

Reconstructing Folk Concepts

Gustavo Arroyo

Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.
—William James

Our reconstructions of folk concepts are often influenced by the metaphysical and epistemological doctrines we are committed to. Surprisingly enough, this influence is rarely recognized in definitional debates and has been mostly overlooked in the literature on philosophical definitions. It is frequent for philosophers to act as if only evidential support (for example, our intuitions across real and hypothetical cases) should be considered when choosing between competing reconstructions. This programmatic paper analyzes the interplay between philosophical commitments and evidence in the reconstruction of folk concepts. It also clarifies the precise manner in which metaphysical and epistemological doctrines influence philosophical definitions, why the incidence of metaphysical and epistemological doctrines is rarely recognized, and why theoretically motivated definitions should not be assimilated to the two major forms of definitions recognized in the relevant literature (descriptive and revisionary).

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Philosophical Definitions and Motivations

Our metaphysical and epistemological commitments often motivate our views about the meaning of folk concepts. A few examples:

- If we are empiricists (we believe that all meaningful concepts are reducible to sense impressions) and we believe that moral concepts are meaningful, we must hold that moral concepts are reducible to sense impressions.
- If we are causal determinists (or if, at least, we believe that causal determinism is a plausible metaphysical picture of the world) and we believe that “freedom” (and its cognates) means something, then we must reconstruct it as meaning something different from “causally undetermined” (we are committed to compatibilism).
- If we are physicalists about the mind (if we reject the existence of private and immaterial mental states and processes) and we believe that folk psychological predicates are not without extension, we must reconstruct folk psychological predicates as denoting something different from private and immaterial mental states and processes.
- If we are naturalists about the scientific status of medicine (if we believe, very roughly, that medicine is guided by the methods and principles of natural science) and we are prepared to assign any extension to “health” and “disease” in the context of traditional medicine, we must reconstruct the traditional medical concepts of “health” and “disease” as picking out only natural properties (we are committed to a non-normativist definition).

Gustavo Arroyo, PhD in Philosophy, adjunct professor, sciences institute, Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

- If we are metaphysical anti-realists and we believe that the concept of “truth” has a coherent use in ordinary discourse, then we must not reconstruct it as “correspondence with the facts”.

It must be clear from the start that the commitment to a philosophical framework motivates (but does not justify) the endorsement of the definition entailed by the framework. “Motivation”, as it will be used here, is equivalent to a reason that can play an explanatory but not a justificatory role. The fact that someone is a medical naturalist certainly explains why he will endorse a naturalist reconstruction of some central medical concepts. But he is not entitled to use this commitment to naturalism in the justification of his choice. If it could be established that the concepts of “health” and “disease” (as they are routinely used in medical practice) are value-free, he could have a necessary premise for arguing that medicine is a natural science. But the notion that medical concepts are value-free must be supported by evidence (for example, by our intuitions about the application of such concepts on real and hypothetical cases). Assuming naturalism in order to justify a naturalist reconstruction of medical concepts clearly begs the question.

As the aforementioned examples make it clear, the favored reconstruction is not only a consequence of the commitment to a certain metaphysical or epistemological framework—it is also the consequence of an assumption about the meaningfulness of the folk concept to be defined. In most cases, the question amounts to deciding whether the concept has extension or not. Compatibilists about freewill, metaethical subjectivists, naturalists, and normativists in the philosophy of medicine, logical behaviorists in the philosophy of mind (just to cite a few examples) assume, respectively, the meaningfulness of “freedom” and its cognates, moral concepts, medical concepts, and psychological concepts. Skeptics about freewill, error theorists about moral concepts, and eliminativists in the philosophy of mind assume that the same concepts lack extension (in the same manner as “witch” and “phlogiston”). I will resume this point later.

It is important to note that there can be different theoretical motivations for one and the same reconstruction. Even if empiricism is the main motivation for Hume’s subjectivist definition of moral concepts, in contemporary philosophy the main stimulus for subjectivism has been ethical naturalism, the metaphysical view that ethical facts are just natural facts (cf. Miller, 2003, Ch. 9). Although determinism has historically been an important motivation for compatibilism—the form of compatibilism traditionally called “soft determinism”—(cf. Kane, 2005, p. 12; McKenna & Pereboom, 2016, p. 31), classical compatibilists such as Hobbes have been inclined to compatibilism as a consequence of naturalism about human nature (Pink, 2004, p. 44; 2011). To be a naturalist about human nature is to believe in a fundamental continuity between humans and all other species. Humans are merely a more complex form of animal. An explanation of human action must resort to the same principles used in the explanation for lower animals. The description of an animal’s action as “free” means that it finds no stop in doing what it wants. Therefore, “The liberty of man (...) consisteth in this, that he finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe”. (Hobbes, 1965, p. 21).

An additional point to be emphasized is that the philosophical framework plus the meaningfulness assumption determines only the contours of our semantic commitments. The adherence to physicalism and the assumption that psychological predicates are meaningful encourage us to reconstruct them as referring to a physical property, but we have yet to know what this physical property is. Naturalism in the philosophy of medicine and the assumption that the concepts of “health” and “disease” are meaningful incline us to believe that they refer to some natural property. But we have yet to state which natural property that is. Philosophical ingenuity is called to find a plausible content fitting the contour. Let us cite and briefly comment on a classical

historical example. Departing from an empiricist framework, Hume reconstructed moral concepts as referring to “sentiments”:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (Hume, 1987, 3.1.1)

The phrasing Hume chooses for his definition of “vicious” (“*x* is vicious” =_{Def} “the contemplation of *x* produces in the observer a feeling of blame”) makes it sufficiently clear that he pretends to be accounting for the folk concept of “vicious”. He could have said “when *I* pronounce any action or character to be vicious, *I* mean,” but he says “when *you* pronounce any action or character to be vicious, *you* mean”, therefore implying that the definition he has advanced describes the meaning that his reader attaches to the concept in ordinary contexts. It is also clear from the text that the reasons the author has for advancing the subjectivist definition are: (a) his commitment to an empiricist epistemology (meaningful predications must refer to “matter of facts”); (b) his conviction that “vicious” is a meaningful predicate; (c) his conviction that there is no matter of fact in the action or character to serve as its referent. The solution for Hume was to posit the (negative) feeling aroused in the observer as the referent.¹

Evidence

Because they are put forward as descriptions of the meanings of folk concepts, the types of definitions we are discussing are in need of evidential support. In recent years, an increasing amount of literature has evolved around the methods used in philosophy to test the material adequacy of definitions. This topic will not be discussed in depth here, but, instead, a general (while perhaps sketchy) characterization will be offered which will be adequate for the purposes of this paper. There are two main strategies to test the material adequacy of a definition. One of them consists in employing the definition for the categorization of real and hypothetical items. Should its employment give counterintuitive answers, we would have *prima facie* disconfirming evidence of its material adequacy. The other common strategy consists in conjoining the definition with plausible assumptions to extract their logical consequences. Should the derived propositions be counterintuitive, we would have a *Reductio ad Absurdum* of the assumption that the definition is materially adequate. As it will be described, it is important for the purposes of this paper to distinguish counterevidence directed to the contour of a definition from evidence directed to its specific content. Consider the following examples:

¹ This point was emphasized by Jonathan Harrison in his classical exposition of Hume’s moral philosophy: “Hume, of course, if he is to escape the conclusion that words like ‘virtue’, ‘vice’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘duty’, and ‘ought’ are meaningless, is committed to holding that there are ideas which these words call to mind, and impressions from which these ideas are derived (...) Hume himself, as we shall see, was well aware of this problem, and it was one reason why he thought that we must derive the ideas of virtue and vice from internal impressions of reflection, viz. feelings of approval or blame.” (1976, pp. 30-31). Jesse Prinz (2007, vii) makes a similar remark: “Hume’s moral theory is empiricist too. Moral concepts seem especially problematic for an empiricist because there can be no image of virtue, no taste of goodness, and no smell of evil. By appealing to sentiments, Hume is able to argue that all concepts bottom out in impressions, after all.”

- If “X is good” were analyzable as “X is *F*” (where *F* stands for a natural property), then the question “Is what is *F* good?” would be as trivial as the question “Is what is *FF*?”.²
- If the medical concept of “disease” were value-free (as naturalists contend), then medical theory would have never categorized homosexuality as a disease.³

From these arguments, false consequences are drawn *prima facie* which affect not so much a particular definition, but rather a family of definitions sharing the same contour. If the contour is materially inadequate, it follows not only that each of the particular definitions that fit into the contour is materially inadequate, but also that the philosophical framework which they stem from is wrong. This is the real target of the arguments and the reason why criticism on the contour of a definition is usually urged by those who advocate rival theoretical frameworks. The above argument against naturalist definitions, for example, was urged originally by Moore as an attempt to support a metaethical realist framework. But the refutation of the contour is something few philosophers, if any, are willing to accept. If the counterexamples were accepted, the entire program of finding a materially plausible reconstruction within the limits fixed by the contour should be given up. To keep the program alive, it is vital to challenge them. More importantly, the framework does not have the status of a hypothesis, i.e., a proposition to be confirmed or disconfirmed by evidence. It is usually more likely a point of departure, the touchstone upon which other beliefs are judged. If an argument seems to show that the framework entailed a materially wrong definition, that would be taken as a proof not that the framework is wrong, but that the counterargument contains some error.

It has been stated above that the contour of the definition follows not from the framework in isolation, but from the framework in conjunction with the assumption about the concept’s meaningfulness. This suggests that the philosopher could eventually reconsider his position on the meaningfulness question in order to save the framework from refutation. But prior to resorting to such drastic measure, he will carry out a zealous scrutiny on the auxiliary (and often unstated) premises used to derive the seemingly counterintuitive conclusion.

Consider the seemingly counterintuitive consequence that follows from naturalist definitions of “good”. These consequences seem to depend, among other things, on the assumption that triviality (not informativeness) is a hallmark of a correct analysis.⁴ Likewise, the categorization of homosexuality in some old medical books refutes the naturalist definition only if we assume that they were not misapplying a naturalist concept. Old medical books could have categorized homosexuality as a disease on the false belief that homosexuality involves some natural disfunction. They could have even misused the *naturalistic* concept on behalf of non-medical reasons. No concept is ever correctly applied.⁵

² This is, of course, a sketch of Moore’s famous open-question argument against ethical naturalism (Moore, 1903).

³ The argument was advanced originally by the normativist philosopher of medicine Tristram Engelhardt (1974). There are variations of the same argument in recent anti-naturalist literature: “Perhaps the clearest illustrations of the ways in which values influence the definition of health and disease emerge from the realm of mental health and mental illness. A cursory glance at nineteenth-century U.S. medical texts reveals that some physicians asserted with all of the authority at their disposal that women who enjoyed sexual intercourse or engaged in masturbation were certainly afflicted with various forms of mental illness and often a variety of corresponding physical ailments as well. Textbooks of the era were replete with diseases of the mind that seemed to afflict only black men and women in astounding numbers. One of the most omnipresent disorders of the day was a condition labeled drapetomania, a horrible plague that denoted an obsessive desire on the part of a slave to run away from his or her owner.” (Caplan 1997, p. 69).

⁴ Fumerton (1983) exploited the apparent weakness of this assumption for rebutting Moore’s argument.

⁵ A full development of this line of counterargument can be found in Boorse (1997).

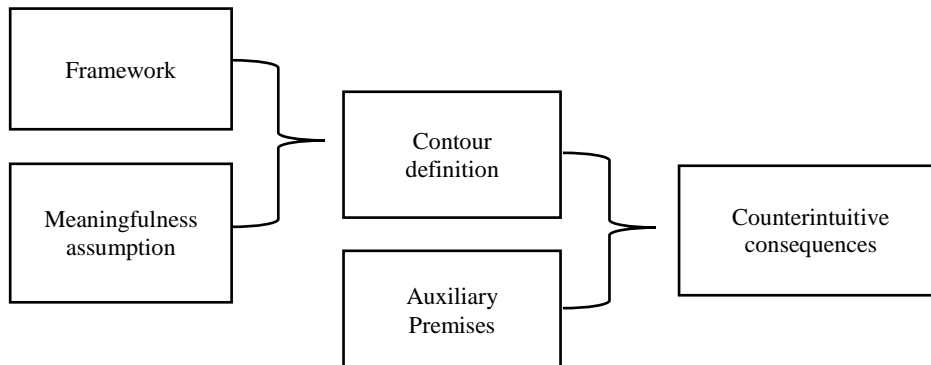


Figure 1. In face of recalcitrant evidence, the definer is not logically bound to admit the falsehood of the framework that motivated the definition putted on test. He can, in principle, challenge some of the auxiliary premises used by his opponent to derive the counterintuitive consequences. If none of the auxiliary premises can be plausibly disputed, he could, as a last resort, reconsider the meaningfulness assumption.

Philosophers act in this respect somewhat like lawyers in a courtroom. A lawyer's job is to make the best case for a preselected conclusion (for example, that his client is innocent). In doing so, he cannot have but a biased attitude towards evidence: he will lend credibility to evidence that confirms his case and be hypocritical to any disconfirming evidence. Furthermore, he must act as if his goal were strictly cognitive and as if his attitude towards evidence were unbiased. In a similar way, the philosopher will not mention the fact that the main reason for endorsing the contour of the definition is his commitment to a certain philosophical framework and will act as if that were only the consequence of assessing the available evidence. Furthermore, he will omit the fact that, in dealing with counterevidence, his purpose is not to promote the definition that is "best supported" by the evidence, but something slightly different: to redirect the destructive power of the *modus tollens* against one of the auxiliary premises contained in the argument of his opponent. As we have noted, Hume is explicit about the empiricist motivation of his definition of folk moral concepts, but this is rather an exception in the case of theoretically motivated definitions.

Let us now turn to evidence directed against the distinctive content of the definition. To illustrate this point, we will mention some *prima facie* counterintuitive consequences that follow from Hume's subjectivist definition of moral concepts. These are mentioned time and again in the vast critical literature on metaethical subjectivism:

- If "x is bad" were equivalent in meaning to "x arouses in the judge a negative emotion", it would be contradictory to claim that something is bad but pleasant, or that it is good but unpleasant.
- If "x is bad" were equivalent in meaning to "x arouses in the judge a negative emotion", there could be no real disagreement in ethical matters and there would be no point in trying to settle such disagreements by argumentative means (because there are no real disagreements about emotions).
- If "x is bad" were equivalent in meaning to "x arouses in the judge a negative emotion", we would not try, as usual, to know as much as we can about the situation being judged before making any judgement (because our emotions would be the only import thing).
- If "x is bad" were equivalent in meaning to "x arouses in the judge a negative emotion", the judgment would be false if we did not experience any negative emotion by the contemplation of x.

In contrast to the criticism directed to the contour of a definition, criticism against its precise content is usually urged by those who are committed to the same framework, but believe that there are (materially) more

plausible definitions fitting the contour. For example, the first two objections against subjectivism mentioned above were raised by Alfred Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* as a way to promote emotivism, a variety of metaethical naturalism. As in the case of global objections, the philosopher can scrutinize auxiliary premises in order to rebut the disconfirming argument. But the precise content of a definition (in contrast to the contour) is, at least in principle, revisable. The philosopher can, for example, respond to parochial criticism by introducing amendments to his definition. Contemporary subjectivists have proposed different adjudgments of Hume's definition to accommodate counterexamples as the ones listed above.⁶ In an extreme case, the philosopher can even discard a certain range of definitions and opt to favor others that are equally consistent with the contour. A metaethical subjectivist could eventually become an emotivist, a contractualist, or a utilitarianist.

Motivated and Revisionary Definitions

Motivated definitions have been considered here as if they were a distinct type of definition, i.e., a form of definition that cannot be properly identified with any of the types recognized in the relevant literature, which will be addressed explicitly in what follows. The literature on philosophical definitions assumes that there are two types of conceptual methodologies (when considered from the point of view of their relation to folk concepts). Definitions are classified as either descriptive or revisionary. Because the preceding discussion leaves little room to consider that motivated definitions can be descriptive, we will concentrate on discussing whether motivated definitions are a form of revisionary definition.

Let us begin by a truism: in order to characterize a definition as “revisionary” regarding a certain folk concept, we must first know what such folk concept means. If we do not know what the defined concept means, we cannot know whether the definition revises it or not. To offer a few examples, we can say with certain confidence, as Carnap does in the introductory pages of *Logical Foundations of Probability*, that the definition of “fish” in zoology revises the folk concept of “fish” because, while the second means “animals that lives in water”, the scientific concept of fish means “animals which live in water, are cold-blooded vertebrates, and have gills” (Carnap, 1950, p. 6). We are justified in claiming that the “total brain” definition of death revises the traditional concept because the new concept is defined as “irreversible cessation of all cerebral functions” whereas the old concept was “irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions” (Sarbey, 2016). We hold that “same-sex marriage” represents a revision of the traditional concept of marriage because the traditional concept only includes opposite-sex couples.

A significant difference between the concepts discussed in this paper and paradigmatic instances of revisionary definitions is that, in the first case, we lack a similar agreed-upon account of the folk counterparts. There is no agreed-upon account of what “disease” means in the context of traditional medicine nor what “moral good” means in the context of ordinary language. If extended and persistent disagreement on the meaning of many folk concepts makes agnosticism the proper attitude relating their meaning, then we lack the necessary resources to decide which of the competing philosophical reconstructions is revisionary or not. The fact that the types of definitions discussed in this paper hinge heavily on theory (and not on purported evidence) could incline us on a first sight to deem them revisionary. But their theoretical inspiration by itself does not preclude the

⁶ These include ideal observer subjectivism (the negative emotions are not the emotions of the real observer but the emotions of an ideal one) (Firth, 1952), appropriateness subjectivism (the negative emotions are not the actual emotions of the observer, but the emotions that he deems it appropriate to have with regard to *x*) (McDowell, 1985; Wiggins, 1987), and dispositional subjectivism (the real logical connection is with our dispositions to experience certain negative emotions) (Prinz, 2007).

possibility that at least one of them hits the mark of material adequacy. We can be lucky enough to advocate the framework that gives the right answers.

The suggestion that motivated definitions are revisionary faces a second (and more serious) problem. It is well known that the acceptability of revisionary definitions depends on their relative theoretical or practical fruitfulness (in contrast to descriptive definitions, whose acceptability depends on their material adequacy). This aspect of revisionary definitions can be also illustrated with the examples cited above. Why should we allow zoologists to revise the prescientific concept of fish, why should we adopt the same-sex definition of marriage or the total brain definition of death? The standard answer is that the zoological concept of fish is better suited for the law-like generalizations which science strives at (Carnap, 1950, p. 6). The same-sex marriage concept prevents the discriminatory effects associated with the traditional concept (Cappelen & Dever, 2019, p. 87). Two notorious advantages of the brain-death definitions of death over the traditional concept are that the first exempts us from costly life-support measures on patients who have no chances of recovering and facilitates the transplantation of their organs (Sarbey, 2016). Can we offer a similar justification for definitions that are motivated by a philosophical framework? Are naturalist definitions of disease or subjectivist definitions of moral concepts justifiable in terms of their practical or theoretical fruitfulness? It is important to note that, by attempting to answer these questions, we would be ignoring the criteria that the advocates of these definitions expect that we use by assessing them. They expect their definitions to be assessed by the methods of classical conceptual analysis (for example, intuitions across possible scenarios). And the reason for their commitment to the evaluative standards of classical descriptive methodology is that, in contrast to revisionary projects, the problem they face is not normative (“what concepts we should have”) but empirical (“what concepts we actually have”). As we have shown, they are compelled to face the empirical question because their metaphysical and epistemological commitments anticipate an answer to it. Perhaps we should ignore their appeals and assess their definitions by the standards of revisionary methodologies. It is far from clear what the final verdict of this type of assessment could be. But there is no question that, in doing so, we would be placing them in a radically new philosophical agenda.

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