

argumentation. The hypothesis suggested by the cases below is that a persuasive definition should be treated as a particular kind of argument.

1. STEVENSON'S THEORY OF PERSUASIVE DEFINITIONS

The concept of the persuasive definition, as used in a certain way in argumentation, is a theory due to the philosopher Charles L. Stevenson, introduced in his article published in the journal *Mind* (1938). It was then elaborated and presented in the form most of us are familiar with it today in his book, *Ethics and Language* (1944). A basic assumption behind Stevenson's concept of the persuasive definition theory is that words used in argumentation, for example in ethical discussions, have both an emotive and a descriptive meaning. This distinction between the two types of meaning appears to have been drawn from earlier theoreticians of language use. According to the account given by Aomi (1985, p. 187), the phrase "emotive meaning" was coined by Ogden and Richards in their book, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). Ogden and Richards postulated that the "descriptive meaning" is the core factual or descriptive content of a word, while the "emotive meaning" represents the feelings or attitudes (positive or negative) that the use of the word suggests to respondents. Stevenson's theory of how persuasive definitions work in argumentation is built on this distinction. How a persuasive definition works, according to Stevenson's theory, is by redefining the descriptive meaning of the word, while covertly retaining its old familiar emotive meaning. The ambiguity, and potential deception in this technique is that while the word ostensibly appears to have been given an entirely new meaning, it continues to retain its past emotional meaning. The emotional connotation expressed by the old meaning could be positive or negative. For example; a word like "liberation" has posi-

tive connotations, while a word like "oppression" has negative connotations. Because of the lingering of this emotive meaning, the respondent is covertly persuaded to accept (or reject) the new definition, based on persuasive positive or negative connotations in the existing usage of the word.

To show how Stevenson's concept of the persuasive definition works in practice, it is best to give an example. Stevenson (1944, p. 211) offered the following illustration, in the form of a dialogue between two parties called **A** and **B**.

Case 1

A: He has had but little formal education, as is plainly evident from his conversation. His sentences are often roughly cast, his historical and literary references rather obvious, and his thinking is wanting, in that subtlety and sophistication which mark a trained intellect. He is definitely lacking in culture.

B: Much of what you say is true, but I should call him a man of culture notwithstanding.

A: Aren't the characteristics I mention the antithesis of culture, contrary to the very meaning, of the term?

B: By no means. You are stressing the outward forms, simply the empty shell of culture. In the true and full sense of the term, "culture" means imaginative sensitivity and originality. These qualities he has; and so I say, and indeed with no little humility, that he is a man of far deeper culture than many of us who have had superior advantages in education.

B is arguing that the conventionally accepted definition of "culture" is superficial, and he proposes a new definition of culture that redefines it in terms of sensitivity and originality, and not just outward appearances. What might be the effects of such a redefinition if applied to a case of ethical judgment? Suppose Rodney uses bad grammar, has bad table manners, and displays an ignorance of history, literature and classical music, but is emotionally sensitive, and is highly original, even eccentric in his behavior. By the standard meaning of "culture," Rodney would definitely not be said to be a

cultured person. But suppose that Rodney's boorish behavior is excused by arguing that according to the new definition; he is a cultured person. What would be happening in such a case is that Rodney's (apparently) bad behavior is being justified or excused by arguing that in the way that really counts, or really should count, he is a cultured person. What's really happening is that a kind of positive spin is being put on the case by using language that makes Rodney's behavior seem okay. How does the technique work? It works because the term "culture" retains its positive emotive meaning, thus seeming to support the view that Rodney is really behaving in an acceptable way. Stevenson (1938, p. 333) explained how the argumentation works to create a deception in such a case. The redefined word retains its old positive emotive connotations that it always had, as noted above. But people tend not to realize that they are still being influenced by them, even though they have agreed to change to the new descriptive meaning, which perhaps should not still continue to have positive connotations, at least of the same kind. The technique works because the descriptive meaning shift is typically not accompanied by a shift of emotive meaning. The result is a deceptive kind of blurring or ambiguity of meaning in the sequence of argumentation. This deceptive aspect has often led to quite a critical attitude toward persuasive definitions in logic textbooks, where they are treated as, if not fallacious, at least something to be wary about. However, persuasive definitions sometimes appear to be acceptable.

A leading characteristic that helps us to recognize persuasive definitions, according to Stevenson (1944, p.214), is that they are often preceded by the word "true" or the word "real." In case 1, for example, B said that he is talking about the "true" meaning of culture. Another illustration presented by Stevenson (1938, p. 334) is the offering of the

definition of "true courage" as "strength against adverse public opinion." Persuasive definitions are commonly found in intellectual writings, like works on philosophy, literary criticism, and the social sciences. Philosophical arguments and ethical treatises in particular are full of persuasive definitions. Hallden (1960) has described many cases of such writings that give persuasive definitions of concepts like love, humor, poetry, culture, life and democracy. It would be a sweeping condemnation to reject all these arguments as being somehow logically deficient, or even fallacious, just because persuasive definitions are used in them. So the diagnosis of exactly what is wrong with using persuasive definitions appears to be an unsolved problem. Whatever the solution to the problem is, Stevenson was certainly right to warn that persuasive definitions can be quite tricky and powerful tools of persuasion.

Aomi (1985, p.187) explained the basic components of Stevenson's theory very well by stating the four requirements of , the effectiveness of a persuasive definition:

1. The word being defined has strong emotive connotations.
2. The descriptive meaning of the word is vague and ambiguous enough to be semantically manipulated.
3. The change of meaning by redefinition is not noticed by naive listeners.
4. The emotive meaning of the word remains unaltered.

This four-tiered account of how persuasive definitions work shows how an emotive inertia factor is a key aspect of the process showing how the use of such definitions can be both persuasive and deceptive. The third and fourth clauses show how the function of a persuasive definition in persuading audience members depends on how they react emotionally to the word being redefined and whether they notice the meaning shift.

2. CASES OF PUBLIC REDEFINITIONS

In the following two cases, a U. S. President used a key term in political rhetoric, but then later, under the pressure of events, redefined it in a way suggesting a persuasive definition. Both cases are very interesting, in relation to the subject of investigating definitions, because they reveal the scope and importance of the subject. Far from being trivial, definitions, especially in legal and political cases, can involve vast sums of money, can affect the interests of powerful groups, and can be important in shaping public policies at the national level. Both cases are summarized from the much more detailed accounts given in the sources cited. Neither case should be taken as being unusual. The interesting phenomena they illustrate would appear to be extremely common in political argumentation. A number of other cases in which definitions have had considerable impact in the domain of public argument can be found in the recent special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* (Vol. 35, No. 4, 1999). For example, Titsworth (1999) has shown how the definition of "learning disability" has had an ideological basis in public discourse.

In the following case, President Ronald Reagan had proposed tax cuts to the federal domestic budget but did not want to appear to be cutting programs in a way that would make his policies unpopular, or offend particular groups. Reagan proceeded with the strategy described below, summarized from the account in Zarefsky, Miller-Tutiauer and Tutzauer (1984).

Case 2

In a speech given in 1981, Reagan pledged to trim spending in federal domestic assistance programs while maintaining benefits for the "truly needy." Under pressure to clarify this key phrase, five days later the Administration presented a specific list of programs that constituted the country's "social safety net" and would be exempt from cuts. The implication was that those who were "truly needy" would not

have their "safety net" program cut (p. 115). Later in the year, however, Reagan cut social security and disability programs but continued the pledge that the government would respond to the "truly needy," thus narrowing the list of "safety net" programs. By redefining "truly needy" and "safety net," he could propose making these reductions without breaking his earlier promise. These redefinitions proceeded gradually and were not widely recognized by the public (p. 117). But they reassured those dependent on social services because they could feel that as long as they were "truly needy," their programs would not be cut.

In this case, the use of the word "truly" in the phrase "truly needy" indicates the use of a persuasive definition. Even though it is admitted that the word "needy" is being redefined or altered, the word "truly" suggests that those who are really in need will not have programs cut. And anyone who depends on such a program will feel that he/she is definitely in the class of the "truly needy." The use of the persuasive definition is reassuring to voters, while at the same time it leaves open a lot of latitude so that cuts can be made without the danger of breaking a promise.

The next case is more complicated because it involves the definition of a term that played an important role in political debate, but it is basically a scientific term. The account below is summarized from the detailed description and analysis given by Schiappa (1996).

Case 3

The term "wetland" came to prominence in the environmental debates of the late 1960's and early 1970's. It refers to an area saturated by water to the extent that only specially adapted plants can grow in it. Wetlands are very valuable to the ecology, according to scientists. Environmentalists, concerned about the disappearance of wetlands, especially due to building, have lobbied to protect these areas from development. Large amounts of money are at stake, and developers have engaged in many widely publicized legal actions and debates on the issue with environmentalists. Starting in the 1970's efforts were made to introduce a standardized ecological defini-

tion of the term 'wetland'. A 1979 definition cited features such as the kind of soil, the kind of vegetation, and the way water is present (p. 213). In 1989 a definition of this kind was codified in a federal government manual for identifying wetlands (p. 214). In the presidential election campaign of 1988, George Bush committed his administration to a policy of "no net loss" of wetlands. By 1990, it became clear that if Bush kept to this commitment, he was in danger of alienating many of his pro-business, pro-development constituents. Accordingly, in August, 1991, a document produced by a vice presidential task force proposed a re-definition of the term "wetland" (p. 217), making the criteria stricter than those given in the 1989 manual. According to studies by scientists and environmentalists, the new definition, 50 million acres previously designated "wetlands" would now be excluded (p. 218). This so-called "codification" of the definition in the 1989 manual was implemented in federal agencies without approval by the White House or Congress, and without inviting public comment (p. 218), even though it met with intense opposition from environmentalists.

Schiappa (1996, p. 220) comments that it is important to recognize that this dispute over defining "wetlands" needs to be seen as a matter of "competing interests." The problem is that "wetlands" is a scientific term that should be defined by the scientific experts, using a so-called "real definition." But when politics are involved, and hence also competing interests, it is easy to slip over into a persuasive definition that suits political needs, driven by powerful interest groups. The problem is that such re-definitions tend to merge scientific and political discourse in a way that misleads the public and allows a "technocratic elite" to be granted "definitional hegemony" to promote their own interests and causes under the guise of scientific neutrality (Schiappa, 1996, p. 220). When you look at the details of the rhetoric in this case, as described by Schiappa, it is clear that the debate is not really about science, but is driven more by the competing interests of groups. Those involved in land development, building, real estate, logging, and so forth, are all on one side, and the environmentalists are all on the other side.

The politicians are trying to steer their way rhetorically between these competing interests while retaining a majority of supporters, and re-definition of contested terms is an extremely useful tool for this purpose.

The third case is one of a legal redefinition of a term that has not only legal implications but all kinds of consequences for public policies and programs supported by government. Picking out any one kind of case of this sort is arbitrary because so many legal decisions, especially in the interpretation of statutes, are so heavily dependent on how key terms are defined or redefined. But this particular area has even attracted quite a bit of philosophical discussion in recent years.

Case 4

Burgess Jackson (1995) has argued for the claim that radical feminists' redefinition of the word "rape" is a persuasive definition. Burgess-Jackson (1995, p. 428) cited several definitions of rape put forward by radical feminists, including the one by law professor Catharine MacKinnon, which says that rape is "sex by compulsion, of which physical force is one form." A notable implication of this definition is that an act of sex in which no physical force is involved could come under the category of rape. Another definition cited by Burgess Jackson (p. 428), one put forward by the American College Health Association, includes "verbal coercion" as part of the definition of rape. These definitions appear to depart from the lexical meaning of the word rape. The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993, p. 968) defines rape as "sexual intercourse with a woman by a man without her consent, and chiefly by force or deception." The feminist redefinitions, by adding "verbal coercion," take the opening made by the qualifier "chiefly" in the lexical definition further, and extend it to cases that would not have been considered rape in the past. A case of this sort would be one in which, during amatory activities, the woman says "no," but the man persists, and although no physical coercion (or deception) was involved, the two end up having sex. Under the feminist redefinition, many cases of this sort that were formerly not considered to be rape, would now be judged to be rape.

Burgess Jackson argued that the feminist redefinition of rape cited above should be classified as an instance of persuasive defini-

tion. Does it meet the four requirements? It seems that it could. The word "rape" has strong emotive connotations. The descriptive meaning of the word is vague enough to be semantically manipulated. What about the change of meaning not being noticed by naive listeners? It is possible that this requirement could be met. Although ignorance of the law is no excuse, in fact many of us do not keep up with changes in the way words are interpreted in new legal rulings. And then there is the fourth requirement that the emotive meaning remains unaltered. This requirement would seem plausible enough to be met in the case of the word "rape." In short, there does seem to be the basis of a case for arguing that the feminist redefinition of rape fits the category of a persuasive definition, according to Stevenson's theory.

3. WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THESE CASES

The study of persuasive definitions is not new to logic. Since Stevenson's analysis, it has now become common to have a section on definitions in logic textbooks that warns of the deceptiveness of persuasive definitions. But the wider implications of the use of persuasive definitions in political and legal settings have not been fully taken account of in these treatments of the subject. Definition is widely taken to be a relatively trivial business of "logic-chopping" that, while it can be tricky, can easily be sorted out by being careful with words. But quite to the contrary, the case studies above show that matters of verbal redefinition are far from trivial, and it can be extremely difficult and costly to try to deal with them. What they show is that not only can definitions and redefinitions be deceptive, but they can support particular interests. Once they are lodged into place in statutes, government manuals and institutional regulations, they can be coercive in empowering some groups

and disempowering other groups. The battle about words is part of, and is a tool used in, a larger battle about values, politics, and often about money.

It should not be news to us that words as well as pictures are the instruments of public relations techniques used in politics, war, propaganda and advertising. But a realization of the extent to which persuasive definitions are woven into our legal system and our democratic system of government may come as something of a surprise. The reason for its unexpectedness is that popular opinions tend to take certain assumptions about definitions for granted, without reflecting on them too deeply. It is taken for granted that words, especially scientific terms and terms used in legal statutes and government regulations, have an objective meaning. On the other hand, it is often assumed that when there are verbal disputes about the definitions of words, that such disputes are relatively trivial, and can easily be resolved by simply clarifying the meanings of the words. The case studies above clearly show that these assumptions are simply not true in some cases, and that the cases in which they are not true can be quite important. The case studies also suggest that such deeply problematic cases may be a lot more common than we think.

One especially disturbing aspect of these cases is that they involve not only political and legal definitions, but also scientific definitions. Supposedly, it is up to the biologists to define "wetlands," and up to the economists to define "needy." Part of the problem is that such terms have been transferred from a scientific context to a legal or political context. The nature of the shift was most marked in the case of "wetlands." At first, this term was given a definition by scientists. But then, because of the cases brought to trial, the term took on a legal meaning. What happened is that scientists were brought into courts by both sides in

such cases to testify as expert witnesses. As such trials became commonplace, a legal meaning of the term "wetlands" came to be defined. Then, as the case illustrated so well, the term "wetlands" was redefined politically, and the new definition, now codified in an important government manual, had important consequences on how land was officially designated by the government, and on whether or not it could be developed for commercial purposes. This kind of shift is very significant, for there may be important differences between how a term should be defined scientifically and how it should be defined legally or politically. Scientific definitions are supposed to be objective and precise. They are not supposed to subject to manipulation by competing interests, in a way that political definitions are. Legal definitions are often supposed to depend on scientific definitions. But still, in law the aim is not only discovery of the truth of a matter, but also fairness to the persons involved. Politics, and also law to some extent, are widely taken to be subjective in a way that science is not supposed to be.

But these matters are now widely subject to dispute. In recent years the claim has been made that objective scientific rationality is a sham, and that scientific definitions are also influenced by the interests of scientists as a group. Thomas Kuhn (1970) is often cited as an exponent of this kind of view of scientific argumentation. Scientific hypotheses and definitions, according to this view, should always be seen as subject to change in the future. Kuhn has shown that the term 'molecule' is defined differently in physics than in chemistry (p. 50). Schiappa (1996, p. 210) shows that what counts as a molecule differs according to the current needs of the two fields of physics and chemistry. According to this postmodernist view, not only is a non-scientific definition of a term different from a scientific term, but the scientific definition serves the interests of scientists in

just the same way that a non-scientific definition commonly serves the special interests of groups who advocate its usage.

While there is something in this postmodernist view, surely it goes a bit too far. Surely a scientific definition should be seen as different from a legal definition, and both should be seen as different from a political definition. A scientific definition, for example, is different from a legal definition, because it has a different purpose, and because the standards for evaluating it are, and should be, quite different. A scientific definition should be judged by scientific standards appropriate for the scientific discipline of which it is part. A legal definition should be accepted, rejected or criticized on legal grounds. When a scientific definition is introduced as evidence in court, by an expert witness for example, it has status as a definition that is either accepted in that science or not. The participants in the trial, for example the judge or the lawyers, can't redefine the term as it is used in that science. They can argue about what the legal implications of it should be, or they can bring opposing scientific experts to testify that the previous testimony about the accepted scientific definition was not accurate.

Schiappa (1993, pp. 408-412) has shown how the definition of "death" constitutes a useful case study of an interesting kind of controversy. The "death" of a person is a medical and scientific term that has legal implications. In recent times, new medical life-support technology has made possible a kind of situation in which a person whose brain function has been irreversibly destroyed can still be maintained so that his or her breathing and blood circulation functions are maintained. Is such a person alive, or can he or she be declared dead, for organ removal purposes? This question is one of considerable public significance. And so it led to active ethical discussions about how the word "death" should be defined. As

Schiappa showed, many of the arguments put forward by philosophers, physicians and other commentators advocated what the participants in the debate apparently took to be real definitions with some sort of scientific or at least objective validity. Cases of ethical disputes are very common and, as Schiappa shows, share a certain characteristic pattern of argumentation. An onlooker to the debate, perhaps someone who reads about it later, sees the participants as offering competing persuasive definitions. But the participants themselves put forward the definition they advocate as though the claim made is an objective assertion that is true, and represents an account of the facts that can be verified. As Schiappa shows, the philosophical argumentation proceeds to argue for a particular definition by proceeding through two stages. First of all fixed criteria that are portrayed as "essential" or objectively true are set up. And then it is argued that the recommended definition meets these criteria, while opposing definitions fail, to meet them. Study of this sort of case seems to suggest that such controversies about not only legal and philosophical definitions, but even medical and scientific ones, are best viewed as comprised of argumentation in which persuasive definitions are being put forward. It seems to be a distortion or misconception to view the definitions as true and verifiable propositions about factual or objective properties.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Schiappa's case study of ethical discussions on the definition of "death" stems from a leading characteristic that helps us to recognize a persuasive definition cited above. Persuasive definitions are often preceded by use of the word "true" or the word "real," before the thing to be defined. So although it seems almost paradoxical to say this, the philosophical notion of "real definition" may in fact itself be seen as a kind of persuasive definition. Schiappa observed that when

participants put forward their own definitions of "death" in the ethical debate on the redefinition of death, they tend to portray their own advocated redefinition as being the "real" definition. Is this move in argument itself a kind of attempt to use the technique of persuasive definition? The idea is an odd one that has a postmodernist ring to it.

The postmodernist views are that definitions can change, that they are more persuasive in nature than tradition indicates, and that they are bound to disciplines and other groups that have interests at stake. All these views seem to be justified, up to a point, by case studies of the how the argumentation actually works when terms of public significance are redefined. But what seems to follow, that the term in question can freely be redefined by another interest group, simply to meet the rhetorical needs of the moment, seems wrong. The view that definitions can rightly be used for different purposes in different contexts seems right. But the implication that therefore a scientific definition is subject to redefinition in the same way as a political definition is, by pressure of competing interest groups and majorities, does not seem to be right. What seems to be needed is a new approach to definitions, along the dialectical lines proposed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), an approach that accepts the contextual variability of definitions without being stuck with some of the more paradoxical and anti-dialectical consequences of the radical postmodernistic views.

4. DEFINITIONS IN THE NEW DIALECTIC

There are two old ideas about definitions that can get us into a lot of trouble when using and relying on definitions in argumentation. One is the idea that words have a precisely determined objective meaning. This view is called essentialism. It holds that each word has a fixed meaning or "essence," and the object of any verbal discussion is to

find the essence of the term in question. The other idea is that the meanings of words are relatively trivial and unimportant. A corollary of this second view is the assumption that definitions can be stipulated arbitrarily by one party in a discussion. The second view stems from the empiricism that is dominant in western culture. This common version of empiricism accepts the inference that collection of data (the facts) is all that really matters, and therefore questions of definition are really trivial. These two ideas are not necessarily consistent with each other, but they are preconceptions that are commonly held in an unreflective way, as popular beliefs. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, p. 211) showed, philosophical analyses of definitions have tended to be fairly consistent with these commonly held beliefs. Philosophical analyses have tended to operate within a dichotomy between so-called "real definitions" and "nominal definitions." A real definition is supposed to be an objective account of the way things are. A real definition (supposedly) describes the true essence of the thing being defined. A nominal definition is supposed to be a merely conventional or arbitrary definition. According to Perelman's analysis, definitions are human agreements about words should be used. Thus according to Perelman's analysis, the dichotomy between real and nominal definitions is a false and misleading abstraction. For Perelman, a definition should always be regarded as an argument, and should be evaluated as an argument. A definition should not be categorized as either purely arbitrary or as purely descriptive accounts of fixed meanings.

The approach to definitions taken in the new dialectic is directly at odds with these popular views. In the new dialectic, argumentation is always evaluated as used for some purpose in a conversation. Definitions are viewed in the same contextual way. To understand a definition, you have to under-

stand the purpose that it was put forward by one party to fulfill, in relation to some other party in a conversational exchange. This dialectical view of definitions is opposed to essentialism. According to essentialism, the definition is based on a fixed meaning that does not vary with the context of conversation in which a word is used. According to the new dialectical view, a definition should be evaluated in light of the purpose it was put forward to fulfill, and this purpose changes, depending on what type of conversation the definition was supposed to be part of. Also, in the new dialectic, definitions are not trivial, because the putting forward of a definition of a key term or phrase can relate directly to the purpose of a conversation. For example, in a persuasion dialogue, the purpose of each party is to persuade the other party to come to accept some proposition that he did not accept before. In such a context of use, a persuasive definition could be quite appropriate. But in much of traditional logic, persuasive definitions are regarded as highly suspicious, if not altogether illegitimate.

The difference between essentialism and the new dialectic can be seen with reference to lexical definitions, of the kind found in dictionaries. According to essentialism, a word has an objective meaning or "essence," and the dictionary tries to provide that meaning by giving the genus and differentia of the term. According to the new dialectical view, the purpose of a lexical definition is to explain the meaning (or usage) of the term to someone who already knows the meanings of other terms closely related to it. These other terms are likely to be more familiar and common. So I may not know the meaning of "hauberk" for example, an uncommon term. But I am likely to know the meaning of phrases like "coat" and "chain mail" that are used to explain what a hauberk is. In the new dialectical view, the purpose of putting forward a lexical definition of a term, as in a dictionary entry for example, is to explain

the meaning (or usage) of the term to someone who does not understand it. The purpose of a lexical definition is to explain the meaning of a term that is unfamiliar to the reader by expressing it in terms with which he is more likely to be familiar.

The distinction between argument and explanation is very important in the new dialectic. An argument is made up of propositions called premises and conclusions, where the conclusion is unsettled, or subject to doubt. The purpose of putting forward an argument is to fulfill the so-called probative function, meaning that the premises can be used to remove the doubt attached to the conclusion and thereby settle the argument. On this view, it is always characteristic of an argument that the conclusion is being doubted, or is unsettled with respect to being true or false. In contrast, in the case of an explanation, the presumption is that the proposition to be explained (the so-called *explanandum*) is true, and is not unsettled, or being doubted. For example, if you ask me to explain why the radiators are normally under the outside windows in a room, there is a presumption that we both accept that radiators are normally under the outside windows in a room. In contrast, suppose we are having an argument about whether Columbus discovered America. It is implied that one of us doubts, or has expressed doubts, that Columbus discovered America. The purpose of having an argument is to try to resolve these doubts, one way or the other. On the new dialectical view, the distinction between an argument and an explanation is one of the purposes of the conversation. We sometimes confuse this distinction, so the understanding of how to distinguish between an explanation and an argument is very important in the new dialectic.

One of the main confusions about definitions is that we tend to presume that there must be just one single reason for putting forward a definition, and that therefore all definitions need to be evaluated in the same way. But in many cases, the purpose of

putting forward a definition is not to offer an explanation, but to offer or support an argument. For example, if you and I are arguing about the abortion issue, and you define abortion as "the murder of unborn babies," it should be clear that you are putting forward an argument. The proposition that an aborted fetus is a person, or "baby," would almost certainly be strenuously denied by the other (pro-choice) party to the dispute. And "murder" is one of the worst crimes. So by defining abortion as murder, the proponent of the definition has already put in place premises that can be easily used to prove that abortion is wrong. In this case, the offering of the definition can be analyzed as an argument, and should be seen as an argument. Putting forward a definition that really has the function of an argument is extremely common in everyday discourse, because words often have an argumentative "spin," or can be defined in such a way that such a spin is placed on them. Once we have been made aware of these phenomena, we begin to see how common they are.

In some cases, the definition of a term, once it has been repeated enough so that it has an impact on the way the controversy is expressed, can have a powerful rhetorical effect on public policies and views. Zarefsky (1998) has presented several case studies of current ethical and political controversies in which the power of an advocacy group to persuade the public to come to accept its view of the matter, and to act on it, has clearly depended on definition. One case, summarized below from the account given by Zarefsky (1998, pp. 3-4), concerns the abortion debate.

Case 5

At one point, both the courts and public opinion reached "something resembling a conclusion" (p. 3). The case of *Roe v. Wade* had legalized abortion in a way that established a kind of balance in favor of the pro-choice side. But then some years later, the pro-life

side took the controversy in a different direction by redefining what was formerly called "intact dilation and extraction" as "partial-birth abortion." The effect of this redefinition was to direct the focus of public attention to a "gruesome procedure" that invoked a powerful image to the public of the "baby" was being torn to pieces.

As Zarefsky pointed out, the rhetorical effect of this redefinition redirected the dialogue from an abstract level to an emphasis on concrete details of a kind that proved to be powerfully persuasive to the public audience. Careful analysis of case studies of public controversies of the kind found in Zarefsky (1998) can be an awakening from our dogmatic slumber about the power of definition.

A typical reaction to realization of the rhetorical power of definitions has been to swing to the opposite extreme of essentialism, called postmodernism. According to postmodernism the meanings of all existing words and phrases have emotive connotations built into them that are up for grabs by those in a position to manipulate them for political purposes. Thus the way commonly used terms are defined serve special interests of certain groups through both persuasion and coercion. For example, meanings of some commonly used words and phrases may serve the interests of traditional groups that have been in power in the past. Arguing from these premises, the postmodernist concludes that redefining terms to wrest political power from older groups by persuasion or even coercion, is justifiable. The postmodernist does not see persuasive definitions-as logically unacceptable or fallacious. She sees them as inevitable, and so they might as well be turned to your own advantage.

The new dialectic takes a view of definitions that is somewhere in between the essentialist and the postmodernist views of them. The new dialectical view recognizes the emotive and political spin that already exists in many commonly used terms, and

appreciates how this spin can be redirected by the use of persuasive re-definitions. The new dialectical view recognizes the argumentative function of many definitions, unlike the essentialist view, which sees meaning as fixed and objective. But the new dialectical view does not draw the postmodernist conclusion that all definitions, even highly loaded, persuasive, or coercive ones used to promote special interests, are equally justifiable. According to the new dialectical view, a definition can be evaluated, and some can be properly judged to be better than others, depending on the purpose the definition is supposed to fulfill. When definitions are argumentative, as they often are, then according to the new dialectic they should be judged as arguments, in the way that other arguments are evaluated dialectically.

A problem for the new dialectic is how to define persuasive definitions (the self-reference in the problem notwithstanding). Are all definitions persuasive? Or are lexical definitions different from persuasive definitions? According to the postmodernist view, all lexical definitions have an argumentative "spin" or bias to favor special interests or viewpoints. A central problem then is how to define the very expression "persuasive definition" itself so that some new dialectical classification system of the various kinds of definition can be given. So far, this problem is unsolved.

5. EVALUATING PERSUASIVE DEFINITIONS

Logic textbooks have often warned about the potential for deception in persuasive definitions, but they tend to stop somewhere short of condemning them as fallacious or illegitimate. Copi and Cohen (1998) write that because "emotional coloration may be slyly injected into the language of a definition that purports to be accurate and appears to be objective," we must "be on our guard against persuasive definitions" (p. 133). This

advice steers a middle way between outright condemnation and acceptance of persuasive definition. It is implied that persuasive definitions could be reasonable in some cases, but warns that they can be dangerously deceptive in some cases, as well. The basic problem is to find some basis for judging how to sort out these two categories of cases. The prior theoretical problem behind the basic problem is to find some systematic basis for grasping what persuasive definitions are all about. What is their supposed purpose as a type of definition? And what are the conditions under which this, purpose can be fulfilled in a given case, so that it can be judged that the use of the persuasive definition in that case was reasonable? This question is, so far, unanswered. But only once it has been answered can it be understood why persuasive definitions are wrong or logically defective Or deceptive.

According to the new dialectic, persuasion dialogue is a legitimate type of framework of argumentation, and there is nothing inherently fallacious or deceptive about persuasion in itself. The kind of persuasion defined in persuasion dialogue is in fact a kind of rational persuasion, provided the appropriate rules for persuasion dialogue are followed. But the cases above pose more specific questions. Is legal argumentation a kind of persuasion dialogue? Is political argumentation, for example in an election campaign in a democratic system, a kind of persuasion dialogue? Is scientific argumentation best seen, the way Kuhn seems to suggest, a kind of persuasion dialogue, or perhaps even a kind of interest-based negotiation dialogue? Some of these questions are addressed in Walton (1998), but some are still subject to investigation. Until they are answered, the study of persuasive definitions will remain an open subject. But some provisional remarks can be made on evaluating the use of persuasive definitions in the cases above. The new dialectical approach

suggests a new perspective on how to judge the use of persuasive definitions in the four cases cited above and in other comparable cases.

In case 1, **B** is trying to persuade **A** to have a better opinion of Rodney. She is trying to persuade **A** to give up the "superficial" view that Rodney is uncultured and move to the more favorable view that, in the "true" sense of the word, Rodney can be seen as a cultured person. In this case, the persuasive definition seems pretty harmless. It is fairly obvious what **B** is up to. And **A** can always disagree, if he wishes, by arguing that he takes a different view of culture, and would define the term in a different way than **A** has. The remaining three cases are different. In the Reagan case, the redefinition of the term "safety net" took place gradually in a way that made it appear Reagan was keeping his pledge to retain benefits for the "truly needy." Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer and Tutzauer (1984, p. 114) describe the rhetorical tactic as a species of what is called "dissociation" in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). A seemingly unitary term is split in two by pairing it with opposed terms, one favorable and one unfavorable, and then the speaker's position is linked to the favorable term and opposed to the unfavorable term. But is dissociation a rhetorical tactic that is fallacious, or somehow represents an unfair or deceptive kind of argumentation that ought to be condemned as illegitimate? Zarefsky, Tutzauer-Miller and Tutzauer seem to stop short of this claim. They see the use of this tactic by the Reagan administration as involving ambiguity and subtle shifts in definition (p. 119). But surely in the kind of persuasion dialogue characteristic of political rhetoric, a good deal of ambiguity and subtle shift in definitions should be expected, and should be accepted as reasonably normal for this kind of argumentation. The opposition can critique what they perceive as deceptions or logical shortcomings involved in such

tactical redefinitions, but redefining the terms of a debate is surely not a logical defect or error in every case.

In the wetlands case, there are more problems, because the initial perception, which seems to be right, is that "wetlands" is a scientific term that ought to be defined by the scientific experts. But then, in case 3, there was a dialectical shift, when the term was redefined (evidently) for political purposes. Schiappa (1996, p. 227) sees the problem as a "dream of escaping politics altogether" by letting the scientific experts define terms for us. He sees this "dream" as one that "potentially ends in disaster" (p. 227). But from a new dialectical perspective, the shift from a scientific context to that of a **political** debate on policies is not necessarily a bad thing. For in many cases such as Walton (1998), such a shift can be constructive. For example, a shift from an information-seeking dialogue to a persuasion dialogue could improve the quality of the persuasion dialogue by making it better informed on the issue. On the other hand, the redefinition in case 3 can be criticized as deceptive, on the grounds that the tightening up of the criteria for "wetland" was introduced in such a way that what was really going on was not widely realized by the public.

Case 4 seems different from the previous three cases. It was a legal redefinition advocated by an advocacy group, and the issue was given much publicity at the time. It is harder to see in this case how deception was involved, if it was. But case 4 is similar to cases 2 and 3, because, unlike case 1, the redefinition was a matter of public policy that did serve identifiable interests. But if it is hard to argue that the redefinition was logically illicit in cases 2 and 3, it is even harder in case 4. According to Burgess-Jackson (1995), the redefinition in case 4 is not an "objectionable" form of persuasive definition, because the word "rape" is vague and ambiguous to begin with, and because it

represents a feminist point of view which is legitimate as a "theory" of rape (p. 433). Based on his analysis of this case, Burgess-Jackson has argued for the general thesis that putting forward a persuasive definition should not be regarded as an inherently objectionable or disreputable move in argumentation.

Surely the postmodernists are right to make the following argument. Since virtually all terms in use in everyday discourse already contain emotive connotations that reflect existing values and traditions, arguing for a new ethical view that redefines such a term should be seen as (in principle) a reasonable kind of move to make in ethical argumentation. Since this argument does seem to be reasonable, it signals caution in condemning all use of persuasive definitions. The objection to persuasive redefinitions, when they are objectionable logically, seems to center more on the potential for confusion and deception. And as Stevenson's analysis brought out, that potential is certainly there. But an even more worrisome aspect of persuasive definitions was brought out quite clearly by cases 2, 3, and 4. Once they are lodged into place, in law, government regulations, or otherwise enshrined in public policies and regulations, then they are coercive and they do serve particular interests. If the interest groups they serve were in fact the very people who got them lodged in place as public policies, the worry about them as argumentation tactics should go deeper. If the use of persuasive definitions has become a sophisticated tool of mass communications shaping laws and public policies to serve special interest groups, this potential for deception and confusion is really something to worry about.

6. WHAT SHOULD THE RULES FOR PERSUASIVE DEFINITIONS BE?

Persuasive definitions have not been studied very much. We have not really advanced beyond the point reached by Stevenson's

investigation of them. There are many unanswered questions about them. Presumably, persuasive definitions are closely related to stipulative definitions, and it is possible they should be treated as a species of them (Robinson, 1950). Rules for stipulative definitions, as opposed to other kinds of definitions, tend to be more permissive. In a dialogue, a participant should generally be free to offer a stipulative definition at any point, and there are few restrictions on a stipulative definition that apply to other definitions. For example, a stipulative definition can ignore previous lexical usage. This same freedom seems to attach to persuasive definitions. But the degree of freedom certainly should vary contextually. For example, if one party offers a persuasive definition in a persuasion dialogue then it is up to that party to defend it, and to stick to it, while it is up to the other party to accept it or not. The other party should be free to propose an opposed persuasive definition, and to argue against the persuasive, definition that had been put forward by the first party. The rules might be quite different in a scientific or legal context however. In law, statutes and rulings of various kinds lay down definitions of significant legal terms. While such definitions can sometimes be disputed, they have a certain standing. Thus an attorney arguing a case in court is far from free to start basing her arguments on stipulated or persuasive definitions that she herself has invented. Similarly in a scientific discipline, certain definitions, like that of "mass" and "force" in physics, are accepted generally in the field. They have a firm standing. Such definitions can be challenged, but not by just stipulating a new persuasive definition out of a hat. The rules for putting forward, challenging and accepting definitions clearly vary with the type of conversational exchange an argument is supposed to be part of. So there are no easy or pat

solutions to the problems of when definitions should be judged to be proper and when not.

In an interesting study of collegiate debating, Shepard (1973) showed that stipulative definitions are freely allowed in these debates, and this possibility offers debaters a creative freedom to exploit persuasive definitions and other stipulated definitions that are fanciful in departing from lexical usage. The problem is that the audience will simply not accept a proposed definition that is too fanciful, and because the debater's argument is based on the definition, the audience will simply not find the argument persuasive. The problem is that proposing a stipulative definition may be proper or acceptable as a move in a debate, but it may be self-defeating as a strategic move. What is suggested is that two questions should be distinguished. When is using a stipulative definition proper or acceptable as a move in a dialogue? When is using a stipulative definition a good strategy to help you achieve your goal in a dialogue?

In all four cases above, the move to redefine a key term by introducing a persuasive definition would seem to be a proper or acceptable move in the argumentation in the case. At least arguments supporting this way of evaluating the , cases were presented above. But the question of whether these redefinition attempts were good strategies is another matter, not yet discussed. In case 1, the redefinition of "culture" might have been a good argument strategy for **B**. For all we are told about the details of the case, it seemed like **B**'s argument was a good strategy in helping him to persuade **A** that Rodney is a good guy. In cases 2 and 3, the strategy seemed like a good one, because by the time the public became aware of what was going on, the budget had been cut and the wetlands had been developed. The deception was successful. But what happens when the public realizes- that it had been duped by a persuasive redefinition, once that has been pointed out? Here it is much harder

to say about long-term effects. Possibly it could be just this kind of deception that makes the public cynical about politics. On the other hand, since a considerable segment of the public presumably supports the side of the developers, the effect is more diluted. In case 4, one long term possible effect may be the trivialization of the crime of rape. The public thinks of rape as a horrible and intolerable assault that demands a very strong penalty. The emotive connotation of the word "rape" in previous usage is that of a horrific, repellant kind of crime. But suppose that lesser offences coming under the heading of "verbal coercion" are widely publicized as rape convictions. The strong emotive connotations in public opinion attached to the word "rape" may become diluted. As long as the public is unaware of the redefinition and its implications, the strategy of the advocates of women's rights could be successful, if the law is changed to a wider definition of "rape." But once the public gains a wider awareness of what is going on, the redefinition could have other effects that go against the strategy of the advocates of the rights and interests of women.

In all these cases, the problem with the persuasive redefinition resides in the awareness of the audience, the other party in the dialogue, or the general public, in making the adjustment between the new meaning and the emotive connotations of the old meaning. The problem is the potential for confusion, dissociation and ambiguity created by the failure of matching between these two things. The persuasive redefiner can get a temporary advantage from this ambiguity however, making it a powerful rhetorical device of persuasion. The long term effects may not be so good, however. The strategic trade-off may then be between a temporary gain and potential long term problems. But the temporary gain that can be achieved makes the use of persuasive definitions very attractive- as a rhetorical tactic, especially

where the redefinition can be lodged into legal, government or some form of public acceptance long enough to have the desired effects its advocates need. On balance, what is called for is recognition of the use of persuasive definition as an argumentation tactic that is, in principle, legitimate. In the right context of dialogue, at the right point in the development of a line of argumentation, the putting forward of a persuasive definition can be a reasonable move. But the potential for deception is there, as soon as the redefinition of the old term departs from the existing usage of the audience, or respondent of the argument. So from a logical point of view, we should be wary of persuasive definitions, and treat them with caution.

From a logical point of view, the most important thing about properly handling cases like those above is that a persuasive definition should be treated as an argument. It should be regarded as open to critical questioning and to the posing of counter-definitions. It should be regarded as having a burden of proof attached. It should be recognized that the audience or respondent of the redefinition should have the right to argue for retaining the existing usage, if it seems to them to better represent their views on the matter. When a proponent puts forward a persuasive definition, she should be held to it, unless she changes to a new redefinition, and she should also have that option. But at the same time she should be open to criticism if she argues in such a way that presumes or exploits the previous existing usage of the term in a way that could be deceptive, inconsistent, and confusing. The dialectical problem posed by such cases is one of retraction of commitment to definitions that one was previous committed to in argumentation, either by posing explicit definitions or by presuming existing usage of a term. It is not possible to make up any one set of rules to govern all such cases, because, according to the new dialectic, the rules will

vary depending on the type of dialogue in which the parties in a case are supposedly engaging.

The problems about definitions posed in this paper are all unsolved. Mainly what has been shown is that these problems are actually important, and are worth solving. It has also been shown that it is possible to solve them, if a new approach is taken. The traditional approach, with its dichotomy between nominal and real definition, is not much good. As shown above, it is misleading in many ways, and takes the investigation in a wrong direction. A case-based approach, that begins with case studies that show how definitions are actually used in different contexts as argumentative moves, shows more promise. Then what is required is a new dialectical approach that classifies, analyzes and evaluates definitions in cases on the basis of how each definition was used for some conversational purpose in that case.

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