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DEFINITIONS VS. IDEAS

Mr. Van Vorhis Urges the Necessity for Ideas Rather Than Inflexible Definitions

Editor Independent: Frequently, in periodicals, I read articles written by earnest and thoughtful men that impress me with the difficulties in economic discussion occasioned by the inconsiderate use of words that, in the nature of language, are not precise in meaning. It is impossible for words to have such certain and specific meaning as some writers desire to give them.

Language, like everything related to human development, is an evolution. It has been evolved out of necessities, the results of conditions and circumstances. This is as true of words, and the meaning of them, in the development of language as it is of tools and the use of tools in the development of mechanics. Words have been loaded with uncertainty in meaning as much as have traditions and theories with errors. The want of precise meaning in words, or, to express it in another way, the various meanings and shades of meaning with which the same word is used, is the result of the same causes that have filled history with "traditions and theories" that are mixed and confused, or that have little basis of truth. The minds of men are warped "and made to fit" not only "notions," but words "that have come to us from the past."

In the evolution of language, we are approximating, I think, a more precise meaning in the use of words, but it is worth while in the discussion of any subject, particularly economics, to use words with the meaning justified by the best literature, but it must be remembered that ideas are not accurately conveyed by words alone, but by a proper combination and arrangement of them into language. In this way, and in this way only, can ideas be conveyed with even approximate correctness and precision. To fail to remember this is a fault from which, I am afraid, none of us, who attempt to write or speak, are as free as we ought to be. The writer, who attempts to give to certain words a fixed and definite meaning, usually fails to confine his use of the words to his own definitions, and generally succeeds in having the average reader misunderstand him.

It ought always to be remembered that no one writer or speaker can determine the meaning with which a word shall be used. If readers are expected to follow accurately our thoughts, we ought to use our words as they are generally used in the best literature. There is no other guide, and to follow this rule is the privilege of every writer. Even when we do this, there are words that we must necessarily use of which the meaning intended must be indicated by the construction of sentences or phrases.

It is a most unfortunate defect in a writing that aspires to be a work on economics, and which is accompanied by the announcement of a purpose to reconstruct the science, and which shows much labor and ability, when there occurs so frequently the unnecessary doubling of words, such as "resulting conclusions," "accepted along with," etc., or when words are used with such literary inaccuracy as the word "incapable" in "Many of the assumptions are incapable of verification," or as the word "collision" when it is asserted that a theory "comes in collision" with an assumption. Conclusions are always results. "Accepted with" is not made better by the addition of the word "along." It is of questionable literary accuracy to say Assumptions have no capacity, or that they can collide with theories. Nevertheless, these inaccuracies do not prevent the writer from being understood. If such use of the words is inaccurate, the language is still such that you get the idea intended to be expressed; and that, after all, is the important purpose to be attained. It is possible to express an idea clearly, so that there will be no misunderstanding about the meaning intended, by the use of words in a way not justified by literary accuracy.

There is very likely to be confusion and uncertainty when we begin the effort to confine too closely the meaning with which a word shall be used. If, in our use of words, we forget the latitude given to the meaning of them,

and try to confine them to some meaning of our own, we shall find ourselves, I think, not only to be misunderstood when we use them, but we will have prepared ourselves to misunderstand the valuable writings that make up what may be called the standard literature of the subject.

There are not many writers, who have attempted any very comprehensive consideration of economic science, that have not attempted some definition of "wealth." Many of them have recognized the difficulty, if not impossibility, of a definition that would be completely inclusive and exclusive. When I read, therefore, the statement "that while the subject of political economy is 'wealth,' yet no definition of that subject has ever been attempted," and that, because of this, the science is vague and "has proceeded without a definite subject," I am forced to conclude that the writer has allowed himself to be confused by a desire for precision in definitions, and by taking as precise definitions that, in the nature of things, cannot be. The desire for precise definitions of some of the important words used in economics, the effort to construct such definitions, and the acceptance of some definitions as precise that are not, and, in the very nature of things, cannot be, have been the very bane of economic study. Some writers attempt to give clearness to the expression of their ideas of economics more by a restriction of the meaning of words to a narrow limit than by a free use of words and a proper construction of language. To accept the statement that "the subject of political economy is wealth" as a precise, completely inclusive and completely exclusive statement of a fact is to lay the foundation for error in the subsequent discussion. As a rule, definitions are only attempts to approximate precisions, and do not pretend to be anything more. By reference to the Century Dictionary, it will be found that there are three general meanings with which the word "wealth" is used in literature, but who will assert that the use of the word is, or can be, confined to these three general classes?

If the foundation of economic science is "sandy" and insecure, it is not for want of attempts at definitions. It has been much confused, certainly, by attempts that, in the very nature of things, could not be successful. Neither generally nor in economic literature has wealth been used with any uniformity of meaning.

The reason is obvious. It is an economic conception that is too broad to have its bounds easily fixed. Every attempt to fix the extent and limitation of the economic idea only results in each particular writer reading into the word his own economic conceptions.

The very growth of economic science is marked by the tendency to abandon attempts at precise definitions, and to use words in a broader and more liberal sense, and thus to make language in its construction more precise and accurate. When we come to a full understanding of economic principles and laws, and the application of them to the best interests of humanity, the science will have constructed the definition of its subject, but not until then. Economics is not founded upon definitions but principles and laws of existence and action. It is not without a definite subject or object because the word "wealth" cannot be defined. The subject of economics is as broad as human action, and the object as comprehensive as human needs, and no definition of any word or words can compass it.

The ablest writers have recognized the different meanings, and have sought to use words so that they would be understood. Adam Smith, by a short explanation, made clear that the word "value" had at least two general meanings, "value in use" and "value in exchange," and that one use was just as correct as the other.

By what authority does any writer assert that it is correct to use value in the sense of its applications to things "in exchange" and incorrect to use it in the sense of its application to things "in use?" There can be no reason for it except the desire for what does not exist in language. The fact that such different meanings are given to words cannot be avoided, and the attempt to avoid causes more confusion than the meanings. The absurdity of the situation is made more manifest when a definition that will "separate value from price" is demanded. Price is value expressed in terms of money. It is just as reasonable to demand a definition of fruit that would separate it from apples.

Ricardo, to distinguish the meaning of "value in exchange" from other meanings of the word, prefixed the word "exchangeable," and called it "exchangeable value." The language of a writer must be interpreted, of course, according to the thought of his time, but during the time of Smith and Ricardo the criticism implied by the question "How can value be exchangeable?" would not have been justified. It certainly would not be justified now, and, if they were alive today, they might exclaim concerning that, and the demand for a definition that would limit value to one precise meaning, "What nonsense!"

We do not need definitions but ideas expressed in language that will be understood by the average reader, who has neither the time nor the inclination to follow an attempt to reconstruct either the science of economics or the language of its literature.

FLAVIUS J. VAN VORHIS.

Indianapolis, Ind.

Gradations

A poor man took—they called it stole—
A gunny sack half filled with coal.
To him, it seemed like hope and life,
For his young babe and failing wife,
A cop rushed up—they grapple, fight;
In vain the poor man smote with might—

That night his wife and infant died—
And when the prisoner's case was tried—
Condemned, by jury of his peers;
To Sing Sing doomed for twenty years.

Three desperate tramps—in hunger's
rage,
Held up a well-filled, frontier stage.
Yes, blood was shed, for some would slay,

Ere parting with their gold, that way.
One tramp was shot—the others fled,
Still weak from hunger—want of bread.

Blood-hounds were sent out on their trail—
Mangled and maimed when lodged in jail.
Tried and condemned—the two were hung—
A warning—to the old and young!

Six idle toughs, great husky scamps—
Some called them vicious, murderous tramps—

Derail a train—blow off a door,
Dynamite the safe—find gold, galore.
They clutch and grab, till three are slain—

Shot down by men who run the train.
With loads of loot—three left—took flight.
Yet they were trailed—yes, shot at sight.

All killed, save one, whose wounds will share,
That doom of dooms—the electric chair!

A greater gang—a hireling horde,
Long drilled to fight with gun and sword,

To march on land, or sail the sea
In search of weakness, or some plea,
To conquer, crush—despoil, or kill,
To please their ruler's murderous will—

Till burning cities light the plain—
"A howling wilderness" of slain.
Men call these: heroes; Patriot band—
Shout "Glory!" and "Achievements grand!"

LYDIA PLATT RICHARDS,
Pasadena, Cal.

A False Report.

The Co-operator, Kansas City, Mo., under date of January 24, 1903, says: "The co-operative movement in Kansas City continues to grow. The statement in the daily papers concerning the 'failure' of the co-operative movement was a misunderstanding, and consequently a mis-statement of the situation.

"Mr. Vrooman has not lost a cent in experimenting on co-operation. An employe may have mis-directed or mis-appropriated money, but all the rest that he has put into the movement was not lost, but spent in establishing the business of commercial co-operation. All other reports to the contrary are false."

THAT "CONSPIRACY"

Correspondence Over The Appeal to Reason's Mid-Road Allegations of Fusion Conspiracy

In its issue of January 24, 1903, its so-called "populist" edition, the Appeal to Reason, a "kangaroo" socialist sheet, said:

"There is no use to argue that the logic of the situation made it necessary for the populists to nominate Bryan at St. Louis in 1896, for you know that Mr. Bryan and the populist leaders arranged months before so that the people's party would be placed in this humiliating position. Mr. Bryan so stated to the writer in 1897."

This and other statements The Independent quoted in its issue of February 5, and commented by saying:

"That is certainly a serious charge if true—and a damnable lie if it isn't. Who is the 'writer' to whom Mr. Bryan stated this astounding thing?—(That is, that Mr. Bryan and the populist leaders had arranged months before the populist national convention to nominate him for president). Where did he say it to the 'writer'? The democratic convention was July 7, 1896, and the populist July 22, 1896. Evidently—if the 'writer' tells the truth—the populist leaders and Mr. Bryan made all arrangements to have Mr. Bryan nominated at Chicago." Under date of February 7, 1903,

The Independent received a letter from Mr. A. W. Ricker, associate editor of the Appeal to Reason, which is printed in full hereinafter. Mr. Ricker is an ex-mid-road populist of Iowa. A day or two before the receipt of Mr. Ricker's letter Mr. Bryan had started on his trip through the east; accordingly a copy of Mr. Ricker's letter was made and sent him, with the request that he reply to the allegations therein, so that the two could be published together.

Mr. Ricker's charge is simply a variation of the one made by Joe Parker in the Southern Mercury some months ago, namely, that all arrangements had been made in 1895 for Bryan's nomination. At that time he intimated that he still held several large cards up his sleeve, which he would show in due time, but to date he has brought forward no proof. Mr. Ricker now comes forward and states that Bryan told him that such arrangement had been made. Mr. Bryan has no recollection of meeting Ricker, but says it is not true that any such arrangements were made, and that he is sure that he never said anything that "could by any reasonable construction be tortured into a basis for the charge" Ricker makes.

So far not a scintilla of evidence has been adduced to prove the "conspiracy." The Independent has been patient in giving space to "hot-air" blowers, simply to see if they have one fact upon which to base a reasonable conclusion, but so far they have adduced nothing but suspicions. Whether Mr. Ricker made his assertions maliciously is on open question, but no reasonable man will believe, without better proof than has been brought forward, (a) that any such "arrangements" were made; or (b) that Mr. Bryan ever told Mr. Ricker that any such arrangements had been made.

Mr. Ricker's letter is as follows:

Editor Independent, Lincoln, Neb.,—Dear Sir: The copy of your paper, dated February 5, in which you call on the Appeal to Reason to produce its proof that Mr. Bryan stated in 1897 that his nomination at Chicago was arranged prior to the time of the democratic convention, lies before me and I beg to submit the following:

In the campaign of 1897 in the state of Iowa, Mr. Bryan and I were both engaged in very laudable work of public speaking. It so chanced that our tour brought us in conflict with each other at Onawa, Monona county. I was speaking for the people's party and Mr. Bryan for the democratic party, or the fusion party to be more explicit. I spoke in the forenoon to a moderately large crowd and Mr. Bryan in the afternoon to a very large crowd. It so happened that our next objective point was Council Bluffs and as there was but one train to bear us