FUTILE DEFINITIONS

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Settling definitions is often seen as a central tool for clarifying concepts, and answering 'What is X?' questions. Examples might be 'What is knowledge?', 'What is a work of art?' or 'What is a dog?'. A common way of answering such questions is by formulating necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing to be of a certain sort. It is this form of real definition that is of concern here.

Suppose I wish to define what a dog is. The aim of such a definition is to enable me, when I encounter a certain thing in the world, to say whether it is a dog or not. One way of doing this is to formulate necessary and sufficient conditions for a dog to be a dog, and not another kind of thing. This involves collating a set of features that all and only dogs have. If a thing has these features, it is a dog, and if it doesn't have these features, then it is not a dog. Generally, these features figure in the definition as individually necessary and jointly sufficient. If a feature is necessary, but not sufficient, for a thing to be of a certain sort, then nothing can be of that sort if it doesn't have that feature. If a feature is sufficient, but not necessary, then if a thing has that feature it is a thing of a certain sort.

One way in which such real definitions are talked about is that they attempt to identify the essence of a thing: that without which a thing cannot be of a certain sort, and with which it is of a certain sort. The meaning of the *definiendum* is explained by the *definiens*, which, if correct, has the same meaning as the *definiendum* and identifies the essence of the thing under consideration, using 'thing' in its broadest sense. In these cases we define *what* a thing is, not *that* it is, unless, as is usual in the case of God, existence is included among the essential features. A thing will have accidental features in addition to its essential features; but considered as a thing of a certain sort these are not part of its essence and are not

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included in the definition because they are not part of what it is to be the sort of thing that it is. All and only things of a certain sort will have the essence that they do.

Much philosophical effort has gone into defining things, from Plato's attempts through the good offices of Socrates to define justice, to recent efforts to, for example, define an artwork.[1] Such disputes are notable for their chronic irresolution. What is claimed in this paper perhaps explains why. It is inherent to the enterprise that there is no method for resolution.

Yet such definitions are often presented as epistemically substantive, in the sense of claiming that they are what we need if we are to know whether the object in front of us is a work of art or not, and that without them we would not know what we are talking about when we talk about justice. We would not *know* that we were picking out an artwork or justice without such definitions, and if we do so correctly without grasping such definitions, it would be by a kind of luck.

The argument presented here is that attempting real definitions is epistemically futile; they do not add to our knowledge or understanding of whatever it is we are talking about, nor do they aid our capacity to identify or recognise things of a certain kind when we encounter them. The argument does not depend on the special difficulty of formulating a definition, as can arise, for some particular kinds of things. This is not the issue. The argument here operates against any attempt to present real definitions that would sort objects in the world into different classes of things in other than a stipulative manner.[2] A stipulative definition indicates merely how a word, or the concept the word signifies, will, and by fiat should, be used.

Let us return to our attempt to define a dog example. Suppose we propose a set of features that will pick out all and only dogs. If something is a dog it has these features, and anything that doesn't have these features isn't a dog. What we have here is a proposed real definition. Again, let us not dwell on the particular difficulty of defining a dog; nothing hangs on whether dogs are more or less difficult to define than anything else. Choose another example of a sort of object in the world if you prefer. An artwork, for example.

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We are usually encouraged, indeed required, to test a definition by considering examples of things to see if the definition is adequate. Examples may of course be hypothetical. In theory the examples could be anything you like whatsoever; that they characteristically are not is, I believe, symptomatic of the fundamental difficulty explored here. Often the definition is said to fail because it is too broad and includes things that are not dogs, or it is said to fail because it is too narrow and fails to include things that are dogs. But some thought about this, I contend, shows that the request to test the definition by the standard method is either impossible or pointless.

Suppose someone opens the door in which the dog-defining activity is going on and brings something in. Here's an example with which we may test the definition – or so the story goes. How are we to decide whether the thing brought in is a thing that reveals the adequacy or inadequacy of the definition? Suppose we are able to decide that the thing brought in is a dog, but would not be included under the proposed definition of 'dog'. We might say that in that case we perfectly show that our definition may provide the sufficient but not the necessary features of a dog, and so is inadequate. All the things that have the proposed features in the definition are dogs, but there are some things, including the thing just brought in, that do not have these features that are also dogs. The same applies to the definition as a sufficient condition, but in this case we bring something in and we identify it as something that is not a dog, but according to the definition is; again the definition has been shown to be inadequate. Note, that what is at issue here when referring to adequacy and inadequacy in the case of real definitions is truth and falsity, not just pragmatic convenience or inconvenience or reference to the facts of usage. The real definition, if it is a good one, is supposed to be true about something in the world – the essential nature of a dog that all and only dogs have that differentiates them from all other things that are not dogs – and the definition is false otherwise.

But how is this test supposed to work? If we are able to identify the thing brought in as a dog, then there is no need for a

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definition of a dog at all. As something aimed at our being able to pick out dogs from other things it is redundant because we were clearly able to do it anyway. If this were not so, moreover, no true test of the definition would be possible.

Of course, the alternative is what might be called a false test. In this case someone brings something in and we are, as before, to decide whether it is a dog or not. One way might be to consult the proposed definition of 'dog'. If it fits the definition then it's a dog, and if it fails to fit the definition then it isn't a dog. But this makes any notion of testing the definition utterly fallacious, as the identification of the thing before us as a dog or not a dog is determined by the very definition the thing is supposed to test. In other words, the test is spurious because it is viciously circular. The thing is a dog or not a dog 'by definition', as the saying goes. But if this is so then the definition is purely stipulative, or must be considered so. It is determined by fiat that anything that falls under it is a thing of a certain sort and anything that doesn't isn't. It is perfectly proper for us to check whether a thing falls under a stipulative definition by consulting the definition, and no accusation of circularity would be appropriate. But the price for this is that such definitions tell us nothing about things in the world and how they might fall into different sorts of things. It merely says in an authoritarian manner: this is how the word 'dog', say, will be used. It tells us nothing about dogs. The definition is in a sense totally arbitrary, although we may have our extraneous motives for formulating it in the way that we do. A stipulative definition, as it were, chops the world up into kinds; it does not, as a real definition is supposed to do, map how the world chops itself up into kinds.

What is pointed to here is a definitional paradox. If real definitions may be tested then we don't need the definitions, for in order to test the definition we have to be able to identify putative test examples as things of a certain sort independently of the definition. If we do not identify these putative examples as examples of a certain sort independently of the definition under test, but rather by consulting the definition, then it cannot amount to a test of the definition.

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What should we conclude about real definitions then? That they cannot operate as, or be proffered as, more than stipulative definitions. We may even grant that things may in fact have essences; they may have necessary and sufficient sets of features that make them the certain kind of thing that they are; some real definitions may in fact even be correct. They may correspond to the essence of a certain sort of thing; they may do this by correctly collating the necessary and sufficient features for a thing to be a certain sort of thing. But there is a sceptical problem immovably in place as to how any of these claims can ever be known.

If we are of an anti-realist bent we might be led to argue that it makes no sense even to make the truth-claims just made about essences and identifying them for what they are. If one were inclined in a realist direction one might argue that it makes sense to make such claims, that they may be true or false, even though we are logically blocked from verifying them.

The problems outlined here about determining the adequacy of real definitions may have serious consequences for the current fashionable revival of essentialism.[3] Essentialism, if it is to be more than promissory, involves the derivation of substantial definitions of sortal concepts aimed at revealing the essences or real natures of entities in the world. This is no trivial matter, as some now see this kind of knowledge as contributing to a substantive metaphysics, and as supporting the reality, for example, of necessary causal connections – laws of nature that are metaphysically necessary – over and above the empirical evidence alone that at best supports, it is said, mere contingent regularity. The targets of such essential revelation by definition are often what get called natural kinds. Things may have essential properties, although one may argue on various grounds against this; but if we have no way of testing the proposed collation of essential properties captured in a putative real definition, then it may turn out that the attempt to extend our knowledge of the world through the capturing of such essences is futile. It is no use pointing to examples or counterexamples of the sort of thing under definition in order

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to test the adequacy or inadequacy – truth or falsity – of the proposed real definition, for in order for us to know they are examples or counterexamples at all we would already have to know what it is that makes a thing that sort of thing – but allowing us to make that distinction in a non-conventional or arbitrary manner was surely the whole point of the real definition. If identifying essences is important for knowing what things really are, then we are in dire straits, because none of the proposed definitions required for the task can be known to be true or false. It seems that to test the definition and determine whether it is true or false, we would already need to know whether it is true or false. This can't be right of course.

One might contend that I am setting up an Aunt Sally here, and that unarticulated recognitional ability is the answer to the way that we test real definitions and that real definitions merely articulate an ability we have inchoately. But this won't do for two reasons.

First, it flies in the face of what has historically often been claimed as the philosophical function of real definitions. When Socrates questions people about justice he usually does so in order to show that they really don't know what they are talking about when they talk about justice, and he does this by showing that on their vague understanding – one that has yet to identify the true essence of justice itself – they are not picking out cases of justice whose nature they are yet to articulate clearly, but are picking out cases that are not cases of justice at all. And this is because they don't know what 'justice' truly means, and thus is.

Second, for the recognitional ability to work as a way of testing real definitions, we would have to suppose that our recognitions were strictly accurate and reliable. The examples presented as tests couldn't be tests for or against a proposed definition otherwise, because we wouldn't know how to regard them. The recognitions have to be strictly accurate and reliable and known to be so, otherwise we could not be sure our real definitions would turn out correct on the basis of them. Without such knowledge, examples could be regarded as counterexamples, and vice versa, and we would from this

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produce a real definition of the kind under consideration that is bound to be incorrect or false. It's not enough that our identifications *are* determinedly accurate or inaccurate. We need to know which is which. That is, which is an example and which a counterexample. In order to do that we would have to articulate our grounds for the recognition and justify our determinations. To do that with strict reliability and accuracy we would already have to know we had the correct real definition, for *ex hypothesi* that – as claimed by those who might take us down the route of articulating recognition ability as solving the problem of how real definitions may be known to be true or false – was their function and value. Again we can't test a real definition by examples and counterexamples unless we have grounds for knowing which count as examples and which as counterexamples with regard to the proposed real definition; but in order to do that we would have to know we had the correct real definition, for only in that way in the end may we surely tell which is which. So, we're back to square one.

It might be, then, that recognitional ability is foundational and should not be seen as a mere stepping stone to, or superseded by, a supposedly proper understanding of the objects we recognise as captured, allegedly, in putative real definitions.

Clearly there must be ways in which we know the identity of things classed into sorts of things that do not involve real definitions that purport to reveal essences. Real definitions are not the way we determine whether a thing is of a certain sort or not where necessary and sufficient conditions are involved, except in cases where the definition is admitted to be purely stipulative. It could be that we should accept that all our definitions couched in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions are really stipulative, and that definitions may in no way give us knowledge of the world. It is often supposed, however, that the world, as they say, carves itself at the joints into different sorts of things; that there is a real distinction between the tree and the earth the tree grows out of that is not dependent on our happening to want to discriminate between them for arbitrary or practical purposes entirely of our own. But it's possible that this isn't true. Without language to shape

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the world, it may be argued, all is an undifferentiated oneness. In any event it certainly looks on the basis of the arguments here, I contend, that we may have to operate as if all we have is stipulative definitions insofar as definitions involve being spelt out in necessary and sufficient conditions, for we seem unable to know whether any such definitions proposed as real definitions are true or false, adequate or inadequate.

How we come to be able to group individual things into sorts of things is the subject of another paper. But it certainly does not seem to be because of the application of real definitions. Not only do we not in fact use them, we could not use them unless we admit our sorting to be arbitrary. Indeed the theory of how real definitions are constructed and tested is incoherent taken in isolation and rests clearly on some other more fundamental way of sorting things into kinds on which the methods proposed for testing real definitions logically depend. Yet it is real definitions in particular that have often been set forth in philosophy as the apogee of the definitional art and that give us knowledge about the world if any definitions can. At the same time they are contrasted with other lesser breeds of definition, some of which hardly merit the name, which are not supposed to give us deep insight into the nature of reality, but instead at best record the way we choose or come to use words. The coarse, fuzzy, lesser breeds of definition – lexical, nominal, ostensive – are supposed to give way to the sophistication of real definition as the ideal way of defining things. They alone reveal the fundamental reason why things fall into different kinds, as we supposed dimly they do suggested by our lesser breed of definitions. On this view, such lesser definitions are best considered as impure stepping stones on the way to real definitions. Yet it turns out it is the lesser breeds that are logically foundational to our being able to differentiate things into different kinds, and they are not to be superseded or refined away.

No-one identifies dogs by consulting the real definition of a dog, and if he did he would be presuming something to which he is not entitled: that the definition is known to be correct. He can only know that if he supposes that real definitions are not

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how we know that things fall into different kinds. Fortunately, we know a dog when we see one, and damned quickly too. It's a bit rough and ready, but perfectly adequate for avoiding getting bitten. Perhaps the same applies (except the being bitten part) to the other examples mentioned of knowledge, justice, and artwork; and of course to other concepts and the things to which they refer, many of which occupy a central place in philosophy. But that is a story for another day.[4]

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Notes

[1] Oswald Hanfling (ed), *Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford and Milton Keynes: Blackwell and Open University, 1992), Essay 1, pp.1-40.

[2] I do not include lexical definitions as what might be going on here because such definition are not usually give in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather by the use of a synonym or synonyms for the *definiendum*; this may amount to a description, but it rarely purports to unearth the essence of the thing to which the concept defined refers. A lexical definition merely records how a word is used and, constrained by some notion of the limits of correctness, recommends that this be followed as a guide to how it should be used.

[3] This has been so in metaphysics generally and in philosophy of science in particular. See, for example, Brian Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and of course many other recent works.

[4] I'd like to thank Constantine Sandis for his comments on a draft of this essay.

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