

Definition

Kent Lewis

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

The previous chapter looked at the gap between a word's connotation and its literal meaning. Unfortunately, denotative language isn't a trouble-free guide to truth. A definition from a dictionary, government, medical journal, or legal text may be as subjective and misleading as its connotative counterpart. What's worse, we tend to accept definitions as objective facts and so are less aware of potential bias—a situation that makes definitions a tricky bit of linguistic waters.

ARBITRARY DEFINITIONS

The first feature to recognize in definition is its arbitrary nature. A dictionary seldom spells out an objective and eternal truth. On the contrary, things change radically depending on *how* they're defined. Consider something as common and familiar as the kilogram. We use this unit everyday, but what is it? How was it set? Originally, scientists conceived of the kilogram as the weight of 1 litre of water, but abandoned this reference as unstable. In 1889, they commissioned the construction of a platinum-iridium cylinder to become the new universal standard for the kilogram. They chose

the inert metal block partly because of its stability, but to a great degree their choice of material, size, and shape was arbitrary, as was the choice of a litre of water. The kilogram could be defined as anything, as long as the definition remained a fixed referent point for all to follow. In 2003, scientists again changed the standard for the kilogram (the platinum-iridium cylinder is losing microscopic amounts of weight), but it matters little, for the kilogram has no intrinsic or natural meaning. Neither does the second, the metre, or the other metric units, all of which have changed over the years. They work purely as an arbitrary choice, a steady benchmark for scientists (Pohl).

Many cultural definitions work in the same way—not as a reflection of pre-existing reality, but as a royal decree, an official “Make it so.” Such definitions aren’t *descriptive* so much as *prescriptive*—they work as rules in a game that guide and allow play, behaving like rules in a hockey game. The hockey community grants the referee a limited infallibility to call goals, penalties, and infractions, so that the game can continue without endless harangue and bickering. The infallibility of the referee enables the play of the game. In a similar manner, the definition of a universal and stable kilogram allows scientists to play the research and measurement game. The infallibility of the Pope forms one game rule of Catholicism, just as the authority of the judge is a condition of the legal game. And if one wants to enjoy the communication game, one uses the communal, dictionary meaning of words. Such decrees, rulings, fiats, and declarations allow for the smooth functioning of society.

While definitions by decree might be socially useful, they’re not necessarily true in any physical sense. They remain arbitrary, sometimes even random impositions. In such cases, we need to remember that referees make bad calls from time to time, and such decisions can be overturned.

SUBJECTIVE DEFINITIONS

“How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.”

—Abraham Lincoln

Students tend to consider reference works as sources of objective information, but such texts often have a set point of view, personality, or bias. A British dictionary such as *Oxford’s* spells words differently than an American one such as *Webster’s*, different again from a Canadian one such as *Gage*. The national

dialects create alternative yet equally “authoritative” spellings. This point-of-view invariably affects the meanings listed in any dictionary, encyclopedia, or reference work, despite their reputation for objectivity and neutrality. Samuel Johnson was hardly impartial when his dictionary (the first in history) defined oats as “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people” (Crystal 209). Today the definitions of vital terms such as pornography, madness, terrorism, pollution, and harassment differ significantly depending upon which authority you cite. Rather than accept definitions as an authoritative answer, we should ask, “Who defined this?” Or more specifically, “What influence has the author’s character, interests, finances, and culture had on the definition?”

The subjective nature of definition becomes painfully clear when we look at national sovereignty. In the Middle East, Palestinians claim that Israel has no right to the historic lands of Palestine and its people. In contrast, Israel refuses to recognize the existence of Palestine, suggesting that it’s not a people, a land, or a nation. The definition of sovereignty in the Middle East depends greatly on *whom* you ask, and *what* authority is evoked. Similar disputes have happened in Canada, as Aboriginal groups have questioned the legitimacy of colonial rule.

The subjective spirit of definition appears even in the supposedly objective disciplines of science and medicine. Fans of gay-themed TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are surprised to discover that the medical community considered homosexuality a mental illness for most of the 20th century. As late as the 1990s, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a sexual deviancy in its encyclopedic reference work, *The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). The DSM acts as the bible of the psychiatric industry; once this authoritative text lists a condition, the medical community largely accepts it as a legitimate illness. Labelled as sick by the DSM, many gay men and women received medical therapy for their sexual orientation, including counselling, drug regimes, confinement, negative reinforcement, and in the first part of the century, electro-shock treatment or lobotomy.

Not surprisingly, gay people tended to disagree with the APA’s classification of homosexuality as a disease. Unlike a real mental illness, they argued, homosexuality doesn’t impair a person’s ability to function in society. Furthermore, most queer people are happy with their sexual orientation, not distressed by it. Most discomfort associated with homosexuality comes from the homophobic culture that persecutes gays.

If homosexuality harms none, why did the APA classify it as pathology? In part, the answer lies in the dubious assumptions and biases of those early psychiatrists. Using the cultural norm as a reference, scientists tended to see heterosexuality as natural, and homosexuality as an aberration; they saw gays as "abnormal" not just in the numerical sense as a minority population; statistical deviation became confused with moral and physical deviancy. Certain passages in the Bible further encouraged medical professionals to see homosexuality as an abomination, a defilement of the flesh. In the end, researchers wrongly concluded that homosexuality was a sickness based on cultural, personal, and religious discrimination.

Such bias shows the need to scan every definition for chauvinism, presumption, and outright bigotry, even the scientific ones. In 1994, the APA recognized its own mistake and removed any reference to homosexuality as an illness from the fourth edition of DSM. Other sexualities haven't been so lucky. Debate still rages today whether or not categories such as "gender identity disorder" and "transvestic fetishism," are real mental illnesses, or yet another medical prejudice against alternative sexual lifestyles.

These muddles demonstrate the mutability of a definition, the protean manner in which a single word can take on radically different meanings in different contexts, according to different people. In the end, the meaning of a word may well depend on who defines it and which authority backs it up.

In this way, definition can't be separated from various forms of power. As different definitions compete for currency and legitimacy, the ones backed with power, influence, and resources tend to win out. And power doesn't always act with truth or justice.

DEFINITIONS WITH PURPOSE

"Every definition is dangerous."

—Erasmus

In addition to personal bias, definitions tend to have specific political ends. That's to say, definitions are designed with purpose to achieve tangible results. People use the power of definitions to bend circumstances to their will, as in the following odd version of a "truck."

In the 1980s, governments started to impose strict guidelines on the automotive industry, mandating smaller size, lower emissions, and greater fuel economy in all cars. The government exempted trucks from these restrictions, because industry argued

that it needed the powerful, if dirty, engines of a conventional truck to haul loads and perform commercial work.

Auto manufacturers grimaced. The new laws called for changes in their most lucrative lines—the sport and luxury models. Even worse, the restrictions targetted the signs of prestige, opulence, and power that distinguish luxury and sports vehicles from cheaper economy cars. How could a sports car with a two-stroke engine attract adrenaline-addicted young men? What car could they offer the rich that still brazenly declared rank and affluence?

The answer is none: instead they offered a "truck." As powerful as a Camaro, as elegant as a Lincoln, as roomy as a Seville, the SUV filled the market niche left vacant by the sports and luxury cars.

Of course, SUVs are light trucks only in the technical sense of the word. In day-to-day life, people use them as personal or family vehicles, driving them to and from work, no different from a Volvo or a Taurus. In fact, 90 percent of all sport utilities remain firmly on asphalt their entire lives ("Ultimate Poseur"). Although they may be classified on paper as a truck, SUVs are used, overwhelmingly, as cars—bigger, more powerful, and opulent cars.

Here then is a dark example of definition with a purpose. By defining their new line of vehicles as light trucks, the automotive manufacturers continued to make luxury sedans as big as they want, despite the restrictions on car size. They still cranked out gas-wasting sports models with over-sized engines, even though all other cars must meet minimum standards of fuel efficiency. Perhaps worst of all, they still make commuter vehicles that spew out unacceptable levels of toxins, despite pollution restrictions. By labelling their vehicles "all terrain," auto manufacturers escaped the troublesome legislation that forced them to conserve natural resources and improve air quality.

We learn an important lesson here: definitions can be manipulated to achieve private, corporate, or political agendas. Rather than accept such definitions, we must begin to question their motives, asking who defined this, who gains, and who loses.

HOW TO COPE WITH PROBLEMATIC DEFINITIONS

When faced with a definition, don't accept it as fact; examine and question it.

- Who defined this? From what point of view?
- Is the definition biased?
- Is it a prescriptive or descriptive definition?
- If prescriptive, why is this definition needed?

- Can the thing in question be defined in another way?
- What purpose is served? Who gains by this definition?
- What potential problems arise?
- What authority is evoked? Can we trust the authority?
- What power backs up the definition?

By accepting someone's definitions, we let others set the game rules. If we question or create a new definition, we radically alter the game.

CASE STUDY: PORNOGRAPHY

We know pornography when we see it, but a censor board must use more objective standards. Historically, the attempts to define pornography fall into three different broad strategies.

CONTENT

A content-based approach defines pornography according to the subject matter appearing on the screen, magazine, canvass, or text. This strategy declares something pornographic based upon the depiction of specific body parts and sexual acts: breasts, vaginas, penises, intercourse, fellatio, etc.

Problems with this line of thinking begin when we try to decide what body parts and acts make their way onto that checklist of the forbidden. Early attempts at a content definition of pornography focused on the naked human form, a category that catches "skin" magazines such as *Penthouse*, but also hauls in all sorts of unwanted by-catch. If we equate pornography with nudity, for instance, we classify a huge portion of world art as pornographic.

Some censors refined the nudity premise, limiting it to specific organs. For a while, Canadian censors defined pornography as anything showing an erect penis, a definition that exempted most (but not all) museum nudes, yet applied to explicit movies like *Deep Throat*. According to this provision, the human body itself was not pornographic, only the aroused male member.

However, this version again created problems. The definition erroneously equates pornography with a man's erect penis, and so doesn't address instances of women's sexuality. Consequently, filmmakers could show graphic scenes of lesbian sexuality and still escape censure. In contrast, gay male sex became almost impossible to document.

Given these flaws, the definition of pornography shifted focus away from the human body to acts of sexuality themselves: censors declared a work pornographic if it showed vaginal or anal penetration,

oral genital contact, oral digital contact, etc. This policy allowed censors to correct its male bias, and address a broader range of indulgences, gay and straight, alternative and mainstream.

As with the focus on the body, a sex-based definition created inconsistencies and controversies. In particular, this definition targeted any sexually explicit work, regardless of purpose, merit, or effect. Great writers such as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Vladimir Nabokov had novels seized because they described human sexuality in realistic detail. Non-fiction works such as *The Joy of Sex* were banned for providing information, counselling, instruction, and medical advice in a no-nonsense style. When censors applied the criterion of graphic content, a major problem arose: this definition banned works that were educational and artistic.

INTENT

A content-based definition of pornography fails, because it doesn't discriminate between serious and puerile works. It ignores the purpose of the text, photo, or video, whether to inform, inspire, or merely titillate. This led some people to think that a better definition of pornography rests in the *intent* of its makers: a work is pornographic when its only goal is sexual arousal.

This approach avoids the thorny field of subject material, concentrating instead on the *sobriety* or *lewd* style. This new method solves many difficulties found in the content-based strategy. Adult videos receive a pornographic classification because they're preoccupied with sexuality, at the expense of character, dialogue, and coherent plot. Expository texts such as *The Joy of Sex* escape censorship because their purpose is scholarly and instructional. Similarly, great works of painting, literature, and sculpture receive no censure, for their intent is to reflect human nature, to fashion a mirror that entertains, educates, and explores in a creative manner. Today, the concept of *artistic merit* still stands, exempting sexually graphic works from censorship because they have aesthetic value.

The problem with an intent-based definition of pornography is that the purpose of a work is not always clear, nor objectively measurable. The slippery nature of intent leads to some obvious contradictions: in the hands of a responsible parent, a photo of a naked child is acceptable; in the hands of a pedophile, it magically becomes contraband. The smut peddler selling explicit pictures produces porn, but the artist depicting sex makes art, thanks to the serious and aesthetic intent. For example, multimedia artist Jeffrey Koons photographed himself and his ex-porn star wife Cicciolina as they engaged in intercourse and fellatio. In one picture, Koons

even ejaculates across Cicciolina's face. Because Koons declares his material as "art," he can produce material as explicit as any adult video. With intent, any smut is okay, as long as it is highbrow smut.

EFFECT

The capricious nature of the content/intent definitions led to a new approach to the pornography debate: effect. This strategy shifts attention away from the pornographers and their products, and looks at the consequences of pornography, asking "What harm does erotic material do?" According to this reasoning, a film showing healthy lovemaking can be distributed freely, for it creates no tangible injury to anyone. In contrast, a film that glorifies rape or degrades women is banned if the film encourages real violence or discrimination. Similar to Canadian hate crime legislation restricting racist material, this version of pornography forbids work that fosters discrimination, aggression, cruelty, and debasement of humanity.

One of the advantages of this approach is the way it avoids the arbitrary definitions of sexuality that hamstrung content-based approaches. Any sex goes, as long as no one gets hurt. Likewise, censors no longer worry about the artist's "meaning," and base decisions upon the category of external harm.

Despite these advantages, this method has also been applied in a rather discriminatory and capricious manner.

The problem lies with the term "harm," a category as arbitrary as any previous measure. Harm is not used in its physical sense (such as broken bone), but in a more nebulous sense of spiritual, philosophical, or cultural damage: an ambiguous premise. Consider the classic feminist argument against pornography that it dehumanizes and objectifies women. This accusation contains a rather obvious contradiction: sex is perfectly healthy if it takes place in the privacy of a darkened bedroom, but magically becomes a threat once recorded on videotape. In addition, the charge does not satisfactorily explain why the depiction of sexual congress dehumanizes women, but not men engaged in the same act. Porn movies usually treat men as little more than mere appendages, while women at least have the luxury of receiving star billings.

Today, the harm-based definition continues to make suspect cases for obscenity. Some feminists label fashion magazines like *Cosmopolitan* as pornographic because they contribute to anorexia in women. Other feminists such as Andrea Dworkin suggest that heterosexuality itself conveys a secret male hatred of women, a desire to violate and possess the female space. Some fundamentalist Christians echo Dworkin, arguing that sexuality outside of

marriage poses a threat to the sanctity of the family. Others suggest that sexual materials are harmful when they defy community standards—an obvious problem for alternative lifestyles.

Defined in this slippery manner, it seems pornography can be anything you don't like.

CASE STUDY: NATIVES

When the Canadian government recognizes a person as a "status Indian," the title brings tangible benefits, such as free tuition, tax exemption, housing, fishing, and hunting prerogatives. These special dispensations are costly, and intended for Aboriginal peoples alone. To avoid abuse, the Canadian government determines very precisely what constitutes an "authentic" Aboriginal.

Native "blood" or ancestry is the most obvious criterion for establishing an authentic First Nations identity, yet is far from a simple matter. If the government restricts its definition to children of "pure blood" parents, then it rejects countless mixed ancestry natives, including entire groups, such as the Métis. Some dilution of "pure blood" criterion seems appropriate, given the amount of interbreeding between First Nations and colonists over the past 500 odd years. But then new problems arise. How much First Nations blood does a person have to have to qualify as a real Indian? One half? One eighth? One sixteenth? No matter where one draws the line, the decision seems arbitrary.

Perhaps more interesting is the variety of ways that the federal government has denied official recognition to Indian people (a loss that the government euphemistically called "enfranchisement"). Indian status has been withheld or retracted for a variety of reasons, including

- Marriage to a non-Native man
- Acceptance of money in exchange for status, a bribe known as "half-breed scrip"
- The desire to vote, own land, consume alcohol, live off the reserve, live outside of Canada, become a professional such as a lawyer or priest
- Birth out of wedlock or in a non-Native community
- Exclusion from official band lists or registry
- Children of Canadian parents born in the United States
- Children of a Native who meet any of these conditions (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples)

These criteria strip Natives of their identity, in ways never applied to Europeans. They also force Native people to make a brutal choice: retain your Native identity or feed your family.

In retrospect, the federal definition of Indian has an obvious purpose: to reduce the official count of First Nations peoples and so to decrease the cost of financial support. Historically, the definition helped in the process of colonization and settlement of the country, forcing Native people to relinquish territory and accept reservation life. The reserve criterion was particularly useful for forcing Plains Indians into permanent homes, ending migrant lifestyles that threatened settlement of the prairies.

Until very recently, the official policy of the federal Canadian government towards First Nations people was assimilation, a policy that encouraged Natives to abandon traditional culture and integrate into Canadian society. The government forced assimilation upon Native communities with a variety of different tactics, including the banning of Aboriginal customs and languages, as well as the kidnapping and re-education of Native children in residential schools. One of the best weapons in the federal arsenal was its very strict definition of a First Nations person, a biased and narrow definition that stripped untold thousands of legitimate Aboriginal peoples of official recognition.

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Exercises

1. Read the following questions and devise a definition for the following.

- Define a *human life*. At what point does a person come into existence? At birth? At conception? How does your definition apply to abortion? Cloning?
- Define *harassment* to prevent abuse but allow free expression.
- Define *artistic merit* so that you will protect legitimate art works, but criminalize the stuff that goes "just too far."
- Define "child abuse." Would it include spanking? Church attendance? Emotional neglect? Circumcision?
- Write a definition of *child* and *work*, to prevent exploitation, yet allow traditional jobs such as babysitting or paper delivery.

f) Define *essential service*, remembering such professions can't strike. Does your definition cover sanitation workers? Ferry workers? Teachers?

g) Define a dietary term such as *fat free, light, low sugar, or healthy*.

h) Define *marriage*. Does it apply to gays? Common-law relationships?

2. Create a definition for the following terms. Then discuss with your class the authority, interests, and bias that may lie behind the definition.

Canadian content
Community standards
Discrimination
Drug
Family
Feminist
Genocide
Multiculturalism
Intellectual property
Organic
Politically correct
Pollutant
Prostitution
Psychosis
Public good
Purebred
Race
Religion
Restricted/PG/Family
Sexual relations
Slander/Libel
Vegetarian
Weapons of mass destruction

3. Define the following medical conditions. Where do you draw the line between a normal and abnormal amount of the behaviour? Are all of these illnesses legitimate?

Addiction
Anorexia
Antisocial personality disorder
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Chronic fatigue syndrome
Cross-dressing
Depression

Fibromyalgia
Gender identity disorder
Oppositional defiance disorder
Recovered memory syndrome
Sadomasochism
Yuppie flu

4. Invent a disease. Take any trait (such as the following) and describe it as a psychosis.

- Faith in economic growth
- Excessive consumption
- Need for love, belonging, or esteem
- Pursuit of career, health, or wealth
- Belief in religion or spirituality
- Political apathy
- Dedication to family or church

What would happen if these were included in the DSM?



What Is Terrorism?

MICHAEL MOORE

Michael Moore is a reporter, author, comedian, personality, filmmaker, and political activist. He has written best-selling books (*Downsize This*, *Stupid White Men*, and *Dude, Where's My Country?*); launched award-winning TV shows (*TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*); and won Oscars for his documentaries *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine*. His film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a damning appraisal of the Bush administration, is the most successful documentary in movie history. Moore focuses on a variety of social justice issues, paying particular attention to the problems of globalization and outsourcing, which devastated the economy of his hometown, Flint, Michigan.

What is terrorism? There is no question that, when an individual rents a Ryder Truck, loads it with explosives, and blows up a building, it is an act of terrorism and should be severely punished.

But what do you call it when a company destroys the lives of thousands of people? Is this terrorism? *Economic terrorism*? The company doesn't use a homemade bomb or a gun. They politely move out all of the people before they blow up the building. But as I pass by the remnants of that factory there in Flint, Michigan,

looking eerily like the remnants of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, I wonder: What will happen to those people? A few will kill themselves, despondent over the loss of their livelihood. Some will be killed by their spouse—an argument over the lack of a new job or the loss of money at the racetrack turns suddenly violent (the woman is the one who usually ends up dead). Others will be killed more slowly through drugs or alcohol, the substances of choice when one needs to ease the pain of his or her life being turned upside down and shoved into an empty, dark hole.

We don't call the company a murderer, and we certainly don't call their actions terrorism, but make no mistake about it, their victims will be just as dead as those poor souls in Oklahoma City, killed off in the name of greed.

There is a rage building throughout the country and, if you're like me, you're scared shitless. Oklahoma City is the extreme extension of this rage. Though most people are somehow able to keep their wits through these hard times, I believe thousands of Americans are only a few figurative steps away from getting into that Ryder Truck. How terrifyingly ironic that the vehicle now chosen for terrorist acts is the same one used by that vast diaspora of working-class Americans who have spent the last decade moving from state to state in the hopes of survival.

This moving van, this symbol of their downsized lives, has become a means to an end. Eighty pounds of fertilizer and a fuse made of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil now fill the trusty Ryder instead of the kids' bunk beds and the dining room set.

Timothy McVeigh couldn't get a decent job in Buffalo, so he joined the army and got the "first kill" of his unit in Iraq during the Gulf War. We gave him a medal for that kill, that taking of a human life. That murder was sanctioned because he was doing it on behalf of Uncle Sam for the oil companies.

The next year, he was unemployed, hanging around Niagara Falls, New York. A photo of him that has been widely published shows him and fellow defendant Terry Nichols horsing around on the ledge at Niagara Falls. I was there at the Falls, writing and prepping my film *Canadian Bacon*, at the time that photo was taken. I, of course, have no recollection of seeing McVeigh there, because who was he then? Just another son of a GM worker who couldn't get a job, not even as a toll-taker on the bridge to Canada (he had scored second highest on the test; there just weren't any openings). In the first scene we filmed a few months later at the Falls, the character "Roy-Boy" is a laid-off worker (also a veteran of the Gulf War) and is on that same ledge, preparing to jump and end it all.

McVeigh and Nichols had met in the Army. The day that Nichols decided to join the Army he drove through the decimated downtown of Flint, Michigan, walked into the recruiter's office, and signed up for a better life—better than whatever Flint could offer.

After the war (and their stint looking for work around Niagara Falls), McVeigh and Nichols then moved to a farm Nichols' brother owned an hour northeast of Flint. They went to Michigan Militia meetings. They blew up "things" in the backyard. It was no surprise to me that McVeigh and Nichols found themselves on a road that led from Flint, Michigan to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

How was it that Timothy McVeigh became so confused and filled with so much anger? What struck me most about his alleged act was that he had decided to *kill his own people* to make his point. This was a strange twist for those on the extreme Right who had always used their violence against blacks, Jews, and immigrants. But McVeigh is not accused of taking that Ryder Truck to the place where his "enemies" were—the Capitol Building, the World Trade Center, a Jewish temple, the headquarters of the NAACP, or other potential targets of his hate. No. He blows up his own people! In mostly white, Christian conservative, Republican-voting, redneck-lovin' Oklahoma City! Talk about the final insanity.

I do not like guns. I am a pacifist at heart. As a member of that minority of Americans who are unarmed, I am committed to finding a way to combat the downsizing tide that seems to be rising against us. So I have written this book. I have no college degree, so take what I say with that in mind. I'm not even supposed to be writing this book right now, because I'm under contract to produce a sitcom I've been hired to write for Fox. A sitcom! What am I doing with my life? Hell, I still owe Mr. Ricketts an English paper from twelfth-grade Shakespeare! How did I ever get here from Flint?

Oh, yeah. In a Ryder Truck.

