

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Aberdeen

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COMMENTS ON ABERDEIN'S ESSAY ON PERSUASIVE DEFINITION

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Aberdein quotes Stevenson who says that a persuasive definition (PD) "gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantially changing its emotive meaning." But Aberdein offers a broader account that substitutes "tone" for "emotive meaning" in Stevenson's remark and "sense" for "conceptual meaning" (though I think Aberdein thinks "sense" is just another word for "conceptual meaning"). But both of these definitions of PD seem too narrow. Consider the following matrix which generates four possibilities:

the proposed definition

	changes the tone	does not change the tone
changes the sense	(1)	(2)
does not change the sense	(3)	(4)

According to Aberdein, definitions that fall in cell (2) are persuasive definitions. Following Stevenson, he will probably say that definitions in cell (3), where the sense is not changed but the tone is, are persuasive quasi-definitions. But what of those that fall in cell (1) where *both* the sense *and* the tone are changed? Don't at least some persuasive definitions belong here? For instance, suppose the standard definition of "income tax" is "a tax imposed on income," but conservatives propose to define it as "a tax imposed on income that takes away the hard-earned fruits of a person's labor without that person's consent," and liberals as "a tax imposed on income that helps to equalize opportunities in society." Aren't both of the proposed definitions persuasive and don't both of them change both the sense and the tone of "income tax"? And, in fact, doesn't Gandhi's definition of "victory" as "defeat where the defeated does not hate the victor," which Aberdein himself takes as an example of persuasive definition, alter *both* the sense of "victory" (by narrowing it) *and* its tone (by giving it a more favorable tone)?

Whatever the correct account of persuasive definition is, there is still the question of whether there can be legitimate persuasive definitions and, if there can, what the criterion is that distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate ones. Aberdein rejects Keith Burgess-Jackson's criterion which is couched in terms of vagueness. Roughly, Burgess-Jackson's suggestion is that a persuasive definition is legitimate if and only if it is backed by a defensible theory that makes its application more precise in the penumbral region where it is not clear whether the term applies or not. Aberdein argues that PD, and so legitimate PD, should not be conceptually tied to vagueness since terms such as "socialism, temperance, victory and poetry" are not vague, but rather multiply ambiguous,

and still might be given a persuasive definition. Of course, it is still possible that Burgess-Jackson has given *sufficient*, even if *not necessary*, conditions of legitimate PD. Furthermore, no one can require that PD, and legitimate PD, involve multiple ambiguity since some terms which are vague, but not multiply ambiguous (e.g., "wealthy"), can be given persuasive definitions. In fact, it seems that a term which is *neither* vague *nor* multiply ambiguous could be given a persuasive definition. "Octogenarian" seems to be an example. So Aberdeen seems justified in trying to construct a criterion of legitimacy for persuasive definitions that presupposes neither vagueness nor multiple ambiguity.

His criterion requires two things: first, that some "core meaning" be shared by the old and the new definition. If this condition is not met, then there is no reason to continue to use the old term with the new meaning rather than introducing a new term with the new meaning. Second, Aberdeen requires that those offering a PD be able to defend it "by the lights of their theory" (condition culled from his remarks about possible illegitimacy in radical feminists's definitions of "rape,") By this he means "defend it to the person's interlocutors" and that requires that "the definer's interlocutor must appreciate its force, even if he is not disposed to accept the definition".

This seems much too weak a condition on legitimacy. First, the definer's theory might itself be completely indefensible even if *relative to that theory* the proposed definition *is* defensible. Second, a redefinition might be illegitimate even though defensible relative to a *defensible* theory. Assume that either the conservative's or liberal's theory relative to which they propose the definitions of "income tax" I offered earlier is defensible. Still, that does not make their PD definitions legitimate. It is illegitimate for them to redefine "income tax" the way they do. Let them stick with the ordinary meaning of "income tax" as "a tax imposed on income" and try to make their case that, say, income taxes are bad because in the actual world (though not necessarily) they involve taking the fruits of people's labor without their consent, or good because in the actual world (though not necessarily) they promote greater equality of opportunity. Let the radical feminists stick with the ordinary meaning of "rape" (which, by the way, I believe should be, "X rapes Y if and only if X has sexual intercourse with Y without Y's consent," not "...without Y's *rational and informed* consent,") and argue that "anytime sexual intercourse occurs when it has not been initiated by the woman out of her own genuine affect and desire" it is *as bad as* rape. In its ordinary meaning it is not an open question whether rape is *prima facie* wrong, but in its new meaning it is. The danger of changing the definition of "rape" is that the moral implications will be stolen from the old meaning rather than won by honest toil.

Burgess-Jackson seems mistaken in thinking that a persuasive definition could be legitimate *only if* it does not permit applying the term where it used to clearly *not* apply or *not* applying it where it used to clearly apply. Sometimes a change in the meaning of a term is legitimate, even if it changes the extension of the term, because gains in simplicity or explanatory power in some theory in which that term plays a role justify that change. He even seems wrong in thinking that if a term is vague it is legitimate to make it more precise in its penumbral region *if* the precisification is backed by *some* defensible theory. Political reasons by themselves never justify a change in meaning, even relative to a justifiable political theory.

Because persuasive definitions are most often employed to change the tone of a word by changing its definition, there is always a presumption against their legitimacy. However, because the change in definition might be justified independently of the hoped for benefits in the change of tone, it is possible that such a change is legitimate. But the criteria for that legitimacy are the same as those for the legitimacy of the change in *any* definition, including non-persuasive definitions. And I have argued that those criteria are not the ones Aberdeen offers either. His are much too weak.



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