

The answer must depend partly upon what is meant by a definition, and partly upon what it is we are asked to define. As regards the first it is seldom, outside of mathematics, that a complete assignment of limits is possible. To define with perfect accuracy requires perfect knowledge. So long as knowledge grows, definitions must be subject to change. But this cannot excuse the loose and careless employment of terms in which the same word or phrase is used in such variable senses as to render clear apprehension impossible. It is true that some of the causes of ambiguity are to be found partly in the present imperfection of our thinking faculties, partly in the defects of language whether as the instrument or as the expression of thought. These are, so to speak, essential causes, and can be removed only by the comparatively slow action of increasing culture from generation to generation. But there are also causes which may be called accidental. Thus a writer has his imagination fired by the wonderful fitness of a word to express a special meaning, and he launches what seems to him his "new creation" upon the sea of literature. Unfortunately, however, the term has already other meanings, and these, when the freshness of the peculiar use has worn off, begin to assert themselves, and it soon becomes impossible, without some explanation, to ascertain which meaning is intended. Then, of course, there is the very common cause—much more pardonable in speaking than in writing—carelessness. And yet another, strange as it may seem, is the demand for definition itself. As experience proves, men readily forgive themselves faults that are avoidable, when they are censured for faults that are not avoidable. Hence, feeling that they cannot define completely, they do not define at all. We shall get more if we ask less. Yet, the least that can be asked is, accurate description of the thing under consideration and uniform use of the word. Terms ought to be, like faithful friends, always the same.

As regards the things which we are called upon to define, these are of three sorts. Some cannot be defined, though well known; some it is useless to define, because no uncertainty in relation to them exists; and some need to be defined