

Lecture 24 – Real Definition

I. Real Definition: The Very Idea

When philosophers ask “What is piety?”/“What is knowledge?”/“What is justice?” Rosen takes them to be asking about the *real definition* (or *metaphysical analysis*, or *metaphysical reduction*) of piety/knowledge/justice itself, rather than asking about the *nominal definition* of the word ‘piety’/‘knowledge’/‘justice’.

Rosen’s central question: what is the real definition of real definition?

We can ask about the real definitions of items in any category (*objects, properties, connectives, quantifiers*, etc.), but here Rosen focus on the real definition of *properties* and *relations*, which he writes as follows:

$\text{Def}(F, \Phi)$.

In English: “To be F is to be Φ .” (Or: “Being F reduces to being Φ .”) (Or: “Being F consists in being Φ .”)

II. The Modal Account

The simplest proposal is that real definition is just a matter of necessary co-instantiation:

the modal account: $\text{Def}(F, \Phi)$ iff (necessarily, for all x , x is F iff x is Φ).

Rosen has three objections to this proposal:

- *It allows for trivial definitions.* For any F , we have $\text{Def}(F, F)$. So every property is definable.
- *It allows for definitional circles.* Necessarily, a thing is grue iff it is green-and-observed or blue-and-unobserved. And, necessarily, a thing is green iff it is grue-and-observed or bleen-and-unobserved. But we don’t want *being green* and *being grue* each to be defined partially in terms of the other, like so:

$\text{Def}(\text{grue}, \text{green-and-observed or blue-and-unobserved})$.
 $\text{Def}(\text{green}, \text{grue-and-observed or bleen-and-unobserved})$.

- *It allows for overly specific disjunctive definitions.* Let u_1, u_2, \dots be all the actual and possible uncles. Let $D_1(x), D_2(x), \dots$ be their complete descriptions in (say) physical terms. Then if physicalism about biological organisms is true, we will have:

Necessarily, for all x , x is an uncle iff $D_1(x)$ or $D_2(x)$ or \dots

But it is not plausible that we have:

$\text{Def}(\text{being an uncle}, \text{being } D_1(x) \text{ or } D_2(x) \text{ or } \dots)$.

III. The Essentialist Account

What if we appeal to essences instead of necessity? One natural way to do so is as follows:

the essentialist account: $\text{Def}(F, \Phi)$ iff (it is essential to *being* F that, for all x , x is F iff x is Φ).

Fine draws a close analogy between essence and real definition, but for Rosen these two notions are different. Rosen’s observation: even if negation is indefinable, it might still be essential to negation that if p , then $\neg\neg p$.

The essentialist account avoids the modal account’s first problem, but it might face versions of the other two:

- *It might allow for definitional circles.* Perhaps we have:
It essential to *being a cause of* that, for all x and y , x is a cause of y iff y is an effect of x .
It essential to *being an effect of* that, for all x and y , y is an effect of x iff x is a cause of y .
- *It might allow for overly specific disjunctive definition.* Perhaps we have:
It essential to *being prime* that, for all x , x is prime iff x is either 2 or 3 or 5 or \dots

Rosen suggests that we can avoid these two last problems by taking the notion of essence in the essential proposal to be *constitutive essence*, not *consequentialist essence*. (Does this help with the cause vs. effect example?) But even if the proposal is understood in that way, Rosen has two remaining objections to the proposal:

- *It blocks definitional expansion*. Plausibly we have:

It is essential to *being a square* that, for all x , x is a square iff x is an equilateral rectangle.

It is essential to *being a rectangle* that, for all x , x is a rectangle iff x is a right quadrilateral.

But Rosen thinks that, if we are working with constitutive essence, it is not plausible that we also have:

It is essential to *being a square* that, for all x , x is a square iff x is an equilateral right quadrilateral.

His worry: this would render the constitutive essence of squareness “implausibly redundant” (p. 197). (But why couldn’t this be part of the *mediate* constitutive essence of squareness?)

- *It makes definability rest on intractable issues*. On the essentialist proposal, *being F* is definable if we have:

It lies in the constitutive essence of *being F* that, for all x , x is F iff x is Φ .

But *being F* won’t be definable if instead we have both of the following:

It lies in the constitutive essence of *being F* that, for all x , if x is F , then x is Φ .

It lies in the constitutive essence of *being F* that, for all x , if x is Φ , then x is F .

IV. The Ground-Theoretic Account

We can avoid most of the problems encountered so far by defining definition in terms of grounding, like so:

the ground-theoretic account: $\text{Def}(F, \Phi)$ iff (necessarily, for all x , x is F iff, and because, x is Φ),

where ‘ p iff, and because, q ’ is shorthand for ‘if p , then p because q ; and if q , then p because q ’.

Rosen’s own preferred account is a hybrid of the essentialist and ground-theoretic accounts, namely:

Rosen’s proposal: $\text{Def}(F, \Phi)$ iff (it is part of the consequential essence of *being F* that, for all x , x is F iff, and because, x is Φ).

His reason for preferring this proposal: “the real definition of F is not just a necessary truth connecting F to its systematic ground, but a principle grounded in the nature of F itself” (p. 200). But if you’re “allergic to Fine’s essentialist idiom,” Rosen suggests that you could endorse the ground-theoretic proposal instead (p. 208, n. 26).

Features of Rosen’s proposal:

- *It excludes trivial definitions*. We cannot have $\text{Def}(F, F)$, since grounding is irreflexive.
- *It excludes definitional circles*. We cannot have $\text{Def}(F, G)$ and $\text{Def}(G, F)$, since grounding is asymmetric.
- *It excludes overly specific disjunctive definitions*. (Why?)
- *It allows for definitional expansion*. In such cases we have transitive grounding structures which are part of *being F*’s consequentialist essence.
- *It avoids making definability rest on intractable issues*. Here the fact that we are working with consequentialist rather than constitutive essence is supposedly key.

Something to think about: do we really want to rule out any kind of circularity in our definitions? Aren’t the following definitions both plausible?

For ϕ -ing to be required is for not- ϕ -ing to be not permitted.

For ϕ -ing to be permitted is for not- ϕ -ing to be not required.

It seems arbitrary to hold that one of these definitions is right and the other wrong. Yet if we apply Rosen’s proposal to both, we appear to get: [ϕ -ing is required] is grounded in [Not-not- ϕ -ing is not not required].