

The Inescapable Nature Of Undefined Terms

by Michael A Green, 2016, www.TheAllowableThoughtCage.com

Nobody knows every single word that exists in their native language. Each person knows a subset of the language, a group of words and expressions they know and recognize. Each person has a somewhat different set, though most people have a lot of basic terms in common. These basic words in common, serve as the foundation that enables us to communicate with each other—to speak, listen and understand each others' words—more or less.

Yet even though we share many words in common, we don't always share the same internal definitions for these words. For example, I have several times encountered couples who had wonderful love affairs and thoroughly enjoyed each others' company, so much so that they got married. Then after they got married, their relationship pretty quickly crumbled and they were shortly divorced. From talking with them, it seemed their definitions of the terms 'married', 'wife', and 'husband' differed fundamentally. They had different definitions for these terms, so they had different desires and expectations of their 'husband', 'wife' and 'marriage'. Typically they never realized these differences existed, never saw the problem coming. They never talked about what those terms meant to them, to compare notes and align their expectations.

So we each have a set of words we know, and we each have our own ways of defining and using these terms. The example above, and others you may remember, lead us to realize that the definitions of some key words we use, become vitally important to our ability to communicate successfully and to minimize confusion.

We each have a somewhat different set of terms we habitually use and favor, whether or not we're aware of our own particular set of preferred terms—and we each define our words using other words. No surprise so far, right? Yet when we define our terms with other terms, then how do we define those other terms? Well, with more words, of course. And then we can define those with still more words. Fine. Yet eventually we will run out of words, when we exhaust the supply of all the words we know.

Eventually we will find ourselves defining our words using other words, and defining those other words with still more words, until eventually will say that one word or phrase means another word or phrase. We seem to be caught in a circle of words referring only to themselves for meanings. When we reach the last set of words we can use, and cannot get past, we have reached something fundamental—our 'core set of words'.

Let's take an example to make this clearer. We need to pick a word to define. How about 'happy', or 'good', or maybe 'important' or 'valuable'. These all seem like important words, don't they? Okay, let's start with 'important' and see what happens. I've never done this before with this particular word, so we're experimenting together, writer and reader.

For this experiment we're not allowed to use dictionaries. *I'm* not allowed to use them since I'm our 'guinea pig', our test subject. I'm only allowed to use my knowledge of the words I know and understand. 'Important' means... having more value than many other things. We'll just keep to the core, keywords to make this far more manageable. So now I have to define 'value'. Value means something worthwhile or having worth. Worth means intrinsic significance. Significance means meaningfulness. Meaningfulness means that it evokes a

response in me in some way, that it touches me. Touching means moving. Moving means gripping. Gripping means... means...

Now I'm at a key turning point. All the words I've already used flash before my mind: important, valuable, worthwhile, significant, meaningful, touching, moving, gripping, and yet I can't use any of these words to define gripping, without going in circles. Gripping means something commanding, something that commands my attention. Commanding means powerful. Powerful means strong. Strong means... I'm not quite sure. It means gripping, powerful, and I'm starting to go in circles. Eventually, I'll run out of all the words I know and can come up with in the moment to define any of these terms, without saying that one of them means the other. We can use words to describe the meanings of other words, with special types of descriptions we call 'definitions'.

From experiments like this that I and others have done, some people become frustrated at this point, others become angry, some surprised, others intrigued, still others laugh, yet they all reach the limits of their ability to further define any word without using other words that have already led them into the circle of words they use to define some given term.

In effect, we can't substantially 'define' all of our key terms. We just find ourselves knowing what they mean, internally, seemingly inexplicably, inside our skins, when we use them. They're undefinable. They just mean something to us in spite of our inability to adequately define them. They're our own personal set of 'undefined terms'.

For me, the words: important, valuable, worthy, significant, meaningful, touching, moving, gripping, commanding and powerful, together, pretty well flesh out the key terms I use to describe those things, feelings, qualities, events, memories or what have you, that relate to my sense of importance or value. There's an end to the words and/or phrases and/or paragraphs I can use to define my sense of 'importance'. I have to stop somewhere and so I do. I can't help it. In terms of pointing to things of importance, I favor these ten terms.

I would recognize others, perhaps dozens of others, using some thesauruses and dictionaries, but if I can't come up with them right now on my own, then they're not as deeply ingrained in my language behavior as the ones I do come up with. Most of the time when I'm talking or attempting to communicate with others I am *not* referring to dictionaries in order to do it. Admittedly, though, I might get somewhat different results doing this same experiment at different times in different moods and in different 'states of mind'.

Okay, so now what? Why should anyone care about any of this?

Consciously selecting your own set of undefined terms seems to be the primary value of understanding this. So, what are the benefits of consciously choosing your own undefined terms? Most people have never done this experiment on themselves or others, probably don't realize their use of words forms a closed loop of a limited number of words, have no idea that everyone has a set of 'undefined terms', and so could probably never have chosen their particular set of undefined terms, using any consciously selected criteria or preferences.

When I read someone or listen to them speak, I'm very sensitive to the set of terms they use as primary. I'm sensitive to them because I understand that their core terms are undefined. I can see into their core 'metaphysics', their fundamental assumptions, by looking at their key

words and phrases, their undefined terms. I can do this because I know they've built their whole edifice, their worldview, on the basis of their personally chosen or casually adopted set of undefined terms, their verbal foundations.

As soon as you can see a person's basic set of undefined terms, you have a pretty good idea of how their worldview is put together and some of the key assumptions and convictions on which it stands. So, the structural implications and the clarity and accuracy of these foundational terms, becomes fundamentally important to our views of reality. They function as the building blocks of the worldviews we create for ourselves. These terms shape and carve our foundational understanding of what's real, they work like 'language lynch pins' supporting our basic grip on reality.

If these terms are poorly chosen then your entire worldview will rest on shaky ground. If your undefined terms are not clear, if they're fuzzy, then your entire view of reality will have deep-seated dim, sloppy or confused spots in it. If your foundational terms imply structural assumptions that are unsound, then your worldview will have discoverable errors in it. You will be resting on confused or false basic premises about the fundamental nature of reality—what is real, what is so. These are errors you can never correct until you choose to orient using different key words and phrases, different undefined terms—and doing this will change your view of what is real—typically subtly, yet at times profoundly.

We work with a mix of defined and undefined terms, and since ultimately we can only define our words with other words, it's up to us which words we reserve for ourselves as undefined. These are foundational terms that strongly shape our worldviews. How many people are aware they're carrying around some set of undefined terms? And of those, how many have consciously chosen which terms to explicitly include in that special group? And how many can recognize the primary undefined terms of those they're listening to and learning from, in order to better evaluate the core convictions these various presenters, teachers and authorities are resting upon?

Now that you know the general structure of what's going on here with undefined terms, maybe you can use these insights to clarify your worldview, reevaluate what's most important to you, and become increasingly aware of how, when and with whom, you are encouraged to abandon your own undefined terms and adopt someone else's. If you can evaluate someone else's before adopting one or more of them, and decide for yourself if you find greater clarity in using them, then you're on solid ground and you're free to outgrow, improve and replace them as your clarity and understanding matures.

If one of the couples referred to above had sat down together and clearly defined what they meant by the terms 'husband', 'wife', and 'marriage', they might have had time to update their definitions so they better matched.

Let's say his definition of marriage was “we just go along pretty much as we are, we get some additional tax write-offs, make our families happier, and maybe get some small things we need for the house in the bargain”. Let's assume her definition of marriage was “now we are seriously committed, doing everything together now comes first, all other things take a back seat to improving our home and living situation and developing a family”.

If they had made these definitions explicit, they might have realized they were not a good

match for 'marriage'. Or they may have been able to blend their definitions and come to some common ground and understanding they could both live with. They could have updated their expectations of marriage in advance so they would have been better prepared for what was to come. Marriage is one of those terms that often means something very specific and unique to certain people, a commonly 'undefined' term loaded with personally charged meanings. A standard dictionary definition like 'legally joining as husband and wife in a social contract' sheds no light on the powerful 'undefined', unspecified and/or unrealized convictions looming energetically beneath the surface.

Words and language—pretty amazing stuff, huh?

For more writing like this about 'definitions' and related topics, check out the articles and posts on theallowablethoughtcage.com and read the book [*Unlocking The Allowable-Thought Cage Imprisoning Our Imaginations*](#).