Tatev GYURJYAN
Yerevan State University

THE NOTION OF DEFINITION: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Philosophy and terminology, semantics and lexicography all study definition as a key concept. Each of these disciplines approaches the concept from a different angle. However, it is the comprehensive knowledge of all these aspects that reveals the essence of definition and leads to its creditable study. The present paper is an attempt to examine some of the focal philosophical ideas on the notion of definition. Since ancient times the process of defining definition has been a strenuous task and not all the theories proposed by philosophers were justified, yet each of them suggested a unique approach to the concept of definition and contributed to the development of the general theory.

Key words: philosophy, absolutely true/ universal theories, fallibilism, definition, species – differentia – genus

The concept of definition has been in the limelight of philosophical discussion ever since Plato and Aristotle. Ancient thinkers delved into sustained rumination to find the answer to a seemingly simple question – *What is so-and-so?*. Although they quite often reject some of their early ideas, their discussions are invaluable and have a great input in the later contemplation on the essence of definition.

Plato, Socrates's student and later Aristotle's teacher, presents ideas and viewpoints of ancient philosophers and their students in the form of dialogues. In his early writings one can observe Socrates propound ideas about the nature of definitions /Plato, 2000/. In particular, in *Theaetetus* by Plato, Theaetetus and Socrates come up with three types of definitions of knowledge /Plato, 360 BC/. The first one, as Theaetetus states, is that knowledge is perception. However, as mentioned in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Socrates himself falsifies this definition bringing twelve distinct objections some of which were considered trivial or comical, yet others were sufficiently grounded and served as profound arguments /Chappell, 2013/. The latter include the fact that one can describe the act of perceiving something as done *thoroughly* or *cursorily*, *clearly* or *vaguely*, however, the same adverbs are not commonly used to describe the act of knowing, which must have been the case if knowing was the same as perceiving. Another objection worth mentioning states that our mind is able to use a number of concepts which it could not have acquired through senses/ perception. Therefore, there is a part of thought or better to say knowledge which is not connected with perception, once again implying that knowledge is not perception.

Further discussion leads Theaetetus to come up with the second definition of knowledge which implies that knowledge is true judgement. Here Socrates claims that one cannot fully understand what true judgement is unless he/ she can explain what the false judgement is /Plato, 360 BC/. The second definition is also refuted

by Socrates by bringing the example of the jury in the courtroom who are being persuaded by the lawyer of what is plausibly his own opinion. Though Theaetetus believes that the lawyer might convince the jury of the truth, Socrates thinks that they will not have true knowledge as their judgement will be based on another person's persuasion, thus concluding that knowledge cannot be true judgement /see Giannopoulou, 2016/.

Theaetetus then comes up with the third definition of knowledge being true judgement with account. To explain it Socrates tells Theaetetus his dream about "primeval letters or elements" that do not have reason or explanation /Plato, 2000: 15/. But what does *account* mean? Throughout the dialogue three attempts of explaining it are made. Firstly, it is supposed to be "the image or expression of the mind in speech" /ibid.: 19/, in other words, it is "speech" itself which is considered insufficient by Socrates. Secondly, *account* implies deriving the meaning of the word as a whole through enumeration of its elements. But this attempt also fails as being able to enumerate the letters of the name *Theaetetus* does not ensure one's knowledge of both the syllables the name comprises and Theaetetus himself. Thirdly, Socrates mentions the marks or signs which distinguish one thing from another. He illustrates this explanation of *account* with the example of the sun being distinct from other heavenly bodies. But knowing the differences presupposes acquiring knowledge about it which is not a direct way of answering the initial question of what knowledge is /ibid./.

In this dialogue we can clearly see Socrates as a proponent of the theory of falsification. He, and later as we know Popper, use the knowledge of ignorance as a tool for elaboration of the knowledge of truth.

As for Aristotle, his reflections on the theory of definition are posed in a number of books, namely *Analytica Posteriora*, *Topics*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, etc., written in various periods of his life. In his works, Aristotle's main discussions dwell upon the notion of "essence" or "essential nature" of definition, which is "in every case universal and affirmative" /Aristotle, 2000a: 27/. First of all, let us go deeper into what *essence* is in Aristotelian rendering.

As mentioned in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Aristotle defines definition as "an account which signifies what it is to be for something" /see Smith, 2016/. It can be inferred from this formulation that a definition of an existing thing is not the description of its meaning – as in case of nominal definitions, but the statement of what it is. R. Smith later concludes that a definition, or in Aristotelian words, "what it is to be", is interpreted in today's terminology as essence /Smith, 2016/. So, in order to prove that nominal definitions, which denote only the meaning of the word, cannot signify essence, Aristotle gives several consequent reasons /Aristotle, 2000b: 81-82/. Firstly, nominal definitions can be easily used to define both beings and non-beings. However, it is possible to give "a real definition" only when defining beings that can be categorized. Secondly, if nominal definitions were valid, there would be no precise structure of a definition and all

linguistic chunks would be definitions, as any of them could be named. And finally, one cannot ascribe a completely specific meaning to a specific name as names are actually conventional /see Deslauriers, 1990: 19/. However, taking into account what has been mentioned above, if definition is considered to be identical with essence, only that what has essence is definable /Smith, 2016/. The latter is termed *species* by Aristotle, is included in the *genus* and has a unique *differentia* /Aristotle, 2000c: 58; see Berg, 1983: 21/. Here genus has a higher hierarchical rank, thus, being superior to species; and differentia denotes the characteristic feature which distinguishes one species from another. Aristotelian *differentia* is, in this respect, analogous to Socratian *marks* or *signs*.

Let us now turn to Aristotle's claim in *Analytica Posteriora* that "every definition is always universal and commensurate" /Aristotle, 2000a: 43/. He supports this idea by giving the following reason: a physician does not prescribe to the patient what only he thinks is healthy but what is generally acknowledged to be healthy by every physician or at least the determinate ones. Consequently, following his logic, it is more difficult to define the universal genera than single species, but quite plausible to reach the definition of the universal notion through defining several species /ibid./. Nevertheless, one should not ignore the existence of time which flows irrespective of anything. Consider the same physician prescribing medicine for the same illness half a century later. Wouldn't there be any advancement in this field over the decades?

At this point, we would like to refer to fallibilism – philosophical doctrine which holds that every theory in the empirical world and knowledge itself is fallible, that is to say, likely to fail or be imperfect. It follows that a theory justified today might be falsified in the future in the light of new evidence. Karl Popper, one of the proponents of fallibilism, writes in his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that "all universal theories, whatever their content, have zero probability" /Popper, 2005: 386/. By saying *universal* theories we infer *absolutely true* or *unchangeable* ones. To prove this claim it is notable to mention, Hakob Barseghyan's (professor of the history and philosophy of science at the University of Toronto) attempt to consider a hypothetical scientific community which "takes the currently accepted theory as the absolute truth" thus rejecting the need for any new theories in the given field /Barseghyan, 2012: 157/. This kind of imaginary community would leave no room for further scientific development and theory change.

It is our strong belief that absolutely true/ universal theories are very similar to Aristotelian formulation of universal definitions. If such definitions existed, there would be no semantic change, such as expansion or restriction, deterioration or amelioration of meaning, which, in fact, do exist. Therefore, we can conclude that universal definitions like universal theories do not exist, and it is just a matter of time to observe their change or falsification.

As N. Swartz states, Plato and Aristotle proposed a "theory of *real* definition" /Swartz, 1997/. From these ancient philosophers' point of view, words had a *true* or *correct* meaning expressed in definitions which existed in the "absolute metaphysical realm" /ibid./. Thus, this so-to-call *real* meaning is unique and universal in its form and independent of the word usage. Here N. Swartz suggests yet another way to contradict to Aristotelian universal definition. So according to the theory of *real* definition, various groups of language users, who assign this or that particular meaning to the same word, do not exist. For instance, let us consider the definitions of the word 'chips' for Americans and the British people. In American English 'chips' refers to "very thin slices of potato that have been fried until they are hard and crunchy and are eaten cold" /Collins Dictionary/ (one would use the word 'crisps' to express the same thing in British English). On the other hand, in British English, the word 'chips' denotes "long, thin pieces of potato that are fried in oil and eaten hot" /ibid./ also known as French fries. Wouldn't it be strange to ask for one *real* meaning of the word 'chips' ignoring the different uses of that word in British English and American English?

The question of defining definition also occurred to Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher of the seventeenth century. Trying to explain what definition means in his contemplations of the geometrical spirit, Pascal singles out the only type of definition recognized in geometry, namely – *definition of name*. He clarifies that the latter is "the arbitrary application of names to things which are clearly designated by terms perfectly known" /Pascal, 2007: 429/. So, definition of name or in other words, *geometrical definition*, is unique for the thing it designates, and the name given to it is randomly chosen and devoid of any other meaning unless otherwise wanted. If, nevertheless, the same name is given to two different things, Pascal suggests mentally substituting the definition with the thing being defined, and moreover, always keeping the definition so close to its 'definiendum' that when one of them is uttered the other is immediately recalled /ibid.: 430/.

Then, Pascal addresses words that do not need to be defined. These are the primitive words that denote the things they refer to so naturally that their explanation would rather be obscure than informative /Pascal, 2007: 431/. Considering Pascal's formulation of definition of name presented above, it becomes obvious that primitive words can be identified with the perfectly known terms used to define things. So it can be concluded from this interpretation that there is no need to define words which are already utterly known and understandable to the users.

Pascal also notes that there are words which are not capable of being defined /Pascal, 2007: 432/. These are the words that are defined with the help of those very words. For example, in order to define the word *being* it is necessary to use the expression *it is*, which actually means defining the word by the word itself. The word and its definition thus become a nonsensical tautology, which does not make sense and contradicts the main purpose of defining.

We agree that *geometrical definition* discussed by Blaise Pascal is precise and true but only within the scope of separate exact sciences. Yet, whenever the word being defined appears outside the bounds of a certain scientific field, it can acquire more than one meaning, and therefore have more than one definition. Consider the word *time*. According to Pascal, "definitions are only made to designate the things that are named, and not to show the nature of them" /Pascal, 2007: 433/, consequently everybody should relate the word *time* to a single concept directly linking the name to the thing. But this opinion holds true, until *time* is viewed at a larger scale having more than two dozens of different definitions as stated, for instance, in Collins Dictionary.

At the end of the seventeenth century a British philosopher and physician John Locke addresses the question of understanding language in *Book III: Of Words* of his monumental *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* /Locke, 2000/. One of the focal issues discussed in this book refers to classification. Here once more we come across the distinction between genera and species. In the Aristotelian rendering, as mentioned previously in our paper, species, which have a unique differentia, make up genus /Aristotle, 2000c: 58/. These components constituting a hierarchical classification, thus, ensure the essence of natural kinds. Locke rejects a number of aspects proposed by Aristotle, including (1) the belief that each individual has an essence besides being a species in the genus and (2) the statement that in nature there exists only one true classification of things which natural philosophers should discover. Locke claims that there are many plausible ways of classifying the world appropriate for this or that situation and purpose /see Uzgalis, 2016/.

It is important to note that Locke, like Pascal, thinks that "the names of simple ideas are not capable of any definitions" /Locke, 2000: 128/. He wittily points out that accepting all names as capable of being defined, would lead to a non-ending cycle of words-definitions-words. That is to say, the words or terms included in one definition could be defined by other definitions, which in their turn would contain words again definable by other definitions and so on. Thus, Locke poses the following question "Where at last should we stop?" /ibid./ and eventually suggests a sensible solution – some simple names cannot be defined.

In several chapters of his *Book III* Locke tries to explain the reason why simple ideas should not be defined or, better to say, could not be defined /Locke, 2000: 128-132/. He concludes that the latter can only be acquired by experience gained through perception of the objects denoted by the word. And only when we have the storage of these simple ideas in our minds can we define and by definition "understand the names of complex ideas" /ibid.: 132/.

As we can see, the seventeenth century was especially notable in Europe for the discussion of the word/ idea, its meaning and definition. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a German philosopher, mathematician, and logician, strived to create a *universal language* and had a significant input in understanding the nature of

human reasoning. Trying to create a structured universal language, Leibniz comes up with the idea that "cognition is essentially symbolic" /see Kulstad, Laurence, 2013/. In other words, the mental process of acquiring knowledge occurs in a system of structured lexical representations/ forms, which are closely connected with the content of the language. Consequently, analyzing and defining the link between the form and content one can categorize all human ideas into simpler, primitive concepts which are presented by symbols or signs. According to Leibniz, combining the latter into derivative, complex concepts will make it plausible to generate correct definitions and values /see ibid./. Thus an ideal/ universal language can be created as a unity of all these symbols which will perfectly represent every human concept.

In this respect, Leibniz's model of the *universal language* resembles Pascal's structure of *definition of name* with, maybe, the only difference being the relation between formal representations of lexical units (names) and concepts (things): cf. *intimate connection* between the form and content vs. *arbitrary* application of names to things. In one of his letters to Antoine Arnauld, Leibniz differentiates between *real* and *nominal* definitions, stating that the former is observed "when we know the possibility of the thing" and the latter when we do not /Leibniz, 2000: 147/. We can conclude that the nominal or, as Leibniz calls it, unreliable definition is similar to Pascal's definition of name where the relation of the name and thing is arbitrary. The real definition, on the other hand, consists of primitive notions which do not need to be defined, so they make the possibility of the thing defined absolutely apparent /ibid.: 151/.

Philosophy, as a fundamental study of the nature of reason, existence, and knowledge, sets the general outlines and principles of many sciences. While discussing the discipline of Pure Reason, German philosopher Immanuel Kant rightly states that even a mathematician cannot ignore the essentials of philosophy and stand superior to it. He mentions that mathematics, like other sciences, is based on definition, which is "the representation of complete conception of a thing within its own limits" /Kant, 2015/. Having a certain number of marks or signs attached to a definition one can never be sure of the truthfulness of an empirical concept, which is actually explained rather than defined. Kant prefers the usage of the word *exposition* to the word *definition*, hence avoiding the hesitation about the completeness of the analysis of any concept. He believes that the only concept always capable of being defined is the arbitrary one, as it is ascribed to the thing by a human being and does not depend either on nature of one's understanding or experience. On the other hand, Kant accepts that these definitions cannot be considered to define real objects rather to declare a project. This implies that only those concepts can be defined which have "an arbitrary synthesis and can be constructed a priori" /ibid./. Thus, he concludes that definitions exist in mathematics alone because thoughts in this science are presented a priory in intuition.

So, Kant considers that philosophical definitions are merely expositions or interpretations of the concepts. They are formed by analyzing things but their overall completeness can never be proved. Whereas mathematical definitions are formed by the mind through constructing concepts. These definitions are a result of synthesis /Kant, 2015/. Kant's standpoint of definitions tends to be as precise as mathematics itself.

The philosophical approaches to the notion of definition presented above are only several instances of the vast contemplation on the act of defining, its methods and types. Our general overview of the role of definition in philosophy lets us conclude that philosophers study definition from an epistemological point of view. Other fields of science, such as terminology, semantics, and pragmatics view definition from a different angle, thus offering diverse interpretations of the subject matter. From a lexicographical perspective, a definition currently serves its main purpose – it connects the concept with its lexical representation.

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S. ԳՅՈՒՐՋՅԱՆ – *Սահմանում հասկացությունը փիլիսոփայության դիտանկյունից.* – Սահմանումն առանցքային դեր ունի թե՛ փիլիսոփայության և տերմինաբանության, թե՛ իմաստաբանության և բառարանագրության մեջ: Այս գիտություններից յուրաքանչյուրն ուսումնասիրում է սահմանումը որույն տեսանկյունից, սակայն այդ բոլոր մոտեցումների համապարփակ իմացությունն է բացահայտում սահմանում հասկացության բուն էությունը: Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում են սահմանման վերաբերյալ փիլիսոփայության ոլորտում քննարկված մի շարք կարևոր տեսակետներ: Դեռևս հնագույն ժամանակներից սահմանելու արվեստը եղել է բարդ խնդիր, որի լուծումները ոչ միշտ են ճշմարիտ եղել, բայց յուրաքանչյուրն իր հերթին նպաստել ընդհանուր տեսության զարգացմանը:

Բանալի բառեր. փիլիսոփայություն, բացարձակ ճշմարիտ/ ունիվերսալ տեսություն, ֆալիբիլիզմ, բառի սահմանում, տեսակ – տարբերակիչ հատկանիշ – սեռ

Т. ГЮРДЖЯН – *Философский подход к определению.* – Определение – ключевое понятие в таких дисциплинах, как философия и терминология, семантика и лексикография. Каждая из этих областей знания подходит к этому понятию с разных точек зрения. Раскрытие сути определения возможно лишь при комплексном рассмотрении всех аспектов. В данной статье представлены наиболее значимые философские суждения о понятии определения. С древних времен процесс определения понятий представлял определенную сложность, и несмотря на то, что не все предложенные философами теории были доказательны, каждое суждение представляло уникальный подход к данному вопросу и по-своему способствовало развитию общей теории.

Ключевые слова: философия, абсолютно верные/ универсальные теории, фаллибилизм, определение слова, вид – отличительное свойство – род