

PHIL2642: Critical Thinking
Exercises from Lecture 4

1. Which form of definition (ostensive, descriptive, stipulative) would you use in each case, and why?

- a) Defining the word "landlord" in a legal contract.
- b) Explaining the meaning of "interest rates" to your friend.
- c) Explaining to an 18 month old child what is meant by "hammer".
- d) Defining "materialism" in a philosophy of mind essay.

2. Assess the following definitions. Look for both kinds of counterexample. (Draw Venn diagrams if you like.)

- a) X is a square iff X has four corners.
- b) A sail is a triangular sheet of canvas which catches wind and moves a boat.
- c) A lighthouse is a tall building with a light on top.
- d) X is murder iff X is the wrongful intentional killing of a person.
- e) An aircraft is defined as something with wings that can fly.

3) In the following examples identify what are likely to be disagreements over the facts and what are likely to be disagreements over the meaning of words. Are the definitions in these examples supposed to reflect common meanings, or are they stipulative?

a)

Trev: A witch is a woman who has magical powers, flies on a broomstick and communes with the devil. No actual women do this, so there are no witches.

Dave: No, my cousin is a witch, and so are some of her friends. She is a good witch, though. She casts spells and believes in pagan gods, but she rejects the devil.

Trev: I know your cousin does all that, but she is not a witch.

b)

Trev: God is supposed to be all powerful, all-loving and all-knowing, but such a God would not create a world full of undeserved suffering. Therefore, God does not exist.

Dave: No, God is love. Since love exists, God exists.

Trev: I agree that love exists, but I don't believe in God.

c)

Trev: John Howard is a war criminal.

Dave: No he's not. He sent Australian troops to war, but he did so because he thought it was the right thing to do.

Trev: Many war criminals believed that what they were doing was right. By "war criminal" I mean someone who causes death and suffering in war, and John Howard has done that. Therefore, Howard should be tried before an international court.

Dave: Howard has sent troops to war, but by doing so he has prevented rather than caused death and suffering. Howard is not a war criminal, even by your lights.

Answers

1a) Stipulative descriptive definition. It is important to be precise in the meaning of terms in legal documents, because misunderstandings due to vagueness could cost people lots of money, or even land them in gaol.

b) A descriptive definition. You can't point to interest rates.

c) An ostensive definition, because hammers can be pointed to, and because small children often would not understand a description. Point to lots of kinds of hammer, and point out lots of non-hammers as well to ensure the child gets the right meaning. Also, show the use of a hammer (a useful way to get across the meaning of functional concepts).

d) A stipulative descriptive definition. This is a technical context in which you need to say exactly what you will mean by the term. Distinguish it from materialism in political philosophy and materialism in the shopping mall. But you also need to make sure your definition matches pretty closely to the accepted technical definition of materialism as the term is used in philosophy of mind.

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2a) A rectangle has four corners and is not a square. The definition is too broad. The definition is not too narrow, as every square does have four corners.

b) A square sail, a silk sail, a sail that moves a windsurfer or a windmill. The definition is too narrow.

(It is possible to argue that the definition is also too broad. Could there be something that is a triangular sheet of canvas which catches wind and moves a boat that is not a sail? e.g. A canvas for painting on the is hung up to dry on the deck of a boat?)

c) A short lighthouse. The definition is too narrow.

An office tower with a light on top. The definition is too broad.

d) Wrongful suicide might count as a counterexample which shows that the definition is too broad (so long as wrongful suicide is not properly described as self-murder). The definition does not seem to be too narrow..

e) A helicopter has no wings but is an aircraft. The definition is too narrow.

A bird has wings and can fly but is not an aircraft. The definition is too broad.

3

a) Are there two common senses of the word "witch"? It seems likely that Trev and Dave mean different things by the word. Trev and Dave seem to agree that there are no women who fly on broomsticks and commune with the devil, so the disagreement would probably dissolve when they see that they are meaning different things by "witch". But maybe there is still a factual disagreement between

Trev and Dave. Does Dave believe that his cousin can really do magic, or just that she casts (ineffectual) spells?

b) Trev and Dave seem to disagree on what is meant by "God". I think Dave's stipulative definition of God as being love is deeply misleading, because almost everyone who says they believe in God believes that God is the creator of the universe, etc. (Of course theists also believe that God is a loving being, but that is very different to saying that God IS love.) It is not clear that the disagreement between Trev and Dave is factual, since it is not clear whether Dave believes in a God who is the creator of the universe, etc., or whether he believes the universe has no creator but that love exists. We would have to ask for more information before we could know whether the disagreement is merely linguistic.

c) There appears to be disagreement over the meaning of the term "war criminal". Dave suggests that someone is a war criminal only if he believes that his actions were wrong. Trev correctly points out that this is not true, according to the common meaning of "war criminal". E.g. Hitler was a war criminal even though he believed that what he was doing was morally justified.

But then Trev offers a stipulative definition of war criminal as "someone who causes death and suffering in war". It is not at all clear that Trev's stipulative definition captures the common meaning of the term, nor that it captures the technical (in this case, legal) meaning of the term that would license the inference to the conclusion that Howard should be tried for war crimes. After all, some people who kill others in war, hence causing death, are moral heroes fighting for a just cause.

Dave's final response indicates that Dave disagrees with Trev over the non-linguistic facts as well as disagreeing over the meaning of "war criminal". Dave argues that Howard did not cause deaths by sending troops to war, but prevented deaths by doing so. Clearly, Trev disagrees with this.