To What Extent Can Definitions Help Our Understanding? What Plato Might Have Said in His Cups

Abstract: Philosophical definitions are overrated as sources of understanding or wisdom. Socrates gives a standard argument in their favor which is often still proffered. Still, that Socrates’ definitions never succeed invites an ironic reading of that argument. Plato also gives crucial arguments against treating definitions as important to understanding, and those objections have current versions. That raises an issue, what did we think definitions would do for us anyway? That question invites a reassessment of definitions that makes them less central and gives them a more humble, though still dangerous, role to play, one that requires they be integrated with surrounding examples and our own complex educations toward wisdom.

Students commonly expect that we will spend quite a lot of time in philosophy classes working to articulate definitions of philosophically loaded terms. Beginners mostly seem to acquire this expectation from over on the wrong side of the tracks in the social sciences, where get-acquainted dances apparently feature definitions, but even philosophers sometimes share this expectation. One argument for endorsing definitions as helps to understanding is developed forcefully by Socrates and Plato. But there are good grounds for abjuring definitions, some of the best of which are also found in Plato. Further, going over the relevant arguments regarding the value and dangers of definitions is a good introduction to philosophical methods because students can see live issues are involved of which they had been unaware, and they can see that their own practices are at stake. A healthy wariness about the value of definitions can result from reviewing these arguments, and discussions and papers from my students tend to become more thoughtful and better philosophy.

The argumentative structure of the paper may belie its tangled history and ambitions. This was written first as a teaching tool in response to, and as a summary of, discussions about definitions in upper division general education Philosophy courses. Wittgenstein seminar discussions of conceptual analysis methods led to substantial revisions broadening its scope. I now use these ideas in Introduction courses, typically around the middle of the semester after working on one or two problems and after disabusing them of the idea that every help at understanding—pointing, giving examples, etymologies, taxonomies—is a definition. Some of the contentious claims about philosophical method may remain covert. I refer to the speech of Diotima in Plato’s Symposium, where she gives an archetypal Platonic definitional account of love, and to the speech of Alcibiades, who presents what I suggest we read as a pure example intended to test the definition it follows. Further, definitions, especially philosophical or analytical definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, are sometimes undermined by Wittgenstein's investigations. Wittgenstein also works toward getting us to regard with suspicion the quick philosophical impulse to suppose that something like a definition is what we need to better understand some philosophical idea. Sometimes, on his view, what's needed instead is excavation of the thinking that went into articulating the problem. Sometimes, that is, we need to be clearer about why we suppose that there is a problem, because in so doing we may find that a particular question, before we get to any answers, rests on mistakes.

The issue is, To what extent can articulating definitions help us understand philosophically loaded terms? The last phrase marks some boundaries, and shows this is a philosophical question, and is not about definitions outside philosophy. So the issue here is not about technical or uncommon or scientific words—if someone does not know what a lungwort is, or a passerine, or an anapest, or an eigenstate, then a definition may be just the ticket. But philosophical issues tend to turn on words like knowledge, truth, appearances, real, meaning, good, art, conscious, justice, power. (To the extent that philosophy is becoming a specialization or is handing authority to methods which are more like science, then either the argument in this paper has a more restricted scope or that kind of philosophy will need to be rethought.) Although these words are crucial in thinking through philosophical problems, they are words remarkable to us in this inquiry in part because people are seldom stymied by them in their conversations outside philosophy. When we are doing philosophy, though, we tend to think we need an insightful definitional account which will illuminate, not just the word but the thing at issue—knowledge, virtue, the good, justice—even though we seem to have just now smuggled in a distinction between word and thing which may itself need investigating.
In several of Plato's dialogues (Plato, *Theaetetus* 146c-148c; *Euthyphro* 6e; *Meno* 71d-72c; *Laches* 190e-192b; *Minos* 313a-314e) Socrates presents a particular argument for definitions as the proper answers to those philosophical questions of the form, “What is X, really?” In others the argument is mentioned but taken for granted (e.g., *Parmenides* 35a-35c). These dialogues contain instances of Socrates arguing for definitions by responding to examples as offering a useless many when he asked regarding one. In the *Parmenides* (135a-135c) the character Parmenides invokes the idea that without a form unifying examples all conversation would be annihilated. In the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, in which Aristotelian methods of definition by classifying and then differentiating are at issue, this argument for definitions is taken for granted and skipped, though the process of definition goes down to defeat.

The argument found or referred to in these dialogues is, I think, the main and crucial argument for definitions, then and now. It is also a good one; it has a lot of bite. Versions of it show up in philosophical conversations, though sometimes I wonder if that is only evidence that I am running with the wrong crowd. It is often presented out of context, as a self-contained argument. In the dialogues, though, it shows up as a part of a recurrent pattern which undermines that same argument, or at least prompts us to be wary. Therefore, I'll give the argument in its place in that pattern.

That pattern is in four or five steps, depending on how we count. The first is that a question, usually unmotivated, crops up—often voiced by Socrates: “What is X, really?” where X is the subject of many of philosophy's Immortal Questions. X could be, that is, love, knowledge, justice, piety, truth, meaning, statesmanship, perception, and so on in a series easily extrapolated up through contemporary manifestations—power, art, reference, mind, consciousness, language, culture, madness. The second step is that some poor sap of an interlocutor offers to answer the question, and does so by offering examples of X. So in the *Theaetetus*, where the question is “what is knowledge?” there is a song-and-dance between Theodorus the math prof and Socrates which results in Theodorus demonstrating that he really is smart, setting up his student Theaetetus as a sacrificial lamb to the dialogue. Theaetetus is willing; he will answer the question, what is knowledge? He offers that there is the knowledge of making and repairing shoes that a cobbler has, and also there is knowledge of geometry and harmony and calculation and other mathematics which he is learning from Theodorus.

The third step in the pattern of these dialogues is that Socrates squashes the examples answer like a noxious bug, and provides the argument in favor of definitions—I asked after one thing and you have offered me instead a great many things. This can be easily unpacked. I asked about one thing and got in answer a potentially endless list of examples. We are missing how we shall tell what makes these examples the right examples, or how we shall tell, given this list, what else belongs on the list and what does not. There must be a way we identify those given examples or a way we decide regarding the next examples not yet given, so let's articulate that and it will serve as a rule which illuminates the heart or the essence of the thing we are after. Definitions then are a path to insight in a way that examples are not.

The fourth step in this pattern makes up the bulk of these dialogues: that is, the dialogues mainly consist of proposals of definitions and then arguments testing them, looking for inconsistencies, *reductio ad absurdum* possibilities, problems of being too general or too narrow. Then in the light of those examinations we revise our proposals or start anew, and then there is still more debate prompted by critical inquiry into possible problems with the revised proposals or the new proposals. This fourth step is the model for a great deal of philosophy ever since, still one of the most widely used models for doing philosophy in the Western World.

But there's a fifth step: these dialogues end with an admission of defeat and an expression of humility. We don't, Socrates says, really know what knowledge is (isn't this odd? he implies), or piety, or justice. We have met defeat, and must return to this investigation at a later time.

Socrates' argument in favor of definitions, given as that third step above, crops up in various forms. In classes, it seems most often that students put it in the form of a rhetorical question, but one easily unpacked using the terms of Socrates' argument. One bright English major, after reading a draft of these remarks, put it thusly: “But how do we know what we are talking about unless we lay out the boundaries?” Faced by these examples or by more candidates for examples, of love or knowledge or piety, we need a procedure for separating the proper or correct candidates from those which should be disallowed. If we cannot do that, then we may not know what we are talking about, and so may not know which examples are the right examples. Students who have taken our Ancient Philosophy courses sometimes use the wording of the one and the many. Examples are a potentially endless list (a many), but we need an account of the category (the one) in which those examples belong in order to know the thing at issue. Without a definition, how do we know what we are talking about? If we don't have a definition, maybe we don't know. Some students note this argument is consistent with Socrates' basic argument for doing philosophy, that we often think we know when we do not, and self-examination may reduce our delusion, may help us become more humble and more wise.
Students sometimes get derailed by, or lose the thread of the discussion somewhere around this point and then soberly claim at the end of the course that they learned the centrality of definitions from me. Save some room, I tell them. What you have so far is a common view, maybe even the standard view, perhaps your own view, but the point of this work is not that view but the critique of that view. It is a tempting view and the argument is a persuasive argument. Now we try to find out whether it is right.

So, now the other side. I offer a first argument, not intended as a proof, calling this line of thought into question based on a more ironic reading of Plato's dialogues. Scholars like Thomas W. Bestor (1981) and Gerald Press (1993) have recommended these more complex readings. Bestor suggests Plato's sophistication regarding words and their places in examples has been underestimated and that the model for theorizing reference we take from reading him should be turned on its head. Press's introduction spells out the "New," of his anthology's title based in taking Plato's irony and dramaturgy to be more central to his philosophy than doctrine is. The results are readings which are markedly more sophisticated and less Platonist. (One is reminded of Jung saying, "Thank God I am Jung and not a Jungian.")

That more ironic reading begins by noting the pattern outlined above, and noting further that in all that formidable corpus, sixteen hundred pages in our current standard editions, not a single definition survives to the end of a dialogue. What are we to make of that? Perhaps it is on purpose. Now of course excuses come to mind--definitions of philosophical terms are hard. Doing a good job takes a lot of work and a great deal of time. The dialogues themselves bear witness to this. Socrates and his interlocutors, and presumably Plato, never overtly give up, never totally abjure definitions, never even appraise that argument above in favor of definitions. It may be that this kind of agenda, of finding knowledge via definitions, is meant to be contrasted with some other more immediate kind of knowledge based on recognition of the forms which is like recognition of an indefinable primary color, an intellectual recognition by a properly attuned philosopher. But the idea that Plato's dialogues are attempts at definitions is still a common view, though dissenting voices are coming forward in Plato studies like Press, 1992. I myself was taught to think that Plato formulates the philosophical agenda we inherit on which formulating definitions is a main item. It is only recently I have come to wonder whether this is true and what to make of the fact that his own attempts to define are exceptionless failures. I have come to think of Plato as a much more pervasively ironic writer and as someone who tries more to get his readers to think things through for themselves than I was taught. Some of Socrates' arguments, after all, are clearly bad arguments, which helps make this ironic reading more charitable than the literal reading I was taught. (Socrates' arguments for the immortality of the soul in the Phaedo before he drinks the hemlock start to look like There, there, [pat on the shoulder], bones tossed to his blubbery friends who can't handle the "We just don't know" answer they were just given in court.) I think now that Plato loves, as Socrates loves, problems more than answers, jokes and methods more than positions, arguments and issues more than doctrine, leaving his readers with work to do more than settling things--and that these facts are crucial differences between him and Aristotle. The inevitable failure of the definitional agenda looks, given his penchant for irony, like it could be part of an evaluation, but one which tests us and our intelligence as it tests whether we recognize that irony at work. This would be consistent with the view (see Stone, 1988, even though irony is not exactly his strong suit) that the Apology puts the reader on trial while it gives an account of the trial of Socrates.

Besides, there is another crucial argument against definitions. It is, of course, given in the Meno (and implied conspicuously in the Euthyphro). It counters the argument for definition, is almost a mirror image of that argument, and that argument for definitions comes out wanting. This suggests then the alternative proposed in the dialogue for how we must know what we are talking about is plausibly open to reading it as a joke. That is, in Meno (80d), Socrates counters with his famous argument which leads to the hilarious conclusion that no one learns anything, only remembers instead from past lives.

That was too quick. The second argument, then (one not dependent on reassessing Plato's irony), against taking definitions as ways to help our understanding is Meno's Paradox, centered in Meno 80 d-e. It is Socrates' argument in favor of definitions turned on its head, and it begins with and is implied by a simple question (a Socratic question even though spoken by his interlocutor): How shall we know when we have succeeded e.g., at defining? Socrates teaches us to consider how this question might be answered by supposing two people, one who is knowledgeable or wise regarding the thing at issue, and one who is ignorant or foolish regarding that thing. To the extent one is wise about the thing we are after (think love, think justice, think virtue), then one might be able to recognize success, tell a better definition from a lesser one. But in that case the definition is useless as far as helping the person's understanding, because the understanding came first and had to come first. To the extent one is not wise about the thing, one will not be able to recognize success, one will not be able to tell a better from a lesser definition. But it is even worse than that, because to the
extent one is not wise then one will be susceptible to being misled by lesser definitions, so definitions in that case are positively dangerous to one’s understanding. To the extent we are knowledgeable, definitions are useless, and to the extent we are not knowledgeable, definitions are dangerous. In no case will they be a help to our understanding.

This brings us to a more modern and somewhat milder argument, a kind of criterion argument. This one overlaps with and is like Meno’s Paradox, except that the punch line helps send us in search of something other than definitions in a more explicit way than Meno’s Paradox does. This then is the third argument against taking definitions as important aids to our understanding, and might remind us of an insight of Wittgenstein about rules, that a rule is not the same as the use or the application of a rule. Here it is, in a relatively mild mannered articulation: It is possible to give a bad definition. A definition cannot itself tell us whether the definition is good or bad. Therefore the criterion for whether a definition is good or bad must lie outside the definition.

A note regarding the literature about criterion arguments, which I generally pass over because it would swell and swamp this paper. Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160-210 CE, and 1933 in the Loeb edition) cites the problem of the criterion, and emphasizes his point that the problem is bottomless because each offered criterion rests on a further justification. Although later writers tend to accept this line of thought (Chisholm, 1966, rev. 1989; Glymour, 1988), a Wittgensteinian insight is that in particular examples or contexts this claim is not true. An experiment takes its apparatus for granted although in another context (e.g. in which we are not performing an experiment using the apparatus) the apparatus may be at issue. The boundary of intelligibility is found within examples and the fact, sometimes forgotten by philosophers, that not everything is at issue, marks where our spade is turned. This seems to be what Wittgenstein was working toward in On Certainty, his last and unfinished work. See especially sections #1-64 and #80-85, #147, #162-167, #209. We could think of this in terms of Occam’s Razor, the admonition not to multiply entities beyond what is appropriate, and recognize that issues too are entities.

How shall we decide whether a definition is good or bad? Meno’s Paradox suggests, and the criterion argument reinforces the suggestion, that we examine the wisdom we have or do not have about the thing at issue. I’ll mention a couple of ways that examination can go.

First, Wittgenstein and others influenced by him sometimes remind us to do a genetic analysis, to remind ourselves about the processes by which we came to be competent or wise in using a term before we began to philosophize about it, the process by which we became able to recognize and think through issues about the thing. That we are talking about philosophical terms here rather than technical ones becomes relevant again, since the philosophical terms are just those which are abstract and educated but which we routinely use outside of philosophy without the conversations grinding to a halt or crashing against a boulder in the current. This takes how we talk using the terms in examples of conversations which are not about philosophical issues to be relevant.

For example, thinking about how we came to be competent to speak of justice, we recognize a long process, proceeding by phases, involving many examples of different kinds in various contexts, involving mistakes and their corrections (making the mistakes and correcting them is a positive step in increasing understanding) and insights and debates and growing understanding. It is a process, and not just the examples. It is rather like an education. Our understanding of justice, and so our later ability to recognize, e.g., whether Rawls has succeeded, often begins as children with the related term fair. Notoriously, small children may wail, “That’s not fair!” to mean something like “I don’t like it!” up until they begin to be able to be silent and wait their turn or share with others. Their understanding of what is fair may be nearly complete before they take up the more tony and academic concern, just. Questions of justice include questions about laws, including whether the laws are fair, what the laws should be, and questions about balancing opposing interests and deciding moral dilemmas. Consider, as a noncontroversial example, whether trial by jury is an aid to justice. It turns out, as any tenth grade civics student could remind us, that trial by jury was justified in spite of acknowledgments that it would lead to injustices in individual cases. Juries, with lack of training in laws and in critical thinking, are swayed by bad arguments and so send some innocent people to hang and set some guilty free. Jefferson and Payne acknowledge this. But trial by jury was founded in a cynical conviction that power corrupts, and that some means is needed to curb the power of police and judges to keep them from going bad. Good judges are better than juries but judges with no limits on their power present the danger that they will not remain good judges, and so the right to trial by jury must be built in on a strong and fixed foundation, and so needs to be carved into stone or into the Bill of Rights. Individual injustices must be tolerated in order to protect against injustice metastasizing because of police or presidents or judges with unlimited powers. Now, this is no very sophisticated set of arguments, but clearly the understanding of justice behind it is not a child’s understanding. It is also not an understanding founded on definition. The same kind of story with its elementary first moves and errors and gradually growing understanding can be told about art, knowledge, virtue, meaning, real, love,
piety, consciousness. Again, our ability and our wisdom with respect to each rests on a long process like an education.

If genetic analyses reveal that our competence to use words wisely results from a long process, then the fallacy of persuasive definition, using a definition as a question-begging premise, shows up more clearly as an illegitimate shortcut and a relevant danger. Awareness of that long process of acquiring our abilities to use the terms of interest in philosophy offers some protection against committing the fallacy. Though using the fallacy label is only considered as part of an argument against bad definitions, these considerations suggest we cultivate paranoia, routinely perform abductions, that bad definitions are under every bed.

The fallacy of persuasive definition, a variety of begging the question, is the fallacy of using definitions as a way to smuggle in premises which improperly restrict the alternatives, or as premises which rest on the desired conclusion we allegedly go on to argue. A current example might come up in connection with educational reform movements to require outcomes assessment as part of school appraisals and departmental reviews. Those accountability movements take on urgency in times of contracting budgets and looming questions about which departments are central to the accomplishment of an institution’s mission and goals. The fallacy could equally well show up as part of arguments on opposing sides of the particular issue, “What is education really?” One answer could go, it is the preparation of young people for taking up productive adult roles in the society in order that they can add to the wealth of the society. This definition, which articulates the concept of education of some boards of regents and trustees for public institutions and legislators looking over their shoulders, will predispose one to assess the parts of the university or college (and then to allocate budgets) by how well the graduates of each part pull down hefty paychecks. It will also not only predispose assessors toward those departments whose graduates do well economically, it will marginalize programs in the arts and liberal arts. Scratch that future tense–this is going on now. Let’s try another definition, another answer to the question, What is education really? It is instilling young people with the best ideas the human race has had. Now, while I like this one better, it too is lamentably incomplete, will marginalize programs whose graduates are merely economic powerhouses, Mencken’s boobsoisie, and will hand more power, money, and status to cultural studies programs and the liberal arts. This definition builds in neglect of education’s role in that part of liberation which involves independence and a paycheck. Meno’s paradox concurs that persuasive definitions are those definitions which are dangerous to our understanding, which we might have known independently. But Meno’s paradox also reminds us that the understanding by which we can recognize that danger is not an easy thing, and definitely is not an understanding which rests on or requires another, better definition. The criterion argument above points outside definitions toward other grounds on which that understanding rests. It rests instead on wisdom acquired through a long and complex process of examination and worry. The argument also points toward dangers of a lack of that wisdom and dangers of oversimplification.

A fourth argument against trusting definitions to help our understanding is also Wittgensteinian. It comes from asking the question again, “Now why did we want a definition?” That is, it pushes us to articulate the line of thought giving rise to the issue, to question the question (What is X, really?) rather than to answer it. And some possible answers, even if they are overly hostile, help argue that the question-the-question move is worth making. One possible answer to why we wanted a definition, after all, is that we wanted the definition to do our thinking for us. A good definition will sort the good examples from the bad, will sharpen the boundaries and eliminate the marginal cases and the borderline cases and the troubling cases–will help legislate which cases are in and which are out. In the face of a question, When does a human life begin? we may be tempted to think, Well, what is a human life, really? and then think, let’s define human life. What is art, really? Is Pollock’s work, or Duchamp’s, or Karen Finley’s, or Hugh Hefner’s, or Jeff Koons’ really art? Well, let’s define art. But this may be a mistake.

This fourth argument, then, is for the claim that definitions are limited in their power to help our understanding and is supported by comparisons with other forms of non-philosophical discourse. Narratives, concatenations of examples, acknowledgment of marginal or troublesome aspects of some examples, etymologies, questioning the question, and jokes may help us see how definitions are limited.

An exercise I sometimes use in class, and one which has in every case led to students arguing that what we need is a definition of human life as part of deciding when it begins, initiates our work with dichotomies, and trades on the following story. Suppose my wife and I want another child but have been unsuccessful at getting her pregnant. This goes on for over a year, I get tested, she gets tested, no obvious problem is found. You are a friend, though not a very close friend, and know of our plight. Most of another year goes by. Then, happy day, we confirm that she is pregnant. The first trimester, with its morning sickness and elation and fears and plans and baby name books, goes by, and things settle down. Then one day in the middle of teaching classes the department secretary catches me returning to my office and tells me to call
Naomi at home. When I call, she is ready to leave, tells me something feels wrong and she is on her way to the doctor, please call after my next class. I volunteer to just come home, but she says, no, just call the doctor’s office after class. I do. She tells me that the doctor has confirmed the baby has died in the womb and she is going to the hospital to be prepped for the procedure. I think aloud of asking to borrow a car but she tells me it will just be a lot of waiting and I’m not going to be that big a help, take the bus and she will meet me there. I go out to the bus stop by my office and sit, very agitated. You come by. “Hey Prof. Powell,” you say brightly, “I hear your wife is finally pregnant! Congratulations!”—and then you notice something in my face and slow down. “Did I hear wrong?” you ask. “Is she pregnant or not?”

In the class where I set this up I ask for a show of hands, is she pregnant, is she not? I get plenty of hands, and then arguments including vehement arguments, for both sides, even though I thought I had taught them by this point to be paranoid about such questions. And then come the arguments that in order to settle the question what we need is a better definition of “pregnant.” What will the definition do? Well, it will decide the question in this case. There is a temptation to think that this is what we ought to do, decide the question, a temptation it behooves us to slow down and examine. Depending on how far behind we are in the course, we go on to reminders about persuasive definitions and to raise the possibility that we are working on what Derek Parfit calls an empty question (see in his Reasons and Persons, Chaps. 12 and 13, especially his example of the club which becomes defunct and then later is resurrected, and the question, “But is it the same club really?”—a discussion which threatens to undermine much of Parfit’s own work). But the crucial thing is to point out that the answer I will in fact give you at the bus stop is different. It is also better. It is, if I am not too agitated and just wave you away, to tell or to abbreviate the story: “The baby just died in the womb, and I’m on my way to join my wife at the hospital.” It may need to be stressed that this answer is not only neither a yes nor a no, but it prevents the yes-or-no question from arising in the case, though those whose susceptibility to philosophy is incurable will still press the question. Sometimes in the face of a philosophical temptation to ask a question which has a yes or no as answer (or other, but still restricted, alternatives) we need to watch for the possibility of just telling the story which allegedly gives rise to the philosophical question but in fact lays it to rest. The thing to do with marginal or borderline or problematic cases is not necessarily to remove their problematic status by artificial legislation but to say that they are problematic, marginal, borderline, and why, or to point out that in the examples attention to the story dissolves the question. A definition which makes all the conceptual boundaries clean and sharp may mislead us and may invite us to commit the fallacy of persuasive definition.

In other words, in these cases, definitions may be dangerous to our understanding. It is not, as the ends of Plato’s dialogues may lead us to think, that settling definitions is impossible or difficult—it is that we are well-advised to avoid them, avoid thinking of them as authorities. Austin remarks that oversimplification is the occupational disease of philosophers—except when it is their occupation. Wittgenstein remarks how often we are guided in our thinking by overly simple pictures of the things at issue, which I read as informed by the same insight underlying Austin’s comment. Frank Ebersole, in Language and Perception, (1982, rev. 2004), and Meaning and Saying, (1982 rev. 2004) has taken Wittgenstein’s remarks about pictures as instructive for guiding philosophical methods. Ebersole’s essays “The Complexity of Speech Acts” in Meaning and Saying, and “Stalking the Rigid Designator” (1982, reprinted with revisions in Language and Perception as “Proper Names and Other Names,” include discussions of pictures of language and pictures of words which dissociate words from the examples. Guided by the pictures, we are convinced that the words stand for e.g. meanings or are referring expressions. A postscript included in the second editions of both books cites Wittgenstein and comments on the centrality for Ebersole of searching for and articulating such pictures, and then subjecting them to examination in the light of examples whose discourse is at odds with what we were tempted to think when under the spell of the philosophical pictures or abstract lines of thought.

A fifth argument against trusting definitions to aid our understanding stresses the occasions in which examples rather than definitions play crucial roles in demonstrating understanding, and examples test the purported understanding offered via definitions. This argument builds on the relationship between Socrates’ argument in favor of definitions and the inversion of that argument in Meno’s Paradox. The former goes, examples won’t do, because we are asking about the one thing of which those are examples, so what we need is a more abstract account of the thing at issue. But the latter is, definitions won’t do, because if we understand the thing so we can recognize a good definition then the definition is useless to our understanding, and if we don’t then bad definitions may mislead us and are dangerous to our understanding. Our understanding must have its sources elsewhere and the criteria of good definitions also lie elsewhere, lie outside definitions. Stalemate. But one criterion to which Wittgenstein (1953) alludes, by which we may sometimes tell whether we understand the thing we investigate, is whether we can go on to give correct
examples. That is, our understanding may be demonstrated, not by giving a definition, but by our ability to keep providing examples. Those examples may be crucial when the adequacy of a definition is at issue (for example in many problems in analytic philosophy). To recap, the question, "How do we know what we are talking about?" can sometimes be better answered by giving examples than by giving definitions. Toward the end of an introductory course, students show whether they know what philosophy is if they can generate a series of philosophical questions beyond those we have addressed. Such an answer not only has it all over any definition, it can serve to test any definition. Theaetetus offers examples at the beginning of that dialogue generated by the question, what is knowledge, really?, and at the end the discussants are surrounded by the rubble of demolished definitions (a real accomplishment, given the temptations which misled us into giving them) but the examples are the only parts of the discourse still standing.

In Plato’s Symposium, where the topic is love, Diotima’s speech from the mouth of Socrates presents an archetypal Platonic definition of love, but it is, strikingly, not the last word, though we have come to expect the last word will come from Socrates. Instead, the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and perhaps any definition, is revealed as wildly inadequate.

In the face of the devastating arguments against the centrality of definitions, we might wonder, “What were we thinking?” That is, we might wish to do diagnostic work with an eye toward inoculating ourselves against similar mistakes in the future. Here, I am on less solid ground, since I can only locate the temptations which misled me, and I do not find that Plato helps me here. Wittgenstein in his talk of pictures is suggestive, but I am not sure how to argue for their roles in ways that help others. I suspect the following tendencies: we tend to separate words from their meanings and significances, that suggests another argument against definitions by way of diagnostic work. Definitions are suspect because the divisions they are meant to heal have many noxious consequences in the form of problems in philosophy of language, and we could think of language and its divisions, following Wittgenstein, in terms of pictures which may lead us astray.

John Searle in his first paragraph of Speech Acts articulates an eloquent and seductive list of problems none of which would exist without this fundamental and primitive dissociation of signs from the things for which the signs stand or to which they refer. That noises—clicks, drumbeats—or colored tokens or puff of smoke can convey meanings by way of an agreed-on code looks like the idea that words can convey meanings by way of agreed-on definitions. This is a familiar idea. It gets taken by e.g. Carnap (1937, 1948) as a guiding model of language: in (1948) Carnap begins his discussion of the theory of signs and languages by spelling out the notion that telling someone and using signs may be interchangeable and equivalent: “A language is a system of sounds . . . for the purpose of communicating with other persons . . . . Instead of speech sounds other movements or things are sometimes produced for the same purpose, e.g. gestures, written marks, signals by drums, flags, trumpets, rockets, etc . . . . Speech language is the most important practically, and is moreover in most cases the basis of any other language, in the sense that this other language is learned with the help of the speech language. But this fact is accidental; any of the other kinds of language could be learned and used in a way independent of the speech language. . . . A continuous utterance in a language, e.g. a speech, a book, or a flag message, may be analyzed into smaller and smaller parts. Thus a speech may be divided into sentences, each sentence into words, each word into phonemes . . . . When we speak in abstracto about analysis of language, we use the term ‘sign’ to designate the ultimate units of the expressions of the languages. Thereby it remains undecided whether words or letters or whatever else are taken as signs.” In (1948) Carnap says that in principle "any series of any things will equally well serve as terms or
expressions in a . . . language." Part of the justification for saying that language is signs is this idea that in principle people could use drumbeats or smoke signals instead of telling in English. Telling in English is analyzed down into sentences, words, and finally sounds; those are interchangeable with and equivalent to signs or signals such as the catcher uses or the flashes of an Aldis lamp, for the use of which we need agreements as to their meanings.

This idea of language as signs of something not in language dominates philosophy of language still. The divorce we have worked then sets us up for supposing that definitions are the bridges, the linguistic turn, between our inquiries in words on the one hand and our inquiries into the things themselves on the other, another chasm which in the history of philosophy will not be filled. Jerrold Katz’s accounts (1992, 2004) of meanings as complex even for syntactically simple objects is an example of what this garden path looks like at its head. John F. M. Hunter (1973), in “On How We Talk” conceives a parody: it is as if each of us has a speaking machine that takes care of making all these connections. Of course, all of this requires we forget Wordsworth’s teaching us (1974, orig. 1810) that “words are not the garb of thought but their very incarnation.” This requires also that we forget the thing Falstaff forgets, when he asks in Henry IV Part One, Act V scene i, “what is honour? A word. And what is in that word?” and repeats the word to himself in the cool London evening, his breath perhaps visible, in this postmodern moment, to the groundlings. “Honnnooouuurr? Air. A puff of wind?? I’m to give my life for a puff of wind??” But Falstaff, and Shakespeare, have issues, not with the word but with the thing, but the thing is not a separate thing from the word—it’s honor we investigate, with or without a “u” in it. Thus, Falstaff famously and comically makes the same divorce of word from thing which is central to philosophy of language. In distracting ourselves by separating the word from its meaning or use or concept, we are, as Austin says, halfway down the garden path already, set up to encompass our own destruction.

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