

Constructing Reality Through Definitions: The Politics of Meaning

Edward Schiappa

The University of Minnesota

*A lecture presented for the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and
Rhetorical Studies Minor*

Speaker Series

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Preface

In the fall of 1998, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing (CISW) and the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies sponsored a lecture by Professor Edward Schiappa from the University of Minnesota's Speech-Communication department. A revised version of his lecture, "Constructing Reality through Definitions: The Politics of Meaning," is published here.

In this lecture, Professor Schiappa discussed the ways that politics comes into play when defining words. Words do not have "essential" meanings; we assign meaning to them that may vary vastly depending on their political implication. For example, changing the definition of the term "wetland" can result in the loss of thousands of acres of wetlands. Edward Schiappa is a national expert on classical and contemporary rhetorical argumentation theory. Among his many articles and books are *The Beginnings of Greek Rhetorical Theory*; *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric*; and *Warranting Assent: Case Studies in Argument Evaluation*. He is also Associate Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Minnesota.

The Center's primary mission is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. This speaker series, along with colloquia, faculty development workshops, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the university community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,

- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics of writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Professor Schiappa's lecture as part of the ongoing discussion about Writing Across the Curriculum. One of the goals of all Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Holly Littlefield, Editor
June, 1999

Constructing Reality Through Definitions: The Politics of Meaning

Part One: An Overview of the Project

The primary thesis of this project is that definitional disputes should be treated less as philosophical or scientific questions of “is” and more as sociopolitical or pragmatic questions of “ought.” While I am not advocating a total abandonment of the legitimate factual or empirical matters that acts of defining involve, I am advocating that greater emphasis be put on the ethical and normative ramifications of the act of defining. It is my belief that many important problems facing people in a variety of roles—as citizens, family members, employees and employers, scholars, etc.—might be faced more squarely and productively by approaching definition as constituting rhetorically induced social knowledge. Definitions bring into existence a special sort of social knowledge: a shared understanding among people about themselves, the objects of their world, and how they ought to use language; knowledge typically taking the form of an explicit and often “authoritative” articulation of what particular words mean and how they should be used to refer to reality. Describing definitions as “rhetorically induced” calls attention to the persuasive processes that definitions inevitably involve. Not all definitions are accepted and used. A major tenet of this project is that the difference between those definitions that are accepted and used and those that are not is a matter of persuasion, and hence many arguments concerning definitions are open to rhetorical analysis.

Precisely what I mean by “rhetorical analysis” will become clear as the project progresses, but two points of explanation may be helpful at the outset. First, rhetorical analysis typically focuses on persuasion conducted through symbolic means. The word “rhetoric” comes from the Greek *rhetorike*, which originally referred to the art or skill of a

rhêtôr—an experienced public speaker. Believing that such skills could be analyzed and better understood, Aristotle defined “rhetoric” as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Kennedy 1991, 36). Today the term rhetoric is used to designate two different sorts of practices: specific acts of persuasion, such as a public oration (sometimes disparagingly referred to as “mere” rhetoric), as well as the analysis of such acts. As historian and rhetorical critic David Zarefsky has put it, “rhetoric may be taken to be the study of the process of public persuasion. It is the study of how symbols influence people” (1986, 5). In the context of this project rhetoric is meant in this second sense, though the persuasive processes that definitions involve take place in private as well as public settings. A rhetorical analysis of definition, then, investigates how people persuade other people to adopt and use certain definitions to the exclusion of others.

Second, a rhetorical analysis is not at odds with a “philosophical” analysis. In fact, rhetorical analysis is an important part of what has been described as a return to “practical philosophy.” Stephen E. Toulmin has offered an eloquent argument for a return to “practical philosophy” that engages contemporary social concerns. Specifically, he suggests that the line between politics and philosophy is no longer helpful in an age when “matters of practice” are literally “matters of life and death” (1988, 343). Part of Toulmin’s turn to practical philosophy is motivated by a rejection of the Platonic goal of absolute certainty resulting from “geometrical” reasoning and his contention that philosophers need to return to the study of persuasive argumentation (1958). Toulmin notes that contemporary “philosophers are increasingly drawn into public debates about environmental policy, medical ethics, judicial practice, or nuclear politics. . . . These practical debates are no longer ‘applied philosophy’: they are philosophy itself” (1988, 345).

Accordingly, I have organized this project into a series of theoretical propositions about language, meaning, definition, and reality, illustrated with a series of case studies. I have done so in the belief that certain ideas that are often dubbed “philosophical” have important consequences for how we live our lives. Though the link between philosophizing—talking about topics such as “meaning” and “truth”—and the very pragmatic question of how we ought to live is as old as Socrates (if not older), we typically proceed as if the link is only relevant to a very few special people, such as Mohandas K. Gandhi, Karl Marx, or Martin Luther King. As Toulmin implies, some topics addressed by professional philosophers are relevant to all of us. We all think and act with a set of beliefs about what the world is like, what is ethical, and how language works. In this sense we are all guided by assumptions that one potentially can articulate and examine. This project is motivated, in part, by the belief that it is time to take many important ideas that are well-known among professional philosophers of language in order to identify those that can inform and enhance the discussion of pressing issues. As Toulmin puts it, “it is time for philosophers to come out of their self-imposed isolation and reenter the collective world of practical life and shared human problems” (1988, 352).

Tonight my task is twofold. First, I want to make a brief case for the rhetorical approach to definitions in general terms. Second, I want to share one piece of the project as an illustration of where the

project is heading. Specifically, I want to talk about a definitional controversy involving “wetlands” to explore and illustrate the thesis that all definitions are political.

* * *

The study of definition has a long and distinguished past. For readers interested in the history of the many attempts to describe and define “definition,” I recommend Richard Robinson’s concise book, *Definition* (1950). I have no intention of trying to chart that history or to provide a comprehensive account of previous philosophical investigations into such matters as meaning and reference, though I will draw from such literature where it is relevant to do so. For the purposes of this project, the prototypical formal definition is a standard dictionary definition. Other typical examples are legal definitions, such as those found in *Black’s Law Dictionary* (which culls definitions from statutes and court rulings), or definitions set forth in scholarly publications. Ostensive definitions are *informal* definitions that involve little more than pointing to something and labeling it. I discuss ostensive definition later, but set it aside for the remainder of this presentation. Other concepts that are not considered here under the rubric of “definition” include the idea that any predicative part of a sentence (X is Y) is a definition, and such pithy sayings as when “Bismark is said to have ‘defined’ politics as the art of the possible” (Robinson 1950, 13).

Definitions are traditionally regarded as involving strictly factual propositions. It used to be quite common to believe that questions of fact are very different from questions of value. The separation of fact and value has relied on various metaphysical distinctions, such as the theory that “facts” involve objective reality, and “values” reflect subjective human preferences. Though most philosophers have abandoned many of the metaphysical distinctions used to separate facts and values, most people, including highly trained scholars, continue to assume that matters involving is and ought are so distinct that they require very different ways of thinking and arguing about them. My objective in this project is to show how definitions can be understood more productively as involving claims of “ought” rather

than “is,” and then to note how a pragmatic approach to definition further bridges the gap between facts and values. Before arguing these points, however, it is necessary to have a firmer grasp of how definitional disputes are usually understood.

Definitions typically are treated as reporting one of two kinds of fact. What often have been called “real” definitions are attempts to describe what something “really is.” When someone asks what piety is, or “What is piety?” that person typically wants to know more about the phenomenon to which people are referring when they say “piety.” Indeed, virtually all questions of the form “What is X?” are asking not “How do we use the word ‘X’?” but instead are asking what X *is*, in reality. This sort of definitional fact can be called a *fact of essence*.

The earliest recorded examples of questions involving facts of essence, at least in Western history, are described in the fourth-century BCE writings of Plato and Xenophon. Both sources tell us that Socrates used to pose the question “*ti esti*”—What is it?—with respect to a variety of topics. Many of the early Platonic dialogues are organized around questions of the form “What is X?” The dialogue *Gorgias* begins by asking “What is rhetoric?”; *Euthyphro* asks “What is piety?”; *Theaetetus* asks “What is knowledge?”; and so forth. In each instance Plato is not asking simply how people use the term “X”; he wants to know what X, itself, *really is*, or what its “essence” or true nature is. Plato believed that one did not really know what something is unless one could give a *logos*, or account, of it. So when Socrates’ line of questioning led persons into contradicting themselves, as often happened in Plato’s dialogues, the conclusion was that those people did not know the true account, or correct definition, of X.

It is rare, but occasionally Plato portrayed Socrates as providing an authoritative account of various “things.” In the dialogue *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates does, in fact, give a working definition of “rhetoric.” Similarly, Xenophon’s account in *Memorabilia* of Socrates’ discussions involving “What is X?” questions imply that Socrates sometimes did offer answers of his own (§4.6 in Marchant 1923, 332-47). For the purposes of this project, anytime someone posits a question of the form “What is X?” or attempts to offer a definition based on what s/he believes X really or truly is, the result is an effort toward a fact of essence, or what also is called a “real” definition.

The second kind of definitional fact can be described as a fact of usage. When someone asks what a particular word means, typically s/he is asking how people use the word. This sort of definition is called a lexical or nominal definition, and it is the sort of definition found in a dictionary. As many philosophers have pointed out, when someone asks what a word means, we answer using other words. We rarely answer by pointing to the object or event to which the word refers, instead we usually define one word by suggesting other words that can be used more or less interchangeably with the word being defined. How people actually use a word is, in principle, an empirical question. For example, if someone asks “what does ‘bachelor’ mean?” one might answer “an unmarried man.” It is demonstratively false to say that most people use the word “bachelor” to describe a particular color, while it is demonstratively true that people use the word to describe some unmarried men. Dictionaries purport to record the most common use of words, and thus what a given word means is a question of fact—in this case a fact of usage.

Most people, when they talk about definitions, do not automatically think about the difference between facts of essence and facts of usage; they assume the two amount to the

same thing. That is, people use “bachelor” to describe unmarried men because, after all, that is what bachelors really are, right? I will call the often unspoken and unexamined belief that definitions unproblematically refer both to the *nature of X* and to *how the word “X” is used* the “natural attitude” toward definition. I borrow the phrase “natural attitude” from Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, who describe the natural attitude as the belief that the objects of our world (including language) are simply “there” and can be taken for granted. Schutz and Luckmann believe that the “natural attitude” is the ordinary state of affairs in human existence (1973). Likewise, I believe that normally we take the status of definitions for granted. Except for periods of time I call “definitional ruptures,” we normally get by just fine assuming that definitions are “out there,” specifically in dictionaries, and that dictionaries are reliable guides to the nature of the things they define.

Before I argue what I think is faulty about treating definitions as propositions of fact, it may be useful to identify some of the implications of the concepts discussed so far. First of all, though the natural attitude collapses the distinction between facts of essence and facts of usage, the two sorts of facts are derived from incompatible theories of definition. For example, Plato believed that most people of his time were ignorant about the true nature of reality. In his famous *Republic* he describes people as living their lives in caves, thinking that the shadows on the wall are “real.” It is the philosopher’s task, Plato believed, to pull people out of the cave and force them to see things the way they really are. For Plato, then, common usage of a word “X” was in no way a reliable guide to the true nature of X. Similarly, anyone who seriously believes that s/he can provide a real definition has no need of a lexical definition. If you know what X really is, then it does not matter what other people say it is.

If, on the other hand, one consciously accepts a lexical or nominal approach to definition, then someone's claim that the dominant usage of a word is not what it "really" means will fall on deaf ears. That is, if you believe that the meaning of a word "X" is what the dictionary tells you it is, then someone claiming that the dictionary is wrong and that s/he knows what X really is will probably sound somewhat strange.

Even though the natural attitude combines two incompatible theories of definition, most of the time we never notice the incompatibility. The reason is that we rarely experience *definitional ruptures*. At most we have a temporary definitional "gap": we hear an unfamiliar word, we look it up in a dictionary, and that settles the matter. We assume that we are now clued into both how the word "X" is used and what sort of thing or event X is. Or, let us say we hear a familiar word used in an unfamiliar way. A friend of mine refers to a haircut as a "shingle." Is such a usage correct? Does my friend really know what in the world a shingle *is*? Again we might consult some sort of definitional authority to settle the matter. It turns out that a dictionary indicates that "shingle" can mean either an item used in building construction, or a close-cropped haircut. So I conclude that my friend both is *using* the word correctly (if arcanelly) and indeed knows what a shingle is.

The difference between a definitional gap and a definitional rupture can be described as follows: a gap can be resolved without the process of defining itself becoming an issue; not so with a rupture. Up until this point the definitional disputes I have been describing have been fairly simple and straightforward. The person or persons involved in the dispute have been portrayed as having a simple and obvious recourse—that of consulting a dictionary. That such is the way that we settle the vast majority of our questions and disputes over definitions probably needs no proof other than reference to the reader's own experience.

But it is easy to imagine situations in which someone might challenge the definition found in a dictionary. Let us say I hear my students referring to a song they obviously are enjoying and they say “that song is really *bad*.” I object to their use of the word “bad” by pointing to the dictionary definition of “bad” and arguing that they obviously are not using the word correctly. My students are likely to point out to me that what *they* mean by “bad” in this context may not be what the dictionary defines as “bad,” but that they understand each other and agree on their usage. They may even try to explain their usage such that I figure out that when they say “bad,” they may mean “good.” Even this rather hackneyed example is sufficient to point out that to resolve the definitional dispute required us to address the issue of how words are defined. The students reject the definition found in the dictionary as irrelevant to their particular usage. The natural attitude has been disrupted because the assumption that dominant usage as recorded in dictionaries corresponds to what things *are* has been called into question in such a way that the participants in the conversation have to reconcile the difference. They might do so by employing a fact of essence: “that is not what bad *is*.” Or they may do so by claiming a fact of usage: “That is not how we use ‘bad’.” In either case, the taken-for-granted status of dictionary definitions has been challenged and the participants are required to employ a theory of definition, self-consciously or not, to close the rupture.

Rather than relying on an example that some might dismiss as merely slang usage, let us consider a definitional dispute in a scholarly setting. A few years ago a noted scholar in communication studies suggested that the word “argument” should be defined in a broad way in college argumentation classes. Not long after, another scholar claimed that the first scholar

had failed to distinguish between two senses of “argument”: argument₁ as a discrete product of discourse (“S/he wrote an airtight argument”) and argument₂ as an interactive process (“We had a fierce argument that lasted for hours”). Since that time other argumentation scholars have suggested other definitions of “argument,” including an argument₀ and an argument₃. These scholars, if asked, no doubt would suggest that standard dictionary definitions of the word “argument” are irrelevant. The natural attitude is ruptured as soon as these scholars defend their respective definition as better than alternatives based on one of the two kinds of facts identified previously: they either argue that, as experts, they have superior knowledge of what an argument really *is* (a fact of essence), or they argue that the word “argument” is used differently by experts and teachers of argument than it is by average language-users (a fact of usage).

I hope that the reader will grant, at least for the moment, that these two examples of definitional ruptures are fairly typical of what happens when a group of language-users reject a standard definition. The reasons given for dismissing, say, a dictionary definition can be grouped as appeals to facts of essence or facts of usage, but in the vast majority of cases, they fall into one of those two categories. Even the argument that a dictionary is simply “out dated” is incomplete unless it is followed by the claim that, hence, “it doesn’t know what *X is*” or “it doesn’t know how people are using the word *now*.”

I believe that definitional ruptures are widespread and that the traditional conceptual tools for dealing with them are unproductive and incomplete. Controversies over sexism, art and obscenity, “life” and “death,” abortion, and sexual harassment, just to name a few, can be understood, in part, as definitional ruptures that can be “mended” more democratically and more productively by augmenting the “factual” approach to definition with a more pragmatic

approach. Here and in previously-published works I argue that real definitions (facts of essence) are unproductive and that claims about facts of usage are better understood as value (ought) propositions than as fact (is) propositions. The usefulness of such a perspective will have to be judged by the reader. At the very least, even if every one of my claims is rejected, I hope that our understanding of the conundrums of shared meaning will be enhanced by a reappraisal of the ways and means of definition.

Project Justification: “Real Definitions” Are No Longer Helpful

The phrase “real definition” refers to all efforts to define things rather than words; facts of essence rather than facts of usage. When one tries to provide a “real definition” of “death,” for example, one is not merely reporting how people use the word “death” but rather one is identifying the defining characteristics of what death, itself, “really” is. Strictly speaking, dictionary definitions are lexical definitions and not “real definitions” because they merely report an account of how words have been used in the past (Robinson 1950, 35-38). According to someone who believes in real definitions, the usage reported in a lexical definition could be in error since people in the past may not have understood what the thing to which a given word refers “really is.” A “real definition,” therefore, is not concerned with how people are using a word, but rather with what the defining qualities of the referent “really” and “objectively” are.

Though Plato and especially Aristotle are the philosophers most often associated linked to the search for real definitions, they are far from alone. Benedict Spinoza in the 17th century proclaimed that “the true definition of each thing involves nothing and expresses nothing but the nature of the thing defined” (1927, I, prop. 8, n.2; see also Hart 1983, 130-31). In the twentieth century, real definition is the primary activity that Bertrand Russell and

G. E. Moore had in mind with their notion of the “correct analysis” of concepts. Moore posited that definitions “describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word,” and “do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean” (1903, 7). Russell’s and Moore’s objective was to enumerate the various empirical constituents of “factual, independently existing” complexes of objects and relations in such a way as to describe “the ultimate constituents” of reality. Accordingly, a “true” or “complete” analysis would yield a “real definition” that “correctly” identifies what “time” or “memory” actually are (Weitz 1967, 99-100; see also Russell 1921).

Arguments about real definitions may be viewed as competing answers to questions of the form “What is X?” Our earliest recorded instances of arguments of this sort, as noted earlier, are in Plato’s dialogues. Typically these dialogues begin with someone planning action based on a belief concerning X. So, for example, Euthyphro believes the prosecution of his own father for murder to be pious, despite members of his family calling Euthyphro impious. Since Plato’s Socrates believes that one must know what piety really is before one can call a specific action pious or not, he poses the question “What is Piety?” that informs the ensuing discussion.

In the case of Plato, the belief that words are somehow related to essences or Ideal Forms fuels the search for definition; therefore a real definition of a word is the one that truly depicts what is “essential” about the word’s referent (Robinson 1950). Though few people still embrace Plato’s notion of the Ideal Forms, the search for real definitions continues and the “language of essentialism” that fills Plato’s dialogues still informs many contemporary arguments about definition. The “language of essentialism” refers to linguistic habits that reflect and depend on metaphysical absolutism: the belief that things have independent,

“objective” structures or essences that are knowable “in themselves” (Barnes 1982, 79-83)

The most readily identifiable example of such a linguistic habit is described by Belgian philosopher Chaim Perelman as *dissociation*: an arguer’s effort to break up a previously unified idea into two concepts; one that will be positively valued by the target audience, and one that will be negatively valued (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 411-59). Arguers enact dissociation through the use of “philosophical pairs,” one of which is usually considered metaphysically, epistemologically, or ethically superior to the other. The prototypical philosophical pair is appearance/reality. An arguer uses this pair by claiming that one definition is the real or true instance of X, whereas competing definitions point to an illusory appearance. In definitional disputes, closely related pairs include essential/accidental and necessary/contingent.

Whenever a novel definition is offered and defended as a “real definition,” some sort of dissociation is unavoidable. When a novel real definition is put forth, we immediately have competing claims about what some part of the world “really is”: the claim made by the current mundane definition, and the claim made by the new definition. There are now two competing claims of what is the “essence” or “real nature” of X. Part and parcel of the worldviews that defend the notion of real definition is that both claims cannot be true. If the essence of X is Y, it cannot be anything else (X is not-Y). To claim that *X is Y* and *X is not-Y* violates a fundamental premise of traditional ontology, the principle of non-contradiction: “it is a property of being itself that no being can both have and not have a given characteristic at one and the same time” (MacIntyre 1967, 542). An advocate of a novel real definition must resolve the contradiction, and this is usually done through dissociation. An act of dissociation breaks “X” into two referents: X is really Y, it only appears to be not-Y. Only through such a

dissociative act can the advocate of a novel real definition defend the claim “X is Y” as “real” while explaining away counter-definitions, including the claim made by the dominant, mundane definition.

I contend that there are serious problems with the “real definition” approach to definition. One problem is philosophical: dissociations that use certain metaphysical pairs are based on an untenable theory of language and meaning. The other problem pragmatic: the language of essentialism obfuscates important social needs involved with defining (a point developed more fully in Schiappa 1993).

To reiterate, metaphysical absolutism is the belief that the world consists of independent, objective “real” objects or essences that can be known directly—as they “really are.” For Plato, philosophy in general and dialectic in particular are the only ways open to a correct understanding of reality; that is, the Ideal Forms. Aristotle rejected Plato’s theory of Forms but maintained the belief that philosophy and what we would now call science provides direct access to the true nature of things. For over two thousand years, most (though not all) Western philosophers maintained a belief in some sort of metaphysical absolutism or “direct” realism. Such absolutism may be applied to transcendent universals (as with Plato), the real essence of things (as with Aristotle), or the nature of concrete particulars (as with William of Ockham). In any event, the proper “objects” of philosophical investigation are “things-as-they-really-are,” or “things-in-themselves” and not things as we merely think they may be.

Metaphysical absolutism should be rejected for two related reasons. The first objection is that “things-in-themselves” is an unintelligible notion. Immanuel Kant called “thing-in-themselves” *noumena* and argued that they are unknowable in principle; all we can

know are *phenomena*—things as we perceive and experience them. We literally cannot speak of things of which we have no experience or sensation. Thus, noumena are even less intelligible than the proverbial tree that falls in the forest with no one there to hear the hypothesized noise. Noumena are more like a hypothetical Absolute Alien: a being you have never heard of, have never met, will never meet, and of which you can have no knowledge.

The second objection is that “knowledge” is limited to what we can say about reality. What we know must be put into language or some sort of symbol system if it is to be shared with others. To make this claim does not deny the importance of nonlinguistic ways of knowing or the personal and “tacit” components of human understanding (Polanyi 1958). But definitions are linguistic expressions, and most of the time when we speak of knowledge we refer to statements and claims, which are also linguistic. Since real objects are nonlinguistic, we are doubly removed from any sort of unmediated or direct access to reality. Our shared accounts of experience are twice removed from “pure” reality: first, our sensations are abstracted from available stimuli; second, our linguistic utterances can only re-present a portion of our sensations.

In light of these and other objections, philosophers in the mid-twentieth century made what since has been called “the linguistic turn” (Rorty 1967). Philosophers of language now consider definitions strictly “lexical” (reports about how words are being used) rather than “real” in the sense advocated by metaphysical absolutism. Thus, the sort of essentialism found in Plato’s works mostly has been abandoned as a guide to definitions, and both Anglo-American and continental philosophers now reject the sort of “Direct” or “Naïve Realism” that informs the notion of real definitions and “correct analysis” (Weitz 1967).

A more thorough summary of contemporary critiques of metaphysical absolutism is unnecessary, at least for the moment. Few philosophers calling themselves “realists” even discuss the concept of real definitions anymore, let alone defend them. Contemporary “metaphysical realists” still defend the idea that “reality” consists of independent, objective “real” objects that can be known, but they have abandoned an absolutist or “direct” realism for approaches that acknowledge that our accounts of the world are mediated by historically situated languages and technologies. Rom Harré, for example, defends metaphysical realism but not “direct” or absolutist realism: “Close examination has shown that the descriptive vocabulary of a scientific community is controlled by a shifting, historically contingent network of contexts, conceptual clusters, material practices, and social influences” (1986, 106). Nicholas Rescher (1987), Sean Sayers (1985), Roger Trigg (1980), Michael Devitt (1984), and Joseph Margolis (1986) are other philosophers who defend various forms of non-absolutist metaphysical realism while abandoning essentialism and the notion that language provides “direct” access to reality. None of their works (at least those cited here) explicitly address or defend the status of real definitions.

Real definitions, then, have been set aside by most professional philosophers. Nonetheless, as the examples provided here suggest, the language of essentialism and metaphysical realism persist in the social arenas outside of the confines of professional philosophy. My position is that proponents of new definitions can produce better arguments if they recognize that definitions do not and cannot describe things-in-themselves, but report or advocate functional relationships between words and people. In short, along with philosopher Richard Robinson I advocate an abandonment of real definitions and a turn toward a self-conscious, lexical approach to defining.

Attempts to define what things “really are,” as Robinson notes, are fueled by the intuitive reasonableness of questions of the form “What is X?” (1950, 190). The reasonableness of such questions is the result of the fact that our language is still permeated by Platonic/Aristotelian terminology and assumptions. An implicit metaphysical absolutism in our ways of speaking reinforces the natural attitude toward definition. Breaking from real definitions, therefore, must be part of a departure from metaphysical absolutism.

I turn now from the more purely philosophical objections to real definitions and toward more pragmatic concerns. The first objection is that real definitions unnecessarily narrow one’s argumentative focus. Not unlike conflicting “facts” and “observations” in science, conflicting definitions in general are perspective- or theory-bound. That is, the truth or appropriateness of a particular definition is dependent upon the truth or appropriateness of interrelated beliefs, values, and concepts. In most situations, one cannot deny the truth or appropriateness of a rival definition without presuming the truth or appropriateness of one’s own. When an arguer uses dissociation to contrast one definition with an inferior one, there is an important sense in which the defense of the “realness” of one’s definition is circular. If an arguer has, to his/her satisfaction, arrived at an understanding of what X actually is, then of course rival definitions merely represent what X merely appears to be. The upshot is that there is no theory- or perspective-independent means of arbitrating between conflicting real definitions. In a publication in *Argumentation* mentioned earlier, I offer examples to illustrate the circularity of dissociative strategies in defense of a real definition. For tonight, I ask your indulgence in allowing me simply to stipulate the point.

The second pragmatic objection to real definitions is that they are dysfunctional to the extent that they direct attention to “is” claims and away from “ought” claims. The proponent of a novel definition is proposing a new way of using a particular word. The proponent seeks to change our linguistic behavior and thereby alter patterns of denotative conformity.

Accordingly, the question arguers should be asking is not “What is X?” but rather “How *ought* we use the word X?” or “What should be described by the word X?” Normative questions of this sort cannot be answered acontextually; they virtually compel interlocutors to address the pragmatic needs of a given community of language-users located in a particular historical moment. Viewed rhetorically, proponents of new definitions seek to alter the behavior of a specific audience. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca declare that “it is in terms of an audience that an argumentation develops” (1969, 5); definitional argumentation is no exception. An arguer defending a definition is just as culpable for the pragmatic and ethical results of his or her arguments as is any other advocate seeking to move an audience to action.

According to Stevenson, persuasive definitions seek to alter the “descriptive” meaning of a word while retaining its emotive meaning (1944). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca modify Stevenson’s position because they believe the descriptive and emotive meanings of a term are inseparable (1969, 447). Stevenson’s position can be reformulated as suggesting that advocates of a new definition of “X” seek to alter *which* sensations we denote as “X” while preserving past patterns of action or behavior taken *toward* sensations called X. In this sense virtually all proposed novel real definitions are persuasive definitions, since “all those who argue in favor of some definition want it. . . to influence the use which would have been made of the concept had they not intervened” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969,

213).

Robinson's critique of persuasive definitions neatly parallels the point made here about real definitions substituting pseudo-*is* claims for normative considerations. Robinson suggests that arguments proposing new and non-conventional definitions should be seen as stipulative rather than as "real" (1950, 59-92). It is simply more intellectually honest, according to Robinson's analysis, to stipulate a new definition for a word and defend its practical utility than it is to argue in behalf of a "real" definition. A persuasive definition is "at best a mistake and at worst a lie, because it consists in getting someone to alter his [or her] valuations under the false impression that he [or she] is not altering his [or her] valuations but correcting his [or her] knowledge of the facts" (1950, 170).

In some cases, how a word is defined has obvious and profound implications. In other definitional disputes, the stakes may seem smaller, but they are still significant. Definitions identify the scope of our daily endeavors, and it is not an exaggeration to say that they often demarcate our available "reality." Calls to adopt new definitions are calls to change our attitudes and behavior. For these reasons, arguments about definitions should be conducted in as ethical and productive a manner as possible. The first step toward improving our argumentative practices concerning definitions is to acknowledge their unavoidably persuasive and argumentative features. The second is to eschew "real" definitions as ethically suspect and philosophically problematic.

Part Two: "Wetlands" and the Politics of Meaning

This part of tonight's lecture explores the thesis that disputes over definitions are political conflicts by examining a controversy over the appropriate definition of "wetlands." My argument is that all definitions are "political" in two respects: first, definitions always

function to serve particular interests; second, the only definitions of consequence are those that have been empowered through persuasion or coercion. The latter point is not to say, simply, that “Might makes meaning,” but rather that for a particular definition to be shared, people must be moved to adapt their linguistic and nonlinguistic responses according to the understanding instantiated in the definition (Sederberg 1984, 56). Such responses “may be shaped through the application of various forms of power from logical or moral suasion, through bribery, to coercion” (Sederberg 1984, 7).

Definitions devised by scientists usually are not described as “political.” Scientific definitions are usually described as being more “objective” (that is, more real) than nonscientific definitions, and informed by “rational” and “neutral” criteria rather than based on value-laden political factors. I believe that such distinctions are misleading and unproductive. Just as what is “really” rape differs from one theory of human interaction to another, what is considered “objectively real” varies from one scientific theory to the next. In lieu of a more thorough defense, I will for the moment simply assert that there is no compelling theoretical or practical reason to treat definitions by scientists as more “objective” or “real” than definitions by nonscientists (I refer to definitions as set forth by particular social groups rather than using the usual rubric “scientific definitions” to emphasize that sociology, not metaphysics, distinguishes definitions offered by one group or another). Though we can distinguish the two groups by reference to different social practices, little is gained and much is lost by attempting to do so on an ontological or epistemological basis (Rorty 1991, 21-62). Kuhn provides an anecdote that demonstrates how definitions serve particular interests. Two scientists were asked whether a single atom of helium is or is not a molecule: “Both answered without hesitation, but their answers were not the same. For

the chemist the atom of helium was a molecule because it behaved like one with respect to the kinetic theory of gases. For the physicist, on the other hand, the helium atom was not a molecule because it displayed no molecular spectrum” (1970, 50). In this example there were two different theory-driven answers to the question “What is a molecule?” What counts as a molecule differs according to the current needs and interests of chemistry and physics. It is pointless to ask which answer is “really” correct since the implicit definitions involved are theory-dependent and, equally importantly, what may be the most appropriate conceptualization for one group of specialists may not be so for another. The question of what ought to count as X for a particular language community is a normative and prescriptive question; what we consider X to be “really” is the result of our answer, not its cause.

Definitions proffered by scientists may serve different interests than those put forth by nonscientists, but they serve interests nonetheless. Typically “scientific” interests can be described as those “internal” to the language community to which a scientist belongs. How well a definition serves the shared purposes of the community might be discussed in terms of coherence with other concepts, clarity, amenability to quantification, or other predictive and explanatory interests. Intentionally or otherwise, “external” interests are also served by scientific definitions, from deciding what is “death” to determining who is “male” or “female” to delineating what should be called “rape.” Both internal and external interests are involved in the dispute over the authorized definition of “wetland.”¹

Though words such as bog, marsh, and swamp have been in use for centuries, the collective term *wetland* “came into broad usage only during the late 1960s and early 1970s”

¹ There is more involved in the dispute over federal regulations regarding wetlands than the issue of definition. For example: Does a ban of development on a privately owned wetland constitute an uncompensated “taking” by the federal government? Are the costs and delays involved in getting a development permit

(Golet 1991, 635). Generally speaking, the term is used to denote areas “sufficiently saturated by water that only specially adapted plants can grow there. Saturation with water prevents oxygen from working its way into the soil and therefore creates conditions of no oxygen” (Tripp 1991, 203). Only *hydrophytes*, vegetation that has adapted to such anaerobic conditions, can survive in wetlands. Furthermore, because the soil in such areas is periodically or permanently saturated with water, it has higher than average moisture content and is classified as *hydric soil*. The degree or type of water saturation of an area is known as its *hydrology*. These three factors—hydrology, hydric soil, and hydrophytes—are the traditional defining characteristics of wetlands.

Wetlands are “open systems.” That is, wetlands interact with other ecological systems, such as groundwater tables and rivers, in a way that enhances the overall environment and, in particular, water quality. When water flows in and out of the wetland area, “sediments and other pollutants tend to remain, and the nutrients are converted into plants” (Tripp 1991, 195). Wetlands produce vegetation that photosynthesize at much higher rates than nonwetlands, which creates material vital to the aquatic food chain. A wide variety of plant and animal life flourish in wetlands. U.S. Representative Robert Davis summarizes the value of wetlands as follows:

Long perceived as wastelands with few redeeming characteristics, wetlands today are being recognized as valuable natural resources. They provide habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals, probably the most commonly recognized value of wetlands. But they have been shown to provide many other valuable functions such as the maintenance of water quality. They can retain, at least temporarily, nutrients that

reasonable? I set aside such issues in this analysis; though they are important, they are not directly relevant to the question of how “wetlands” ought to be defined.

would otherwise reach streams, rivers, or lakes and contribute to increased growth of algae. Sediments that are suspended in running water can also be removed by wetlands. Wetlands interconnected with the groundwater table can recharge groundwater while in other areas discharge groundwater. Wetlands also provide a valuable function by reducing the severity of floods. They are effective as a storage basin during times of heavy rainfall and ease in the flooding of rivers. Finally, wetlands provide a multitude of use for recreational activities; hunting, fishing, and a number of nonconsumptive uses of wetlands are enjoyed by many Americans (in U.S. Congress 1992, 2).

So-called “drier” wetlands are areas that are saturated for relatively short periods of time, but still serve some of the important ecological functions of wetlands. Ironically, “drier” wetlands are among the most valuable of wetland areas from an environmental perspective: “Many have a powerful intuition that the wetter the wetland the more valuable it is. This intuition is false” (Tripp 1991, 201). Among the valuable functions of “drier” wetlands are the following. **1)** They are particularly effective natural flood controls: “Their relative dryness gives them greater capacity to absorb floodwater. Their strong vegetation slows down floodwaters and limits their destructive force” (Tripp 1991, 201). **2)** They are especially useful filtration systems because they “trap and absorb pollutants *before* runoff can mix with deeper waters. Scientific studies have confirmed that many drier wetlands provide the most effective treatment of water quality” (Tripp 1991, 201). **3)** Certain animals can live in shallow wetland areas when the “wetter” wetlands become too deep: “Loss of these areas leaves these animals nowhere to go in periods of high water” (Tripp 1991, 201). **4)** During dry periods, a good deal of plant and tree growth occurs. Then, during seasonal or temporary

periods of saturation and flooding, certain plant material is carried into deeper waters where it becomes an important food supply for various fish species. In sum, certain wetlands appear to be “dry” much of the time. Nonetheless, the saturation they receive is sufficient to facilitate valuable ecological functions that distinguish them from nonwetlands.

Specific definitions of “wetlands” differed somewhat from state to state when the term first became popularized in the late 1960s. It was not until the mid-1970s that efforts were made to produce a standardized definition that could be used nationwide (Golet 1991, 635). Virtually from the beginning, those most interested in defining “wetlands” were interested in identifying and preserving the ecological functions of wetlands. In strictly academic settings, conflicting definitions can coexist without serious problem (for example, in rival textbooks). It is assumed that there is sufficient overlap in the competing definitions that no harm results from a lack of strict uniformity. Besides, normally no one in academic settings has the authority to declare *one* specific definition to be that which everyone in a given discipline must follow. Public laws, on the other hand, are aimed at precisely this sort of denotative conformity. Section 404(f) of the 1977 Clean Water Act was designed to halt widespread wetland destruction. The subsequent definitions put into service by the relevant federal agencies after that point in time were backed by the power of federal law. In 1979, a standard ecological definition was published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

[W]etlands are lands where saturation with water is the dominant factor determining the nature of soil development and the types of plant and animal communities living in the soil and on its surface. The single feature that most wetlands share is soil or substrate that is at least periodically saturated with or covered by water. The water creates severe physiological problems for all plants and animals except those that are

adapted for life in water or in saturated soil (Cowardin et al. 1979, 3).

Such a definition mentions all three factors mentioned previously: hydrology (wetness), hydric soil, and hydrophytes. While the temporary or permanent presence of water is what makes a given area a wetland ecology, the total amount of water *on* and *in* the soil varies tremendously over the seasons and is very difficult to document directly. Accordingly, the 1979 definition, like most of those to follow, defines “wetlands” as areas that have any *one* of three features: wetland vegetation, soil, or hydrology:

For the purposes of this classification, wetlands must have one or more of the following three attributes: (1) at least periodically, the land supports predominantly hydrophytes, (2) the substrate is predominantly undrained hydric soil, and (3) the substrate is nonsoil and is saturated with water or covered by shallow water at some time during the growing season of each year (Cowardin et al. 1979, 3).

Because the amount of water necessary to produce wetlands is highly variable and difficult to measure, most efforts to define “wetlands” throughout the 1980s focussed on hydric soil and hydrophytes. Hydric soils have been defined as those that receive sufficient saturation to produce anaerobic conditions—conditions that sharply limit the types of vegetation and animal life that can live in or on the soil. Hydrophytes are those plants that have adapted to such anaerobic conditions. A specific list of hydrophytes was drafted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1977 and has been reviewed and updated many times since (Golet 1991, 637).

Based on these early ecological definitions, it has been estimated that wetlands in the contiguous states are being destroyed by natural and human causes at a rate of nearly 300,000 acres annually. If present trends continue, an additional 4,250,000 acres of wetlands will be

lost between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Department of the Interior 1990, 13). Given that approximately 56% of wetlands have already been lost over the past two centuries (Dahl 1990), the cumulative losses are enormous:

Society pays for the loss of wetlands in very direct ways. Wetland losses increases the need for water treatment facilities and multi-billion dollar flood control projects.

Wetland losses also represent the loss of habitats of animals and plants of aesthetic, commercial, recreational, and medicinal value. Society pays for the loss of wetlands that had helped replenish and cleanse bays, estuaries, and rivers that contribute significantly to the spawning and rearing of hundreds of estuarine, anadromous, and oceanic species valued by commercial and recreational fishermen (U.S. Department of Interior 1990, 15).

During the 1980s, four different Federal agencies had jurisdiction relevant to the regulation of wetlands: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Army Corps of Engineers (CE), and the Agriculture Department's Soil Conservation Service (SCS). All four had the legislative or administrative power to define "wetlands" according to their respective needs and interests. As noted by Max Peterson of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies: "At one time Fish and Wildlife Service had a *habitat* classification. Soil Conservation Service had a *soils* classification, and other agencies had a definition based on *water presence*" (U.S. Congress 1992, 43; emphasis added). Each of these regulatory bodies had the statutory or administrative power to designate specific areas as "wetlands" and to affect peoples' behavior accordingly. For example, according to the so-called "Swampbuster" provision of the 1985 Food Security Act, farmers wishing to sell wetland acreage to commercial

developers first must obtain a federal permit. If the acreage is classified as “wetlands,” according to federal definitions, the permit can be denied.

Just how disparate the different federal regulatory agencies’ definitions of “wetlands” were, prior to 1989, is a matter of some dispute. Though some contend that the various agencies used “very similar approaches” (Tripp 1991, 199), others complain that the lack of standardized methods “resulted in inconsistent determinations of wetland boundaries” (EPA, et al. 1991, 40449). To ensure a reasonable degree of uniformity, the four responsible federal agencies began a series of meetings beginning in early 1988 to produce a standardized manual for delineating wetlands. In January 1989 the Federal Interagency Committee for Wetland Delineation published the *Federal Manual for Identifying and Delineating Jurisdictional Wetlands* (hereafter *Manual*). According to Francis C. Golet, a professor of Natural Resources Science who has been involved in wetlands research for over twenty years, “the 1989 Manual represents the culmination of nearly 17 years of efforts by wetland scientists, soils experts, and land managers from throughout the country. It also represents a consensus of the four leading wetland management/regulatory agencies” (1991, 639).

Like most federal regulations, the 1989 *Manual* received both praise and criticism from those most directly affected. Critics charge that the *Manual* significantly broadened the definition of “wetlands” such that millions of acres previously *not* considered “wetlands” would now be so designated (EPA, et al. 1991, 40450). Those who defend the *Manual* point out that it did *not* “initiate a significant revision to prior existing standards. Like the other manuals, it most heavily emphasized evidence of soil types and vegetation, and used the limited available evidence of hydrology (of wetness) primarily as a means of verifying the evidence provided by soils and vegetation” (Tripp 1991, 199). Defenders of the *Manual*

agree that there have been problems implementing the relevant federal regulations, but argue that the definition of “wetlands,” itself, is consistent with years of experience and needs no revision (Environmental Defense Fund 1992). The implementation of federal regulation concerning wetlands, like all public policy procedures, requires an on-going process of negotiation and mutual adjustment between regulators and those regulated. If not for the campaign rhetoric of George Bush during the 1988 presidential election, hammering out the details concerning the appropriate regulatory definition of “wetlands” very well might have remained a matter of interest solely to specialists. As a result of campaign promises made in the fall of 1988—promises repeated after Bush took office—how to define “wetlands” became a controversy of nationwide attention and interest.

As part of a bid to be known as “the environmental president,” Bush promised in the 1988 presidential election that he would commit his administration to the goal of “no net loss” of wetlands. In October of 1988, as part of a candidate forum in the magazine *Sports Afield*, Bush stated: “My position on wetlands is straightforward: All existing wetlands, no matter how small, should be preserved” (in Paugh 1988, 15). Following his election, in a speech before members of Ducks Unlimited in June of 1989, Bush proclaimed that “any vision of a kinder, gentler America—any nation concerned about its quality of life, now and forever, must be concerned about conservation” (1989, 860). Noting that “our wetlands are being lost at a rate of nearly half a million acres a year,” Bush reaffirmed his commitment to “no net loss”:

You may remember my pledge, that our national goal would be no net loss of wetlands. And together, we are going to deliver on the promise of renewal, and I plan to keep that pledge. . . . Wherever wetlands must give way to farming or development,

they will be replaced or expanded elsewhere. It's time to stand the history of wetlands destruction on its head. From this year forward, anyone who tries to drain the swamp is going to be up to his ears in alligators (1989, 861).

Bush described the protection of the environment as “a moral issue. For it is wrong to pass on to future generations a world tainted by present thoughtlessness” (1989, 862).

Encouraging his audience to judge their actions in light of the verdict of future generations, Bush asked those present to imagine what might be said forty years from now:

It could be they'll report the loss of many million acres more, the extinction of species, the disappearance of wilderness and wildlife. Or they could report something else. They could report that sometime around 1989 things began to change and that we began to hold on to our parks and refuges and that we protected our species and that in that year the seeds of a new policy about our valuable wetlands were sown, a policy summed up in three simple words: “No net loss.” And I prefer the second vision of America's environmental future (1989, 862).

The efforts to codify the different federal definitions of “wetlands” began in early 1988, well before Bush was elected president. Nevertheless, by making “no net loss” a centerpiece of his administration's environmental policy, Bush energized governmental efforts to protect wetlands. As Congressperson Gerry E. Studds noted, “this is the first instance I know of where campaign rhetoric rises to the level of statutory law. No loss of wetlands originated in a campaign speech; to my knowledge, it is not the law” (U.S. Congress 1992, 31). In his 1990 budget statement Bush reiterated the goal of “no net loss.” The U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a “wetlands action plan” in 1990 that was titled *Wetlands: Meeting the President's Challenge*;

the publication prominently quoted the above cited passages from Bush's speech before Ducks Unlimited. Congressional hearings were held in part to explore ways in which to meet the president's goal of "no net loss" of wetlands (U.S. Congress 1989). The responsible federal agencies already were committed to enforcing existing statutory regulations requiring the protection of the nation's wetlands; their efforts to produce a unified *Manual* for delineating "wetlands" was part of that on-going effort. Bush's policy of "no net loss" created heightened awareness of such federal efforts so that when wetland protection came into conflict with other policy objectives, public controversy was virtually inevitable.

The goal of "no net loss" probably was deemed a politically viable promise because it sounds flexible and absolutist at the same time; thereby placating environmentalists who demand commitment and pro-growth developers who want flexibility. Thus, environmentalists tend to emphasize the *no loss* part of the promise, while developers emphasize *no net* loss. In practice, however, the effort to placate both constituencies proved impossible. Congressional hearings held in 1989, 1990, and 1991 document that pressure was mounting from both directions. On one hand, Bush's call for "no net loss" generated considerable enthusiasm for protecting wetlands. Almost all policy-makers endorsed the goal, the only question was how to implement it. When is it appropriate, for example, to drain a valuable wetland in one location with the expectation that another wetland will be created elsewhere? Pressure mounted on the different regulatory agencies to articulate clearly how they would meet the President's challenge for "no net loss." On the other hand, the coincidental pledge for "no net loss" and the publication of the official *Manual* to delineate wetlands galvanized opponents of federal environmental regulation. Opposition to the protection of wetlands comes most often from farmers wanting to sell their land and from

developers wishing to buy, drain, and develop wetlands. They argued that the regulatory agencies had run amuck, applying the label “wetlands” much too broadly, and that regulators were not taking into adequate consideration local economic needs.

The Bush administration found itself in a dilemma: Either Bush could lessen his commitment to “no net loss,” thereby breaking a highly visible and useful campaign promise, or he could stand by the promise and risk alienating pro-business, pro-development constituents. Bush’s “solution” was simple and, had it worked, politically ingenious. In January of 1990, White House Press Secretary Fitzwater announced that “At the President’s direction, the Domestic Policy Council, which has created a task force on wetlands, is in the process of examining how best to implement the President’s goal of no net loss” (Bush 1990b, 73). “How best to implement the President’s goal of no net loss” turned out to be a proposed redefinition of “wetlands.” By sharply narrowing the scope of the regulatory agencies’ definition of wetlands, Bush would be able to claim that he kept his promise of “no net loss” of wetlands while allowing for the development of areas previously designated wetlands.

In August of 1991, the four agencies charged with protecting wetlands published in the *Federal Register* a document entitled “‘Federal Manual for Identifying and Delineating Jurisdictional Wetlands’; Proposed Revisions” (EPA, et al. 1991). Though bearing the name of the relevant regulatory agencies, the document was produced under the direction of the Vice President’s taskforce on wetlands and was intended to be codified as a Presidential Executive Order with the force of law. The “Proposed Revisions” were presented and explained as a clarification and refinement of the 1989 *Manual*, but in effect the revisions represented a major departure from the *Manual*’s procedures for delineating wetlands. The

practical result of the proposed redefinition, if implemented, would be to decrease dramatically the amount of acreage that could be designated protected wetlands. The most modest estimate is that “as much as a third of the 38.4 million hectares (95 million acres) of wetlands in the lower 48 states will be considered wetlands no more and thus will be vulnerable to development” (Lemonick 1991, 53). The Environmental Defense Fund’s extensive study of the effects of the proposed changes to the *Manual* suggests that an even larger percentage—50% or roughly 50 million acres—of land previously designated “wetlands” would be excluded by the proposed redefinition (1992, x). Their estimate corresponds to that by the National Wetlands Technical Council, a group of “independent wetlands scientists” (U.S. Congress 1992, 661-63).

There are two primary differences between the 1989 *Manual* (which represents the traditional practices of delineating wetlands) and the Bush administration’s proposed redefinition. First, where the 1989 *Manual* allowed an area to be designated a wetland if any one of several criteria were met clearly, the 1991 redefinition require that all three criteria (hydrology, hydric soil, hydrophytic vegetation) be met and proved independently. Second, the specific standards by which each criteria is judged was made much more stringent. For example, the 1989 *Manual* required seven consecutive days of inundation or saturation “at or near the surface,” while the 1991 redefinition more than doubled the length of time necessary (15 to 21 days) and specified water *at the surface*, not just near it.

The codification of definitions of “wetlands” in the 1989 *Manual* was implemented by the relevant federal agencies without additional authorization by the White House or Congress, and without inviting public comment. The *Manual* was considered a “technical guidance document which is not required by law to go through Administrative Procedure Act

rulemaking procedures” (EPA, et al. 1991, 40446). In other words, the relevant federal agencies were empowered to enforce the *Manual’s* definition of “wetlands” without additional authority, since the power to regulate wetlands was given already under current federal law. Opponents of wetland regulation responded in two ways. First, a rider was successfully attached to the Energy and Water Development and Appropriations Act of 1992 that cut off funding for further delineation of “wetlands” using the 1989 *Manual*. The action temporarily disempowered the federal agencies from requiring conformity to the *Manual’s* definition. Second, opponents criticized the agencies for creating and enforcing the “new” definition without inviting public comment. The Bush administration could have enforced the 1991 proposed redefinition by Executive Order or through the same input-free process that the 1989 *Manual* was adopted. However, having criticized the federal agencies for having acted without inviting public comment, the administration felt compelled to extend such an invitation regarding the proposed redefinition (EPA, et al. 1991, 40446; see also Hilts 1991, 10). The response was overwhelming: over 10,000 documents were sent to the EPA, requiring the agency to hire an outside consulting firm to collate the input provided.

Though not without supporters, the proposed redefinition was met mostly with intense opposition and condemnation. *Sierra* magazine claimed that the administration’s “evisceration of existing wetlands policies demonstrates—more conclusively than any previous actions in this arena—the abandonment” of the “no net loss” pledge (Pope 1991, 22). The Bush administration’s proposed redefinition “broke his most specific campaign pledge” (Pope 1991, 23). The redefinition was seen as a cynical ploy: “A teensy redefinition of what constitutes a wetland, and presto—the administration jeopardizes 30 million acres of them, an area about the size of New York state” (Dworetzky 1992, 9). The Associated Press

reported that “Government wetlands experts have concluded that the Bush administration’s proposed redefinition of the term is unworkable, unscientific and would leave ‘many obvious wetlands’ unprotected” (“Papers” 1991, 7). By late November of 1991, criticism from inside and outside of the administration had grown so intense that a spokesperson for the President’s Competitiveness Council admitted that the proposed redefinition would have to be revised “to honor President Bush’s 1988 campaign pledge” (Hilts 1991, 1).

Before discussing the specific arguments lodged against the administration, I want to draw attention to a rhetorical strategy that emerged in the criticisms that is particularly relevant. The proposed redefinition was branded “political” and contrasted to the current “scientific” definition. Representative Lindsay Thomas complained that policy-makers had no business defining “wetlands”: “The problem is not how to define wetlands. That is a science” (U.S. Congress 1992, 24). Similarly, scientist Francis C. Golet suggested that “the definition of wetland is wholly a scientific issue.” Though political input is unavoidable, “in matters of science, such as the definition of wetland, scientific arguments must prevail” (U.S. Congress, 1992, 640, 654). The image of an objective, bias-free science was invoked frequently to help justify continuing the 1989 *Manual’s* definition as opposed to the administration’s proposed redefinition. James T. B. Tripp, general counsel to the Environmental Defense Fund, ended his testimony to Congress as follows:

The attack on wetlands programs has proceeded from a number of factual misconceptions. The proposed revisions to the manual represent this callous approach to science taken to an extreme—as nonscientists believed they could draw up a manual that would be usable and would accurately cross of some unarticulated category of wetlands that did not perform important functions. The need for more

dispassionate, unbiased science has rarely been greater on any environmental issue. I urge this Committee to make an important priority the assurance that accurate science guide public policy on this issue (U.S. Congress 1992, 208).

In light of the fact that few, if any, scientists engaged with environmental studies were willing to support the administration's proposed redefinition, it is tempting to interpret the dispute in the simple terms of Politics (subjective and biased) versus Science (objective and unbiased). As an editorial in *The New York Times* put it: "Mr. Bush's scientists have one definition of what a wetland is, his political advisers another" ("Back in the Bog" 1991, 20). Consistent with contemporary philosophical pragmatism, however, I believe that we are better off without such a dichotomy (Rorty 1991, 46-62). Pragmatically, the dispute over defining "wetlands" is understood as a matter of *competing interests*. When science and politics are treated as wholly distinct, the tendency is to slip into the rhetoric of "real definitions." "A wetland is a wetland is wetland," as one environmentalist put it (Seligmann 1991, 49). Real definitions, for those who believe in them, ought to be provided by those who are most expert with respect to the slice of Reality being defined. Reality is to be defined by the experts—By Those Who Know, just as Plato would have suggested. "The natural sciences, given the frequent presence of a scholarly consensus on the means and ends of inquiry, often approximate the rational ideal of definition," notes political scientist Peter C. Sederberg (1984, 94). If we accept this stereotype, then it is an easy step to granting definitional hegemony to a technocratic elite. One witness to a congressional hearing on wetland protection claimed that "the 1991 revisions represent a knee jerk reaction to political pressure rather than reason" (U.S. Congress 1992, 244). Another witness suggested that the definition of wetlands "probably needs to be turned over to the National Academy of Science

because an independent objective standard needs to be used” (U.S. Congress 1992, 62-63). The problem with such a solution is that it turns “experts” into a technocratic ruling elite. “These technocrats,” Sederberg observes, “would be the functional equivalent of the philosopher kings” (1984, 57). Rather than relegating the task of defining reality to philosopher kings, I believe a more productive and ethical route is to see definitional disputes as a matter of competing interests, while insisting that some interests are better than others. Accordingly, the questions to ask are whose interests are being served by a particular definition, and do we want to identify with those interests?

In the case of “wetlands,” the competing interests are fairly easy to identify and to contrast. In the simplest of terms, the 1989 *Manual*’s definitions represent the interests of ecologists; in contrast, critics argue that the proposed redefinition of wetlands is “devised by developers, timber companies, and highway departments” (Pope 1991, 23). Just how fair and accurate such a simple contrast may or may not be is illustrated by looking at the more specific interests identified in arguments for and against the proposed redefinition. The most thorough critique was provided by the Environmental Defense Fund (hereafter EDF). Together with the World Wildlife Fund, the EDF published *How Wet Is a Wetland?: The Impacts of the Proposed Revisions to the Federal Wetlands Delineation Manual* in January of 1992. According to the EDF, forty scientists and specialists were involved in preparing the 175 page report. EDF claims that “an estimated 50 percent of America’s remaining wetlands” would be excluded by the proposed redefinition (1992, x). The long-term result would be “severe environmental and economic impacts.” The report identifies five specific areas of harm: flooding, water quality, biological diversity, waterfowl, and fisheries. In each area, EDF directly challenges the administration’s belief that only “wet” wetlands deserve

protection. As noted earlier, “drier” wetlands sometimes protect the most important ecological interests served by wetlands. EDF notes that the proposed redefinition’s criteria for determining hydrology “has virtually no relevance to flood control.” In fact, “compared to the more permanently flooded wetlands, the wetlands excluded by the proposed manual actually have greater capacity to detain floodwaters because they are less likely to be filled with water before the flood event” (1992, x). A specific example demonstrates the costs of the new definition:

In the eastern portion of DuPage County, Illinois, the loss of wetlands has led to frequent severe flooding that caused \$120 million in damages in 1987 and will cost up to \$50,000 per damaged residence to remedy. The proposed manual would exclude 86 percent of the similar kinds of wetlands in the western portion of the county—an area that today retains many wetlands and suffers from little flooding (1992, x-xi).

The reports proceeds to document similar harms to water quality, biological diversity, waterfowl, and fisheries. In each area of harm the report specifies the sort of damage that would occur if the new definition were utilized. The problems described are precisely those identified in documents such as the Department of the Interior’s *Wetlands: Meeting the President’s Challenge* and discussed by Bush himself in addresses such as the one given to Ducks Unlimited in 1989. The difference is that EDF documents, in detail, how much of the damage from loss of wetlands comes from the loss of so-called “drier” wetlands that the proposed redefinition was designed to exclude.

The arguments set forth by EDF are openly pragmatic. There is little or no effort to invoke the sort of circular rhetoric typically associated with “real definitions.” Though chapter one is titled “What are wetlands?” the answer is pragmatic and functional. EDF notes

that “because wetlands are diverse, few generalizations about them are always true” (1992, 2). Instead of looking for unchanging qualities or an essential nature of wetlands, EDF identifies the valuable ecological functions that various sort of wetlands serve. The current definition, fueled from the beginning by ecological interests, ought to be preserved because the consequences of the proposed redefinition are undesirable. EDF rejects what they call “the misconception that only areas that are wet at the surface for extended periods are ‘real’ or ‘valuable’ wetlands” (1992, xiii). In the process of defending the claim that “wetter wetlands are not better wetlands,” EDF does not adopt the position that there are real versus apparent wetlands, but instead focuses on the many valuable functions such lands perform and notes that surface hydrology—the primary defining characteristic of the proposed revisions—has little to do with such functions.

Interestingly enough, both sides in the wetlands definition controversy are interested in producing a definition that will delineate wetlands accurately, consistently, and predictably. Both sides want, in other words, *denotative conformity* with respect to the word “wetlands” for the purpose of enforcing current statutes regarding wetlands. Accuracy, consistency, and predictability are often considered “scientific” values (Kuhn 1977, 320-39). Indeed, in the proposed redefinition the Environmental Protection Agency claims that “Of paramount importance to us. . . is to maintain and improve the scientific validity of our delineation methods” (1991, 40446). In a general sense, then, both sides are interested in their definition being considered “scientific.” When critics of the proposed redefinition call it “unscientific,” as they often have, to what are they referring? The scientists who have charged the administration with being “unscientific” are not *merely* interested in accuracy, consistency, and predictability. They *also* want to continue to study and protect wetlands for

their ecological significance. Being “unscientific” in this context translates as “abandoning what scientists have been doing with respect to wetlands.” Accordingly, when a scientist such as Francis Golet charges that the redefinition “disregards more than 15 years of scientific research” (U.S. Congress 1992, 639), I believe his criticism is best understood as a complaint that the redefinition breaks faith with those responsible for many years for our understanding of the ecological importance of wetlands, and abandons the values and interests that current statutes were drafted to protect. The EDF’s studies concerning the amount of loss of wetlands protection suggest that the EDF is, in fact, able to utilize the new definition to delineate wetlands accurately, consistently, and predictably. The problem with the new definition is not so much that it is “unscientific” in general, but rather in particular because it abandons the values and interests of scientists traditionally associated with the study of wetlands.

The interests pursued by those in favor of the proposed redefinition are fairly straightforward. Organizations such as the Tidewater Builders Association, the Forest Farmers Association, the National Association of Homebuilders, Weyerhaeuser Company, Associated Builders and Contractors, and the National Association of Realtors testified before Congress in favor of the administration’s proposed redefinition. In fact, the National Association of Realtors noted that they had advocated the policy in early 1989 “that *all three parameters* (which include hydrophytic vegetation, hydric soils and hydrology) be utilized in delineation of a wetland”—precisely the policy proposed by the Bush administration (U.S. Congress 1992, 368; emphasis in original). The arguments offered by such organizations boil down to one basic complaint: the 1989 *Manual* prevents people from developing land in the manner of their choosing. As a result, the right to use one’s property profitably is obstructed

by federal regulations that these developers feel “go too far.” A representative of the Tidewater Builders Association complained that real estate “estimated at \$50 billion” potentially met the *Manual’s* criteria for wetlands and thus could not be developed (U.S. Congress 1992, 60). A county commissioner from Georgia claimed that “economic growth has been drastically curtailed” by the 1989 *Manual*: “Engineers, architects, home builders, developers, contractors and their employees were impacted” (U.S. Congress 1992, 226).²

² These claims are challenged explicitly by members of The Georgia Conservancy (see U.S. Congress 1992, 398-402).

A related and persistent justification for the proposed redefinition is that the 1989 *Manual* drastically expanded the amount of land regulated as wetlands. The argument is controversial; as noted earlier, environmentalists as well as government officials claim that such accusations are ungrounded and are the result of misunderstandings that subsequently have been clarified (EDF 1992, 13-18). Nonetheless, advocates of the proposed redefinition consistently argued that the 1989 *Manual* expanded protection to far too many areas that are not “true” wetlands. Robert W. Slocum of the North Carolina Forestry Association argued that “identifying dry land that has no resemblance to *true* wetland ecosystems as ‘wetlands’ only confuses the public and the landowners and hinders protection of *true* wetlands” (U.S. Congress 1992, 109). Slocum praised the administration’s proposal as offering “a more *realistic* definition” that protects “*true* wetland ecosystems” (U.S. Congress 1992, 113). Similarly, the National Association of Realtors stated that they were “pleased with the consensus definition of protected wetlands reached by the Bush administration, which more accurately and clearly defines a *true* wetland” (U.S. Congress 1992, 366). More often than not, advocates of the proposed redefinition expressed their belief that “true” or “real” wetlands still would be protected (see, e.g., U.S. Congress 1992, 336, 367, 386). Explicitly or implicitly the 1989 *Manual* was condemned for protecting lands that are not “really” and “truly” wetlands.

I have argued previously at length that such dissociative claims in defense of a definition are circular and unhelpful. To claim that one definition is superior to another because it captures what is “really and truly” a wetland simply avoids the pragmatic question of what ought to count as a wetland for the purposes of federal regulation. Typically, advocates of the proposed redefinition rely on a “wetter is better” logic. The Delaware

Council of Farm Organizations, for example, argued that “farmers are not, in general, opposed to protecting wetlands; that is land that is *truly wet*” (U.S. Congress 1992, 409). The problem with such arguments is that they fail to clash with the case offered by ecologists concerning the value of so-called “drier” wetlands. Rather than invoking the dichotomies of “true” versus “false” wetlands, or “scientific” versus “political” definitions, a more productive discussion would focus on the relative costs and benefits of protecting the lands included by the 1989 *Manual* and excluded by the proposed redefinition. Such a discussion is precisely what the EDF offers in *How Wet Is a Wetland?* (1992). The pragmatic question is, therefore, whether the benefits of protecting the disputed lands are considered more important or valuable than maintaining the property rights of those who own them and wish to profit by developing them. So far, the values and interests expressed and implied by existing legislation would warrant the conclusion that the answer be “yes.”

Even setting aside the question of which interests are more important to protect, the Bush administration’s attempt at redefinition was logically inconsistent as well as ethically suspect. Bush’s early declarations about wetlands, in his role as “the environmental president,” depend on traditional definitions of wetlands. For example, in his statements about the quantity of wetlands being lost each year, he relies on statistics that utilize a definition of “wetlands” codified in the 1989 *Manual*. Yet his later statements clearly back away from standard definitions. While insisting that “I am committed to no net loss of wetlands,” Bush also insisted that “I am not committed to decisions that take productive land out of production.” He complained that “you’ve got zealots in various levels of the bureaucracy” that require control “from the top on down” (1990a, 632). Bush effectively abandoned his identification with the agencies charged with protecting wetlands who had

been working toward a consistent definition of “wetlands” for over a dozen years. In so doing, he rejected his previous alignment with the interests those agencies represent. During 1992 Bush repeatedly insisted that he was committed to “no net loss” of wetlands, but backed off the traditional definition: “I think what happens during some periods, some of the bureaucrats in our regulatory agencies started defining the wetland problem in a way that really overdefines it. There was not a legitimate wetland we were trying to preserve” (1992a, 971). Not surprisingly, Bush relies on the rhetoric of real definition to defend the revised policy. When speaking to an agricultural organization with pro-development sentiments, Bush made his interests clear:

My direction to Vice President Quayle’s Council on Competitiveness was to protect environmentally sensitive wetlands and protect the property rights of landowners. I’ve asked the board [of the Farm Bureau Federation] to send in specific recommendations during this hearing period. Our new guidelines will distinguish between *genuine* wetlands which deserve to be protected and *other* kinds of land, *including your farmlands* (1992c, 83; emphasis added).

Noting that “the extreme environmentalists are not happy” with his new wetlands policy, Bush claimed that the answer is “to try to balance all of these interests” (1992b, 1177). Yet by dramatically narrowing the standard definition of “wetlands,” Bush clearly tipped the balance away from environmental interests. Complaining again that “we were too far over between the Corps [of Engineers] and EPA on the regulatory side,” Bush warned that we must “be wary of the extremes” (1992b, 1177). His own definition is simple and direct: “I’ve got a radical view of wetlands. I think wetlands ought to be wet” (1992b, 1177). By identifying himself with the “wetter is better” criteria espoused in the proposed

redefinition, Bush explicitly distanced himself from the environmental interests reflected in the traditional definition upon which his pro-environmental statements depend. It is ironic but fitting that Ducks Unlimited—the very organization before which Bush gave his most important and influential wetlands address—came to oppose the proposed redefinition (U.S. Congress 1992, 88-90, 311-27). That Bush's attempts to balance interests were unpersuasive is suggested by a steady decline in approval rates of his handling of environmental issues. In March of 1991, at the peak of his popularity as president, Bush had a 52 percent approval rate for his handling of environmental issues. By June of 1992, that rate had fallen to 29 percent with 58 percent of those polled expressing disapproval (Saad 1992, 1).

I conclude with two comments about the wetlands controversy. First, the dispute is a useful case study because it throws into relief how definitions are interest-driven and saturated with questions of power and persuasion. What makes “wetlands” unusual is the amount of media coverage the controversy has received. But the fact that definitions *matter*—that there are pragmatic and political results of our choices of definitions—is not unusual at all. Power to define is power to influence behavior. All proposed definitions are devised for specific purposes that can be evaluated according to the interests that they advance. And the success of any definition depends on how effectively its advocates persuade (or coerce) members of a given community to conform and use the term “properly.” In the case of “wetlands,” the Bush administration was unable to persuade enough regulators and citizens to support the proposed redefinition, and unwilling to coerce them to do so. Such disputes over the scope of government regulation highlight the political dimension of defining that is, I believe, ubiquitous.

Second, note that none of the interests identified so far need be classified as exclusively “scientific” or exclusively “political.” Scientists constitute a specific subset of society that is identifiable, in part, by their common interests and values. But interests and values they indeed have, and accordingly it sheds little light to describe such interests and values as “nonpolitical.” As noted in the cases of defining “death” and “rape,” a variety of social interests are advanced by achieving a level of denotative conformity with certain words. Thus, politicians and scientists share the goal of denotative conformity with respect to “wetlands.” The dream of escaping politics altogether and letting “experts” define tough concepts for us is a powerful one, but the dream potentially ends in a technocratic nightmare. If one considers the outcome of the wetlands controversy a happy ending, it is because one identifies with the interests of the winner. The results could have been otherwise; politics is responsible for what we now call “wetlands” and for what we will treat as “wetlands” forty years hence. Interests are always served by definitions: The only question is *which* interests. Prudence requires that, as a society, we learn to tell the difference between the definitional disputes that are exclusively “scientific,” in the sense that the outcome only affects the community of scientists, and those disputes that involve us all—scientists included. Both sorts of conflicts are political; recognizing them as such may prompt us to take greater responsibility for defining the reality we impose upon ourselves and others.

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