportive and technical) definition would probably have done the job. For example:

gram molecular weight: That's a way of measuring a compound in amounts that are large enough to use conveniently.

The fact that someone wanted another *sort* of definition doesn't mean that the first sort offered was defective in some way. ("There's nothing wrong with the milkshake; it's just that I wanted beer.")

Avoid Ambiguous Language

If a definition is given that involves any of the three ways of being ambiguous that we distinguished in Chapter 3, then it's defective and ought to be rejected. After all, it's hardly possible to take an explanation as a good one if you aren't even sure how the explanation is to be understood.

The following definition is one that contains an ambiguous word:

playwright: one who produces plays.

The troublesome word is "produces," for it can mean "manufactures" (i.e., writes) or "finances and supervises presentation of a play."

Similarly, the definition below leaves it unclear whether it is literary composition or handwriting that is intended:

minuscule: a form of writing developed during the Middle Ages.

The definition of "vernier" as "an auxiliary device designed to facilitate fine adjustments on precision instruments" is grammatically ambiguous. It's impossible to tell from the sentence alone whether the device is *applied to* precision instruments or is *attached to* them. It's the last interpretation that is intended, and if the phrase "on precision instruments" were moved so it followed "an auxiliary device," the definition would be unobjectionable.

Avoid Metaphorical Language

There is, hopefully, a place in the world for wit and fancy and the playful use of language. Definition is not that place, though. Literal as mud and dry as dust is the only way to give definitions. Otherwise, the aim of explanation is frustrated. When it comes to the crunch, it's better to sacrifice beauty for truth.

It's not likely that anyone who defined "camel" as "the ship of the desert" would be taken seriously. (Of course, somebody who didn't already know what a camel was wouldn't be very enlightened by this supposed definition.) There is a danger, though, that someone might take the definition of "the United States Constitution" as "the rock of American democracy" literally as the *name* of a certain rock. After all, if he has heard of Plymouth Rock and the Rock of Gibraltar, he won't be too surprised to hear that there is another rock called "United States Constitution."

Definitions given in metaphorical language are, at the very best, uninformative. At the worst, they are misleading. Metaphors should be kept locked in their cages and allowed out only when they can peform tricks that are useful as well as amusing. So far as definition is concerned, that time is never.

There's more to be said about metaphors used in definitions, but we'll save it until a later section. Then we'll talk about some of the ways that metaphors and other turns of phrase can be put to work to deceive and mislead, by carelessness or by craft.

Avoid Being Too Broad or Too Narrow

> The Master of the Inner Truth pays a visit to a small Kentucky village. There he announces that he will answer any question put to him.
>
> "What is talent, Master?" a young man asks.
>
> "Talent," he says, "is the ability to compose a beautiful sonnet while taking a bath."

How's that for a definition? Pretty lousy, really, and hardly worthy of a Master of Inner Truth. The major trouble with it is that it has merely presented us with one sort of case in which we would be willing to say someone has talent. (It's possible to say that the case mentioned is a paradigm case, and if the Master goes on to describe other cases, we can let him off the hook.)

A proper definition of "talent" ought to make it clear that the word applies to a wider variety of cases than the one cited by the Master. We want to make sure, for example, that we include people who compose poems other than sonnets, those who write outstanding novels, plays, movie scripts, and propaganda, those who perform such actions as playing the viola or riding the unicycle particularly well, and so on.

The definition the Master gives, we would say, is too *narrow*. It excludes many kinds of cases in which we would regard it as legitimate to apply the word "talent."

Suppose we widen the definition, then. Let's define the word in this way:

talent: the ability to do something.

You don't have to be a Master of Inner Truth to recognize that we've gone too far in our definition. We have broadened the word's range of application to such an extent that anybody who is able to perform anything in any way whatsoever can be said to have talent. The word now applies to both Martha Graham and a dancing bear, to Arthur Clarke and any hack who can put words on paper. It applies to the poor drudge scrubbing the steps and to the person who flips the switch that turns on the computer. The definition now, of course, is too *broad.*

In this case, the definition is too broad because it would lead us to apply "talent" to cases that we wouldn't ordinarily regard as appropriate. You might say here that the definition is just *wrong*, if it's intended to be an explanation of the ordinary meaning of the word.

There is, however, another way of being too broad that doesn't make a definition wrong. It just makes it very unhelpful.

Consider the following definition of "shirt":

shirt: an article of clothing.

Quite correct, right? Right. But the obvious difficulty is that anyone who didn't know what a shirt was in the first place would not be helped very

much to be told it's an article of clothing. True, if he had absolutely no idea about what a shirt is, he would be helped a little bit. He would learn that it's not a device that's fed through a computer, it's not something to eat, and it's not something to read while commuting to Oshkosh.

On the other hand, the definition doesn't distinguish a shirt from the fez of the Sultan of Baghdad, the cloak of Captain Marvel, or the turban of Ibis the Invincible. The definition, again, is not wrong, but it's too *broad*. More features need to be added in the definition so that it becomes clear just what sort of thing more specifically *counts* as a shirt.

It should be clear from the three cases we've looked at that a proper definition has to be like Baby Bear's porridge—*just right*. It can be neither too narrow nor too broad.

Fancifully speaking, a definition draws a circle around the things or situations to which the word defined applies. (The circle is rather rough for some words.) Accordingly, you have to be careful to see that the circle doesn't include things to which the word doesn't apply. On the other hand, you have to see that it doesn't leave out things to which the word does apply. Giving a proper definition isn't really all that different from sorting oranges and potatoes.

By the way, the Master could have given a better definition of "talent" had he said something like this:

talent: the natural or acquired ability to do something in a superior way.

If anybody cares, a definition of "shirt" that escapes the crime of being too broad would be one along these lines:

shirt: a garment for the upper part of the body, typically with sleeves, collar, and a front opening, and sometimes worn under a coat or another heavier shirt.

Avoid Using Irrelevant Features

There's no reason to give the Master of Inner Truth a hard time, but there is something else wrong with his definition that ought to be mentioned. You'll recall that he defined "talent" as "the ability to compose a beautiful sonnet while taking a bath."

If we took this definition literally, in the way that a computer or a robot might do, it would have an odd consequence. It would keep us from saying that the author of a beautiful sonnet had talent if he composed it while sitting at his desk or riding on the IRT subway. We could say that he had talent only if he composed it *while taking a bath.*

Clearly no one would intend this, and to suggest they might is just to make a bad joke. Nevertheless, the bad joke has a good point. Mentioning features that are not relevant to the use of the word being defined is to invite confusion and misunderstanding.

It's possible to go from bad to worse and mention *only* features that are irrelevant to the use of the word. Suppose, for example, someone defined

"rock music" in this way: "music played on electrically amplified in-struments."

The natural response to this definition would be, "Well, that's not quite right. Sure, a lot of rock music does use amplification, but that's not really what makes it rock music."

The definition seems to miss the point. It focuses on features that seem accidental or irrelevant. After all, if the electricity is turned off, rock music doesn't have to come to a halt. It can be played on instruments that aren't amplified and still be rock. A definition would be more on target if it zeroed in on such features as the themes and beat of the music. These are what are basic to making it what it is.

In giving a definition, then, we ought to aim at mentioning those features that are relevant and important to the word's use. We ought to avoid mentioning those that are irrelevant or trivial. And this is so even if the features are ones that are always found in those cases in which the word is used.

For example, let's suppose that all students hate freshman composi-tion. A definition might go like this:

freshman composition: the class that all students hate.

Obviously, even if this were true, it would have nothing to do with explaining the meaning of the phrase. After all, suppose all students were to come to love the course, the meaning of the phrase "freshman composition" wouldn't change. To define the phrase properly we need to mention those features that are important and relevant to its use. Something like this:

freshman composition: a college course that aims at improving the writing skills of
    students through practice and criticism.

We could add many more commandments to this list, but since God needed only ten to cover all aspects of life, we ought to be able to get by with four to deal with definition. These "rules" are no more mechanical than an apple, and they can't be applied in an automatic fashion. As with most rules that deal with real life, they have to be employed with discretion, judgment, and imagination.

Dirty Definitions

We generally think of definitions as tools to be used to smooth the path of understanding and open up the road of communication. Such, indeed, is their legitimate use. But just as the same scalpel that saves lives in the hands of a surgeon can become an instrument of destruction in the hands of a maniac, so can definitions become methods of deceit.

In this section, we'll discuss two types of definition that involve misleading an audience under the guise of presenting a legitimate expla-

nation of the meaning of a word. Sometimes such definitions are presented only in fun, and are not really intended to mislead. Most often, however, they are used to cloud the understanding, to alter attitudes, and to secure agreement on a point of view without troubling to argue for it. Used for these ends, such definitions are morally dirty. If there were a Deceptive Practices Act regulating definitions, they would be outlawed by it.

Persuasive Definitions

In his famous eighteenth-century dictionary, Dr. Johnson defined "lexicographer" as "a maker of dictionaries; a harmless drudge." A lexicographer *is* a maker of dictionaries and he *may* be a harmless drudge, but of course, "harmless drudge" is not part of the usual meaning of the word. After years of exacting labor, Johnson was allowing himself a sardonic comment on his chosen occupation.

Persuasive definitions are definitions that appear to explain the ordinary meaning of a word but are really disguised attempts to influence our attitudes or conduct. Since rhetoric is "the art of persuasion by words," and such definitions try to persuade us to adopt a certain point of view, they are also called *rhetorical definitions*.

Some persuasive definitions attempt to influence our attitudes only in a gentle way. Like Dr. Johnson's definition, they are not intended to deceive us, but they are intended to express an opinion and to get us to share that opinion.

Cardinal Newman's definition of a gentleman as "one who never inflicts pain" was not put forward as a report on how people who speak English use the word "gentleman." Rather, it expressed Newman's belief that a gentleman *ought to be* such a person. Anyone who thought this notion of a gentleman a good one would thus have to conduct himself in the prescribed fashion.

Sir Henry Wotton's charmingly ambiguous definition of an ambassador as "an honest man sent to lie abroad for his country" quite successfully conveys a certain attitude toward diplomacy and diplomats. Similarly, Oscar Wilde's famous definition of foxhunting as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible" leaves no doubt about what he thought of foxhunting. Ezra Pound's quip that nowadays a philosopher is "just a guy too damned lazy to work in a laboratory" makes quite clear Pound's contempt for philosophers.

In spite of the fact that they may look like and read like definitions, cases like the ones above are not really definitions. None of them was ever offered as a serious definition (except for Johnson's), though, no doubt, they were offered seriously for some other purpose.

Sometimes, however, persuasive definitions are not just epigrams or editorials. Some are deliberately designed to be misleading. They are

phrased to appeal to prejudices and emotions and to influence behavior and attitudes, while at the same time attempting to pass as legitimate definitions.

Consider these, for example:

1. A Catholic is a person who owes allegiance only to the Pope.
2. A Negro is a person who bears the mark of Cain set on him by God to separate him from the rest of the human race.
3. Jews are an inferior race of people bred from the dregs of other races.

Such definitions are generally offered as correct accounts of the meanings of the words they pretend to be explaining. But they are, of course, only propaganda devices that work by associating the word and what it refers to with a complex of emotionally charged terms.

Not all persuasive definitions must be so virulent or appeal to prejudices and emotions in such a direct fashion as the ones above. Some consist in linking the word supposedly defined with honorific words like "my country," "patriotic," "intelligent," "with it," and so on.

There is obviously a place for strategy in formulating persuasive definitions, and the smart propagandist must know his audience and their values and prejudices so he will know what sort of words to use in framing his "definitions."

He must also decide, of course, whether he wishes them to approve or disapprove of the things referred to by the word he is defining. It is, after all, a poor propagandist who leaves his audience in doubt as to what their opinions ought to be.

Consider the following definitions and notice the kind of appeal made:

liberal: a person who is ahead of his time, one who tries to see future problems before they become crises.

liberal: a person out of touch with the hard realities of the world, one who dreams of utopia and ignores immediate and pressing difficulties.

woman: a person selected by nature to be the mother of children and the assistant of man.

woman: someone who has been forced to bury her talents and sacrifice her intelligence because of a repressive male-dominated society.

Probably few people are taken in by persuasive definitions, unless they are already prepared by their own wishes and prejudices to be misled. Being fooled by a persuasive definition, then, is generally a symptom and not a cause. Yet not all who are misled are willingly misled. So a knowledge of persuasive definition and an awareness of how it works is considerable protection against the dangers of deception.

Loaded Definitions

Loaded definitions are close cousins of persuasive definitions. A loaded definition does undertake to explain the meaning of a word as it is used,

but the explanation is expressed in a prejudicial manner. The definition given is thus "loaded" with bias, and what ought to be a straightforward factual account of the use of a word is turned into a propaganda device.

Two famous historical cases of loaded definition are the following, which were given by Samuel Johnson in his eighteenth-century *Dictionary*:

excise: A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but by wretches hired by those to whom the tax is paid.

oats: A grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.

An excise tax is one that is levied on the production or consumption of commodities. Dr. Johnson's definition does succeed in conveying about this much, but it also packs into the definition assumptions about the nature of such a tax and about the people who collect it. Someone not knowing the meaning of the word and attempting to learn it from the definition would get the impression that an excise tax is *necessarily* a hateful tax and that the people who collect it are always base and despicable ("wretches"). These assumptions are not a part of the legitimate meaning of the word "excise." Whether people love or hate a certain tax has nothing at all to do with whether or not it's properly called an excise tax. Nor does the character of the people who collect it.

Loaded definitions share with persuasive definitions the frequent technique of employing words with pleasant or unpleasant connotations, words that encourage us to approve or disapprove of whatever they are applied to. The use of the words "hateful" and "wretches" are examples of this practice.

Notice, though, that the second of Dr. Johnson's definitions conveys a low opinion of the people of Scotland without making use of such words. In saying that Scots eat the same food as horses do in England, it invites us to conclude that, compared with the English, they may be like animals in other respects as well. (And, of course, even if it were true that the Scots ate oats and the English didn't, this would have nothing to do with the proper use of the word. It's in no way connected with the meaning of "oats.") Definitions don't have to be loaded, then, solely by the presence in them of emotionally charged words. Suggested comparisons can also do the trick.

The following definitions illustrate both kinds of loading. Furthermore, they give some indication of the ways in which individuals or groups can further their own interests. If the definitions they offer were generally accepted as legitimate, then the viewpoints they represent would be accepted as well.

integrationist: a person committed to the foolish and dangerous doctrine that races of man ought to have equal rights and form one society

welfare assistance: money paid by government agencies to people who are too

lazy and shiftless to support themselves
lobbyist: a person who helps make democracy more effective by representing the interests of a group to government officials

As these examples show, loaded definitions, unlike persuasive definitions, do include an account of the standard meaning of the word defined. Persuasive definitions make no attempt at this. For this reason, loaded definitions are perhaps more dangerously misleading than persuasive ones. The grain of truth makes the pound of prejudice easier to swallow.

Concerning the recognition of loaded definitions, a word of caution is in order. Not all definitions that are expressed in evaluative terms are loaded ones. They may be perfectly legitimate accounts of the meanings of ordinary words.

It's an interesting fact about languages that many words have evaluations built into their meanings. This is not at all surprising, for, after all, language is used to express evaluations. Certain words, then, come to apply to persons or situations that display characteristics of which we don't approve, or which we think foolish, imprudent, or irrational. A definition of "evildoer," for example, has to include a value phrase to the effect that an evildoer does evil.

Or, to take a more dramatic example, "murder" has to be defined in such a way as to make it clear that murder consists in *unjustified* killing. (It is this fact, by the way, that makes it nonsensical to ask "Is murder ever right?" The question has to be "Is killing ever right?" We might say that by definition murder can never be right [i.e., justified].)

Similarly, the word "scoundrel" means "a worthless and unprincipled person." Thus we show our disapproval of such a person by calling him a scoundrel, not by defining what he is called in such a way as to display disapproval.

In any event, the explanation of the meaning of a word that correctly reports how a word is used may contain evaluative phrases. So long as the definition does not pack prejudice into the explanation, it is not a loaded one. A loaded definition can be such only in contrast with an unloaded one, and if society or the community of language users does the loading, this is standard use. It's not something we are directly responsible for, at least not so far as giving definitions is concerned. Our job is simply to report the facts of the word's use.

Exercises

The Court of Definition

From your modest beginnings as a Scare-Quote Identifier for Logic, Inc., you have worked your way up to a truly distinguished position in the

field of informal logic. The International Logic Association has elected you to serve a term on the Court of Definition.

As a justice on the Definition Court, you are to apply fairly and forthrightly the rules regulating definition. You are to use your best judgment to determine whether the definitions that come before you are guilty of violating the Prohibitions. You are to assume, of course, that the definitions have been offered as reportive definitions.

The Prohibitions, recall, are these:

1. avoid complete circularity;
2. avoid language that is obscure, ambiguous, or metaphorical;
3. avoid being too broad or too narrow;
4. avoid using irrelevant features.

In addition to seeing to it that these Prohibitions are not violated, you are to keep a sharp eye out for those who try to get away with using persuasive or loaded definitions.

All judicial opinions must be defended, of course, so you must be prepared to explain why you regard a Prohibition as being violated or why you decide that a certain definition is persuasive or loaded.

Since not every definition that comes before you will be guilty of some crime against logic and right reasoning, you must be considered in your opinion and be certain that you have good reasons to back it up.

Cases of Definitions To Be Judged

1. Eat: To perform successively (and successfully) the functions of mastication, humectation, and deglutition.

   AMBROSE BIERCE,
   The Devil's Dictionary

2. Pooh-pooh: To say "pooh-pooh," to dismiss without consideration.

3. Time is the moving image of eternity.

   PLATO

4. Poetry is the kind of thing poets write.

   ROBERT FROST

5. An antimetabolite is a substance that antagonizes the action of a metabolite.

   ERWIN DI CYAN,
   Vitamins in Your Life

6. Mysticism is just tomorrow's science dreamed today.

   MARSHALL MCLUHAN,
   Playboy Interview

7. Money: A medium of exchange.

8. A demonstration is a dissenter's device to rally the uncommitted behind him so that by sheer weight of numbers an aura of conviction is projected on his behalf.

SPIRO AGNEW

9. According to the alchemists, "calx" was the ash or fixed part of a substance that remained after it had been burned.

10. A drug is a substance that has an effect upon the body or mind.

National Clearing House for Drug Abuse

11. Balkan states: The states that occupy the Balkan Peninsula: Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Rumania, and Yugoslovia.

12. Happiness is a warm puppy.

CHARLES SCHULTZ

13. An element is a substance, a sample of matter consisting solely of atoms with the same atomic number.

W. A. KIEFFER,
Chemistry: A Cultural Approach

14. Carbon is the element that is the backbone of life.

15. Ensign: A standard of a military unit.

16. Scientist: One of those scholars who receive the largest amount of federal money in the form of research grants.

17. Policeman: A killer licensed by society to protect the lives and property of the rich.

18. Informal logic: A travel guide to the ordinary world of correct reasoning.

19. Oxygen: A substance ordinarily sold in cylinder-shaped tanks.

20. Harmful: Capable of harming or causing harm.

American Heritage Dictionary

21. Abortion: A form of murder in which an unborn fetus is removed from its mother's womb and allowed to die.

22. [Poetry] is language whose individual lines, either because of their own brilliance or because they focus so powerfully what has gone before, have a higher voltage than most language has. It is language that grows frequently incandescent, giving off both light and heat.

LAURENCE PERRINE,
Sound and Sense

23. Cultivate: To improve and prepare (land), as by plowing or fertilizing, for raising crops; to till.

American Heritage Dictionary

24. Library: A collection of books primarily intended for personal use and not for sale.

25. Singletree: A whiffletree.

26. Woman: The sex most discriminated against in present-day society.

27. Intellectual: Any left-leaning crackpot who subscribes to dangerous and unpatriotic ideas.

28. Conservative: A person with both feet firmly planted in the mud.

29. Tea: A beverage that is drunk in England at four o'clock in the afternoon.

30. An egghead is one who stands firmly on both feet in mid-air on both sides of an issue.

SENATOR HOMER FERGUSON

31. Amnesty: The state's magnanimity to those offenders whom it would be too expensive to punish.

AMBROSE BIERCE,
The Devil's Dictionary

32. Yawn: A silent shout.

G. K. CHESTERTON

33. Medicine: The only profession that labours incessantly to destroy the reason for its own existence.

JAMES BRYCE

34. Lawyers: The only persons in whom ignorance of the law is not punished.

JEREMY BENTHAM

35. Tact: Knowing how far we may go too far.

JEAN COCTEAU

In the Def-Class Division

After your term as justice on the Definition Court expires, you are at a loss for another job. But Logic, Inc., comes through again and asks that you serve as a consultant to their Definition Classification Division.

They've accepted some contracts that have faced them with some tough problems in classification, and you agree to help with them.

The standard scheme that you use, recall, is this one:

1. Stipulative
   a. Arbitrary
   b. Restricting

2. Reportive
   a. Lexical
   b. Technical
   c. Historical

You are handed a list of the definitions and you begin work classifying them in your usual careful and competent manner.

1. Siphonostele: A vascular tube surrounding the pith in the stems of certain plants.

2. *Free verse*, by our definition, is not verse at all; that is, it is not metrical. It may be rimed or unrimed. The word *free* means it is free of metrical restrictions.

   LAURENCE PERRINE,
   Sound and Sense

3. For our purposes language may be defined as systematized combinations of sounds which have meaning for all persons in a given cultural community.

   THOMAS PYLES,
   Origin and Development of the English Language

4. Cure: A method or course of medical treatment used to restore health.

   American Heritage Dictionary

5. I now mean by elements . . . certain primitive and simple or perfectly unmingled bodies, which not being made of any other bodies or of one another, are the ingredients of which all those perfectly mixt bodies are immediately compounded and into which they are ultimately resolved.

   ROBERT BOYLE,
   The Sceptical Chemist (1661)

6. By a Fallacy is commonly understood any unsound mode of arguing, which appears to demand our conviction, and to be decisive of the question in hand, when in fairness it is not.

   RICHARD WHATELY,
   The Elements of Logic

7. Curette: A surgical instrument shaped like a scoop or spoon, used to remove dead tissue or growths from a bodily cavity.

   American Heritage Dictionary

8. I shall make use of the expression "DSP" to abbreviate "different senses of possible."

   PAUL GOMBERG

9. *Grammar* is the Art of expressing the Relations of Things in Construction; with due Accent in Speaking, and Orthography in Writing, according to the Custom of those whose Language we learn.

   A. FISHER,
   Grammar (1788)

10. By an *argument* we mean a system of declarative sentences (of a single

language), one of which is designated as the *conclusion* and the others as *premises*.

<div align="right">BENSON MATES,
Elementary Logic</div>

11. The term "mortgage," when used herein, shall include deed of trust, trust deed, or other security instrument.

<div align="right">American Land Title Association Standard Form 3360</div>

12. Concerning the coverage afforded under Section II of this policy, "occurrence" means an accident, including injurious exposure to conditions, which results, during the policy term, in bodily injury or property damage.

<div align="right">Prudential Policy and Casualty Insurance Company</div>

13. When we review the different institutions in our Western society, we find some that are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line. Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors. These establishments I am calling *total institutions*, and it is their general characteristics I want to explore.

<div align="right">ERVING GOFFMAN,
Asylums</div>

14. "Motor vehicle" means a land motor vehicle, trailer or semi-trailer designed for travel on public roads (including any machinery or apparatus attached thereto) but does not include, except when being towed by or carried on a motor vehicle, any of the following, utility, boat, camp, or home trailer, recreational motor vehicle, crawler or farm type tractor, farm implement, or, if not subject to motor vehicle registration, any equipment which is designed for use principally off public roads.

<div align="right">Prudential Policy and Casualty Insurance Company</div>

15. To "barbadoes" a person meant the same in the seventeenth century as to "shanghai" him meant in the nineteenth.

<div align="right">SIDNEY W. MINTZ,
Columbia Forum (Spring, 1970)</div>

A Strange Hobby

To relax from your consulting work with Logic, Inc., you pursue a rather strange hobby. On the principle that it takes one to know one, you spend some of your free time constructing loaded or persuasive definitions. You find that this gives you an opportunity to express your own beliefs and prejudices in a harmless way. It also prepares you to recognize

loaded or persuasive definitions when they are used in a serious (or half-serious) way by others.

Here are a few of the expressions that you deliberately define in a dirty and unfair fashion:

1. Physician	6. Politician
2. Food-Stamp Program	7. Women's Liberation
3. Homosexual	8. State Legislature
4. Militant (noun)	9. Pornography
5. Intellectual (noun)	10. Income Tax

Logic, Inc.—Special Assignment

A hermit has been discovered living in a cave high in the Rocky Mountains. He has been there since the atomic tests of the early 1950s, but he has now decided that the world isn't going to be bombed out of existence in the next few years and that he wants to rejoin society again.

The Interior Department has hired Logic, Inc., to assist this man in his return to present-day society. This presents a difficulty for the organization, because four of its Definition Agents are on sick leave with the complaint of eyestrain and acute boredom. They ask if you would be willing to step in and lend a hand.

You readily agree to, of course. The task that you are given involves explaining to the man the recently acquired meanings of the words listed below.

1. What would you say by way of explanation in each case?
2. What method or methods of definition seem to you most useful in giving your explanations?
3. Which words on the list have meanings that were new several years ago but now seem well established? Which have meanings that are not well established, so that a report on them is really a historical definition?

acid	dropout	pad
bag	freak	pill
bread	grass	pot
busing	hangup	rap
bust	head	rock
camp	joint	stoned
demonstration	Mace	topless