

## Chapter 4: Definitions & Controversy

### “What Do You Mean?”

*Every definition is dangerous --*

Erasmus

Perhaps you have heard of “slipping someone a Mickey.” That means secretly putting knock-out drops in their drink. Definitions can be used to “slip” values to people in the same way. When someone offers a definition, they often are slipping in their own values as well.

Disputes about definitions are not often mere quibbles. They frequently involve subtle attempts to promote or undermine particular values. When someone offers *the* definition of a term, what he or she typically has in mind is a definition that supports *his or her* particular point of view.

Consider the pro-life, pro-choice controversy. Typically those who oppose abortion define it is murder. Yet dictionaries tell us that “murder” is an “*unlawful killing*.” With certain restrictions, abortion is *not* unlawful. Therefore, it is not murder. This is faultless logic; but that does not settle the matter. When someone defines abortion as murder, they really don’t care if their definition agrees with the dictionary. The point of their defining it that way is to indirectly convince others to share their belief that it *should* be unlawful.

There are two ways that values slip in via definitions. The first is by means of implicit definitions. The other way is via programmatic definitions. We’ll examine both.

#### Implicit Definitions

Let’s begin by explaining implicit definitions, contrasting them with their explicit counterparts. *Explicit definition*. are expressed overtly in speech or writing — as in a dictionary. *Implicit definitions*, in contrast, involve the distinctions people actually make in practice but don’t mark in so many words.

Importantly, we do not learn the greatest part of our vocabulary by being taught *explicitly*. Typically we learn the meanings of words *implicitly* through usage. (The details of this process are the subject of much debate and research.) When we absorb meanings in this way, we frequently are blissfully unaware of the values that also slip in. For example, no generally accepted explicit definition of the term “female” defines it to mean “second rate, incompetent or unworthy of the same consideration as a man.” Yet if a society does not permit females to drive, own property, go to school, vote, or to appear in public without a male relative as escort, then the implicit definition of “female” may well include “second rate, incompetent and unworthy.” Ultimately, then, this is not about *defining* the word, “female;” it’s about how females should be regarded and treated.

There are many other examples to chose from. For instance, consider again the Pro-Life-Pro-Choice debate about abortion being murder? If we look up an explicit definition in *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, we find “abortion” is “the

Words may be deeds.  
-- Aesop’s Fables

expulsion of a non-viable fetus.” It says absolutely nothing about murder. But pro-life advocates will argue that what is at stake is not how the words are defined in any particular dictionary, but how they *should* be defined in practice—particularly legal practice. The main point is, what looks like a debate about definitions is really a dispute about social practice.

Now let’s move on to programmatic definitions.

## Programmatic Definitions

Programmatic definitions are used to express serious moral choices, to subtly legislate and to short-circuit debate. Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) did that when he declared, “*There can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man’s last end,...there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education.*” Accept this definition and we embrace the exclusively conservative Christian program of action which underlies it. And when we do that, even the likes of Plato or Albert Einstein becomes uneducated because their schooling was not wholly directed to personal spiritual salvation in the Christian framework.

The practical force of programmatic definitions is that their acceptance has consequences far exceeding mere linguistic preference. Accept the definition and there is no need for argument or evidence. The choice has already been mindlessly made. In short, it is by means of the practical consequences of accepting them that programmatic definitions can be identified.

Here is another, more recent, example of a programmatic definition in action. When a suburban Philadelphia school district recently conducted in-service training on “multi-culturalism” for their teachers they invited an expert in African-American studies. She advocated developing in students a consciousness of black history via an Afrocentric approach. She reportedly told the assembled teachers: “*The problem with Eurocentricity is that it has set up hegemony (dominance) or hierarchy. Afrocentricity is to see all cultures as equal.*”<sup>1</sup>

The consultant’s definition of Afrocentric violates descriptive usage. *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines “Afro” as “pertaining to black traditions, culture, etc. and “centric” as “pertaining to or situated at the center.” So “Afrocentric” means “placing black traditions and culture at the center of things.” How, then, can “Afrocentricity” possibly involve “seeing all cultures as equal?” But accept the consultant’s definitions and, without either evidence or discussion, Eurocentrism becomes narrow-minded and Afrocentrism open-minded. That is why her definitions are programmatic.

Words are the great foes of reality. -- Joseph Conrad
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A handy, though by no means infallible, method of identifying programmatic definitions is the presence in the definition of adjectives such as “*true*” or “*real*.” For instance, Pius XI telegraphs his programmatic definition when he speaks of “*true* education.”

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<sup>1</sup>Linda Finarelli, “Enfield Middle School faculty gets lesson in multiculturalism,” *Springfield Sun*, Springfield, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, May 20, 1993, p. 15.

We should add that those who offer programmatic definitions do not necessarily intend to deceive or slip us a linguistic Mickey. Individuals offering programmatic definitions often sincerely believe that the meanings they propose are the only “true” or “right” ones. Sincerity and good intentions, however, are not enough.

## A Procedure

When wrestling with questions of definition, the following steps may help.

### Step 1) Look up suspect terms in a Standard English dictionary; or in a special technical dictionary.

Although dictionaries are not faultless, this procedure normally has the virtue of **impartiality**. The compilers of the dictionary probably did not construct it with the controversy you are concerned with in mind. The meanings they give are normally in the form of synonymous phrases gotten from traditions of usage in both spoken English and English literature, in the case of a Standard English dictionary; or, the words and phrases, and over specified conditions, come from the technical practices of the special science which the dictionary pertains to.

Finding a term in a dictionary of any kind will only settle a controversy if the parties to the dispute agree to accept that dictionary as authoritative.

### Step 2) Identify implicit definitions and make them explicit.

This can be a difficult undertaking. What you are looking for are definitions that are indirect, roundabout or disguised. Once you find them, make these implicit definitions explicit by writing them down.

A definition is the enclosing a wilderness of ideas within a wall of words. -- Samuel Butler
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For example, how do you think the word, “cat,” is implicitly defined in each of the following situations:

- a. Tabby and Felix are invited every evening up onto the dinner table to share their mistress’ meal; and when Tabby dies she is buried in a pet cemetery with her very own tombstone.  
(Here cats are implicitly defined as almost human.)
- b. Cats are raised in cages and fattened for preparation as a specialty food.
- c. Cats are worshiped in life and mummified at death in preparation for their journey into the Other World.
- d. Cats are hunted down and killed as servants of the Devil.

### Step 3) When comparing competing definitions, consider their broader import, i.e. imagine them as proposing different ways of living.

Ask what kind of society would result from following through on the changes implicit in accepting one definition over another. This will often lead to a broader consideration of who benefits and who loses under different social configurations. By examining the broader issues, we may come to recognize that something as “trivial” as a definition can have a major impact on how we live.

## Chapter Highlights

Opponents in controversies often define terms in ways that support their values. All such definitions are not done explicitly. Some are implicitly presented. Implicit definitions are subtle. That's because we absorb the meaning of terms from the linguistic and social contexts of their use. Implicit definitions often do not coincide with the explicit definitions characteristically found in dictionaries.

Another way of organizing definitional considerations is to use Scheffler's typology of *descriptive*, "technical," "stipulative," and "programmatic" definitions. This chapter emphasizes programmatic definitions because if one accepts cleverly devised programmatic definitions, one agrees to the values that are imbedded in them.

The big idea here is that a dispute over a definition may turn out to actually be a dispute over a way of life.

### Other Related Chapters in This Text

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|----------------|----------------------|
| 3. Reification | 6. Name Calling      |
| 2. Slogans     | 13. Operationalizing |

### Keywords for Further Data Base Search

necessary condition	formula	definiens
sufficient condition	characterization	definiendum
recursive definition	description	genus

### Test Yourself

Contrast and compare an explicit definition of each of the following terms with a definition implicit in a social practice.

TERM	EXPLICIT DEFINITION	IMPLICIT DEFINITION
<b>female</b>	relating to the sex that bears young or produces eggs (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary)	incompetent in political judgment (in societies prohibiting female suffrage)
<b>criminal</b>		
<b>murder</b>		
<b>obscenity</b>		

<b>justice</b>		
<b>violence</b>		