

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Words That Never Settle: A Philosophical Account of Suspended Meaning

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Abstract

Why have twenty-five centuries of definitions failed to settle what “justice” means? This article argues that meaning is an achievement rather than a state: a term possesses a meaning to the degree that the social process instituting it has been completed, and completion consists in the convergence of competent speakers’ dispositions of application. Three claims follow. Persistent debate that survives definitional clarification is evidence of semantic incompleteness rather than of doctrinal error; interpretation cannot by itself complete a meaning, since definitions redistribute incompleteness across their defining vocabulary; and some meanings are permanently suspended because their rhetorical function depends on their remaining incomplete. The account is weighed against Gallie (1956), Peirce (1878), Wittgenstein (1953), Waismann (1945), Davidson (1986), Lewis (1969), Kripke (1980), Stevenson (1938), and the literature on metalinguistic negotiation and conceptual engineering, and it yields a falsifiable prediction: definitional disputes die when the capital attached to a term drains away, without any analysis resolving them.

Keywords: Semantic Incompleteness, Contested Concepts, Conceptual Engineering, Metalinguistic Negotiation, Persuasive Definition.

1. Introduction

Some words end conversations and some words begin them, and the difference has occupied philosophers and linguists over the past decades (Gallie 1956; Chalmers 2011; Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Cappelen 2018). If a speaker says that the sun rose at six, no one pauses over “sun.” If the same speaker calls a policy illiberal, the room divides, and the division rarely concerns policy. One party takes “liberal” to name a commitment to individual rights, another a hostility to tradition, a third an economic doctrine, and the debate that follows is about what the participants are permitted to mean.

The standard picture in philosophy of language has little room for this phenomenon. On that picture, competent speakers share the meanings of their words and their disagreements are disagreements in

belief. The attribution is not a caricature: most formal semanticists “treat meaning as mind-independent (and abstract), not as concepts ‘in the head’” (Partee 2016: 3), and Chalmers states the tradition’s operative expectation in one line: “Once we resolve an issue about language, the dispute over the nonlinguistic domain evaporates, or at least should evaporate” (Chalmers 2011: 516). Disputes that appear to be about words are accordingly treated as confusions to be dissolved or, in the recent literature, negotiations to be conducted (Plunkett and Sundell 2013). What the standard picture does not allow is that, for a significant class of words, there is no fixed background: the meaning itself is unfinished, and the disagreement is the visible surface of its unfinishedness.

This paper defends that possibility. Its central claim, the Completion Thesis (CT), is that a term has a

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meaning to the degree that the process instituting that meaning has been completed, and that the process is complete to the degree that competent speakers converge in their dispositions to apply the term within a normative practice of teaching, correction, and justification. CT reverses the usual order of explanation. Convergence in use is not explained by shared meaning; it constitutes the completion of meaning. Where convergence is high, as with “rain” or “triangle,” the meaning is complete and disputes are marginal. Where it is partial, as with “game” or “sandwich,” the meaning is incomplete at its edges. Where convergence is low and shows no tendency to increase, as with “liberalism,” “justice,” or “art,” the meaning is radically incomplete, and I will say that such terms carry *suspended meanings*: meanings that hang, unfinished, between the competing hands that reach for them.

Three further claims give the account its content. The first is diagnostic: persistent debate that survives definitional clarification is evidence of semantic incompleteness. When parties exchange definitions, find them intelligible, and continue to diverge in application, the term’s institution never fixed the point at issue: there is nothing yet in the language for either party to be right about. The second is limitative: interpretation cannot by itself complete a meaning. A definition is a string of further words, each with its own degree of completion, and a definition of an incomplete term must either use complete terms and be rejected as changing the subject, or use incomplete terms and relocate the disagreement. Definitions redistribute incompleteness; only convergence completes, and convergence is social rather than intellectual. The third is explanatory: some meanings are suspended because their function depends on their incompleteness. Terms such as “democracy” and “terrorism” do rhetorical work precisely because their institution is unfinished; each party can recruit the term’s accumulated prestige or revulsion for its favored extension, and each has an interest in blocking every rival’s completion. Suspension is not an accident of these terms but an equilibrium.

The argument addresses three research questions. Why do definitions of certain terms fail to terminate the disputes they were designed to settle (RQ1)? What distinguishes the terms whose disputes are interminable from the larger vocabulary whose meanings settle without ceremony (RQ2)? Under what conditions can completion be deliberately achieved, and what does the answer imply for conceptual engineering and the ethics of debate

(RQ3)? Existing accounts answer at most one of these questions: Gallie’s essential contestedness names the phenomenon without explaining its selectivity; metalinguistic negotiation explains the activity without explaining its interminability; conceptual engineering prescribes revisions without a theory of why revisions so rarely take. The gap the paper fills is a *differential* account: which terms remain unfinished, why, and when the condition ends. Section 2 develops the puzzle, Section 3 the Completion Thesis, Section 4 suspended meaning and its mechanism; Section 5 positions the account among rivals, Section 6 answers objections, Section 7 draws consequences, Section 8 concludes.

2. The Puzzle: Why Definition Does Not End Debate

Begin with a datum whose strangeness is easy to miss. Human beings have been defining “justice” for twenty-five centuries. The definitions were produced by the most careful minds the species has managed; each was offered as the end of the matter, and each became instead a new party to the dispute. Stevenson’s reading of the *Republic* documents the pattern at its source: Socrates must secure the laudatory charge of “justice” against Thrasymachus before any content can be supplied, and later definitions, “with few exceptions,” are equally persuasive, differing only in the influence exerted (Stevenson 1938: 341–343). Nor is the pattern confined to moral vocabulary. Within technical semantics itself, Riemer observes that scholars assert the meaning of an expression while treating colleagues’ disagreement as “merely a consequence of lack of research,” which he calls “something of a convenient fiction, given that people have been trying to write systematic definitions for many centuries at least” (Riemer 2016: 2); and the specialist literature on vagueness has accumulated “with no hint of a consensus emerging” (Kamp and Sassoon 2016: 389). Contrast a second datum: no one has ever needed a definition of “rain” to end a dispute about the weather.

The standard picture explains the second datum easily and the first not at all. Several responses to the scandal are available, and each fails. The first holds that the disputants talk past each other, attaching different meanings to one phonological form. But they do not behave like homonym users. They quote each other, answer each other’s arguments, and feel the force of counterexamples: a Rawlsian who hears Nozick’s Wilt Chamberlain case (Nozick 1974: 160–164) does not reply that “justice” means something else in her mouth; she feels its pull. Gallie recorded the same

datum: the disputes are “not resolvable by argument of any kind” yet are “sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence” (Gallie 1956: 169), which is inexplicable on a homonymy diagnosis. Nor does genuine disagreement require a shared complete meaning: “from the single premise that some linguistic exchange reflects a genuine disagreement, nothing follows with respect to the semantics of the expressions employed” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 18), disagreement consisting in acceptance of rationally incompatible contents (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 11). The dispute over “justice” is real without any completed meaning to underwrite it, which is precisely what a shared *incomplete* meaning predicts: the counterexample engages the completed portion, and the divergence lives in the rest.

The second response is realist: there is a complete meaning, or a fact about the property the term denotes, and persistent dispute reflects only the difficulty of discovering it. The response borrows its plausibility from cases such as “water,” where a hidden essence settled what the term had been tracking (Putnam 1975; Kripke 1980). But the borrowing is illegitimate. Putnam’s founding text “did not offer a theory of meaning for any especially large class of terms” (Floyd 2005: 19), and “justice” tracks no natural kind: there is no laboratory in which the parties’ dispositions could be corrected by nature. Waismann draws the needed line: language “contributes to the formation and participates in the constitution” of a fact, “which, of course, does not mean that it produces the fact” (Waismann 1945: 148). Where the world provides no anchor, the realist response is a promissory note that twenty-five centuries have declined to honor.

The third response, the most sophisticated, is that the disputants are negotiating: the dispute is metalinguistic, a contest over what the term should mean (Plunkett and Sundell 2013; Ludlow 2014). This response is half right, and Section 5 gives it its due, but it leaves the deepest question open: why do the negotiations never close? Actual negotiations end; this one has been in session since Thrasymachus. A fourth response is subtler than bare homonymy: Waismann suggests that the tormented words carry a “systematic ambiguity,” level-indexed uses held together by likeness (Waismann 1945: 140). Yet systematic ambiguity is stable and untroubling for “exists” and “knows,” which generate no genealogical warfare over who owns the word. Ambiguity plus accumulated capital, not ambiguity alone, produces the phenomenon, the conjunction Section 4 develops.

The puzzle shows that the relationship between definition and meaning has been inverted in the

tradition. Definition was supposed to be the instrument by which meaning is fixed. The historical record shows definition functioning instead as the instrument by which incompleteness is *displayed*: each new definition of “justice” is a probe that reveals where convergence runs out.

3. The Completion Thesis

3.1 Meaning as Achievement

The Completion Thesis treats “meaning” as an achievement term in Ryle’s sense (Ryle 1949): a word like “win” or “arrive,” which names not an activity but its successful termination. The achievement must be distinguished from Gallie’s claim that contested concepts signify “some kind of valued achievement” (Gallie 1956: 171): Gallie locates it in the concept’s content, CT in the semantic process itself. On the completion view, “meaning” names the successful termination of a social process I will call *institution*: the process by which a community comes to converge on the application of a form. Institution begins with an act of introduction, baptism, coinage, borrowing, or drift, and is completed, when it is completed, by the community’s convergence. The structure has a canonical precedent in Kripke’s account of names, on which a speaker refers “by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study” (Kripke 1980: 91). CT treats the output of that transmission as admitting of degrees, and takes the constitutive base to be dispositions of application, following Peirce: “what a thing means is simply what habits it involves” (Peirce 1878: 292). Between introduction and convergence, a term is in use but its meaning is in the making; it would be as much a mistake to say that such a term already has its meaning as to say that a house under construction is already a house.

Five clarifications guard the thesis. First, incomplete terms are not meaningless. An incomplete meaning has a completed portion, the region on which speakers already converge, and communication succeeds within it: every competent speaker applies “liberalism” to Mill and withholds it from Franco, and the debates live in the vast middle territory. The account therefore predicts the actual distribution of disputes, clustered between the settled core and the settled anti-extension. Second, completion is predicated of expression meaning, the standing dispositional profile attached to a form, not of utterance or communicative meaning (Löbner 2013), which remain fully available; this is why disputes over “liberalism” are fluent rather than

incoherent. Third, completion is community-relative: a term may be complete within a profession and suspended in the public at large; those discussed below are indexed to the widest community using the term. Fourth, completion concerns the social institution of expression meaning, not first-order correctness: universal convergence on applying “justice” would complete the term without making the community’s verdicts just. Fifth, CT is an enabling-condition thesis, not a definitional analysis. As Hacker puts the parallel point, mathematical certainty rests on general agreement “not because ‘mathematically certain’ means the same as ‘generally agreed by mathematicians’, but because if mathematicians did not generally agree then we would not have our concept of mathematical certainty” (Hacker 2019: 166). Convergence is what the institution of a determinate standard requires, and the idea has a pedigree: Saussure already held that a language “is not complete in any one” of its speakers and “exists in perfection only in the mass” (quoted in Ogden and Richards 1989 [1923]: 5).

3.2 Degrees of Completion

Completion is a matter of degree. Let a term’s *completion degree* be the extent to which competent speakers’ sincere, literal dispositions of application converge across the candidate applications that the community’s purposes actually generate, weighted by the frequency and consequentiality of those applications. Several features are deliberate. Convergence is measured over speakers, as a statistical property of a population, and the measure is ordinal rather than numerical: an account of incompleteness that reported crisp percentages would embarrass itself. Competence is defined dispositionally, as uptake without repair, not by credential. The restriction to sincere literal application excludes withholdings driven by implicature or tact (Väyrynen 2013: 161, 164). And completion is purpose-relative saturation, not omniscient determinacy: Ludlow is right that “we never completely sharpen the meaning” of any predicate, even “hexagonal” (Ludlow 2014: 5–6), and Riemer that “there has not yet been any successful definition offered of even a single word” in the substitutional sense (Riemer 2016: 223), but definitional failure is universal while convergence failure is selective, and the selectivity is the explanandum. Davidson proposed that “degree or relative frequency of convergence” on passing theories measures similarity of language (Davidson 1986: 445); CT extends the measure from speaker pairs to a term across a community, and psycholinguistic work on lexical entrainment shows convergence in

application to be a real, elicitable process (Ludlow 2014: 72; Alxatib and Sauerland 2019: 353). Nor is CT a stipulative redescription that defines completion as convergence and reads incompleteness off divergence: the definition earns its keep by consequences it does not contain, the clustering of disputes, the deaths of Section 4.3, the jurisdiction condition of Section 7, which no mere redefinition of “meaning” delivers.

The vocabulary of a language then spreads across a spectrum. At the top sit terms of near-total completion: “rain,” “seven,” “dead.” Where a hard case arises for such a term, as with “dead” under mechanical ventilation, the incompleteness is felt as a crisis, and the community, through law and medicine, completed the meaning by converging on brain-death criteria. In the middle sit terms complete at the core and unsettled at the edges, and here two conditions must be separated. Waismann distinguishes vagueness, a “fluctuating” actual use remediable “by giving more accurate rules,” from open texture, the permanent “possibility of vagueness” that no definition can foreclose (Waismann 1945: 123). Open texture is a universal background condition; vagueness is boundarylessness whose manifestations include “the needlessness and even disutility” of drawing lines (Sainsbury 1996: 257): the community never needed to converge on whether a hot dog is a sandwich, so it never did. At the bottom sit the radically incomplete: “liberalism,” “justice,” “freedom,” “art,” “terrorism.” Here incompleteness reaches the core: speakers disagree about the paradigms, what they are paradigms of, and who is entitled to say. Semantically, such terms behave as multidimensional predicates for which context fails to fix the dimension set and its weighting, so that comparative trichotomy can fail (Kamp and Sassoon 2016: 434): suspension is contestation over the metric, vagueness indeterminacy of a threshold on a fixed metric (Väyrynen 2013: 179).

One amendment is owed to Putnam. The division of linguistic labor, on which speakers “rely on experts” to fix the extension of terms such as “elm” (Floyd 2005: 22), is not a counterexample to CT but a completion mechanism: a meaning is complete to the degree that the community converges directly or converges on deferring to a subpopulation that converges. The amendment sharpens the diagnosis of suspension, for “justice” and “liberalism” are precisely the terms for which no deference stratum exists, or several compete; as Burgess and Plunkett note of philosophical vocabulary, “the folk are in the overwhelming majority, and hardly deferring to philosophers” (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1098). The

dissociation between convergent use and convergent definition is independently attested: phonologists of rival schools, sharing no definition of the phoneme, produce phoneme inventories that “are the same, or at any rate, they do not differ very much” (Shaumyan 2006: 177), exactly the independence CT predicts and the standard picture cannot accommodate.

3.3 The Limitative Principle: Interpretation cannot Complete

Why can definition not do what convergence does? The argument has three steps. First, a definition is an utterance, and an utterance shifts dispositions only in speakers who accept it. Acceptance of a definition of a contested term is exactly what the contest is about: offering a definition of “liberalism” in a dispute over liberalism is a move by one party, and the other parties treat it as such. The definition inherits the conflict it was meant to resolve.

Second, even an accepted definition is a string of further words, and its capacity to fix application is bounded by the completion degrees of those words: the definitional circle of lexical semantics (Riemer 2010), scaled to the community. Define “justice” as “giving each person their due,” and the incompleteness flows into “due.” A definition composed wholly of complete terms would be determinate, but a determinate definition of a suspended term is rejected as a stipulation that changes the subject; one composed partly of incomplete terms preserves the subject and the incompleteness. The definer must choose between fidelity and determinacy, and cannot have both. I call this the *definer’s dilemma*. Its micro-mechanism is the fluctuation between criteria and symptoms: contested terms sit atop clusters of co-occurring marks, and rival definers elevate different members to criterial rank, a fluctuation that “signifies an indeterminacy in the use, and hence the meaning, of the expression” (Hacker 2019: 294). The dilemma is visible wherever a standards body must define without convergence: the DSM concedes that “the term psychotic has historically received a number of definitions, none of which has achieved universal acceptance,” before substituting a symptom list whose content “varies to some extent across the diagnostic categories” (APA 2000: 297, quoted in Geekie and Read 2009: 139).

Third, and most generally, interpretation operates on the wrong ontological level. Incompletion is a property of the community’s dispositional profile, a statistical fact about millions of speakers; interpretation is an individual act of intellect. An individual act can propose a completion, campaign for one, or model one, but can no more constitute one than an individual

can constitute a custom. Ogden and Richards reach the same result from a causal-psychological starting point: “an interpretation is itself a recurrence” (Ogden and Richards 1989 [1923]: 56), a further member of the series rather than a metalevel act that closes it. Lewis makes the parallel point about explicit agreement, whose “major effect is transmitted through a growing causal chain of expectations, actions, expectations, actions,” so that a convention created by agreement “bears no trace of its origin” (Lewis 1969: 84). The engineers themselves have supplied the miniature: “begging the question,” a professionally maintained definition taught explicitly and backed by classroom authority, has been lost to folk convergence on “inviting a question,” prompting only “a reactionary sermon on English usage in Intro Philosophy” (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1092). The philosopher who believes her analysis has completed a meaning has mistaken a bid for a sale. Peirce anticipated the conclusion: “Nothing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions,” though “our existing beliefs can be set in order by this process” (Peirce 1878: 288).

Two boundary conditions define the principle rather than qualify it. Waismann also holds that “the process of defining and refining an idea will go on without ever reaching a final stage,” since “every definition stretches into an open horizon” (Waismann 1945: 125); but his non-termination is epistemic and prospective, applying uniformly to all empirical terms, whereas the present argument is social and strategic, and delivers what the epistemic argument cannot: an explanation of why definition fails catastrophically for “justice” and harmlessly for “sandwich.” And the principle asserts that interpretation cannot complete a meaning *by itself*, where completion must pass through an open community of interested speakers. Where interpretation is coupled to a propagation channel, it can transmit convergence: “the sheer presence of prescriptive efforts has the power to affect attitudes about usage as well as, in some cases, the development of actual language usage” (Curzan 2014: 3), and precisely such channels explain the completions of “dead” in Section 3.2 and “planet” in Section 5. The limitative principle is thus a claim about a modality that is social-structural rather than logical or psychological (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1099), defeasible in exactly one way: by an enforcement structure whose jurisdiction covers the term’s stakeholders. The great definitions of justice failed not because their authors lacked acuity but because they attempted, with an instrument that redistributes incompleteness, a task only convergence performs. Their real function, visible in

retrospect, was cartography: each mapped where the community's dispositions diverge.

4. Suspended Meaning

4.1 The Concept and its Signature

Call a meaning *suspended* when its completion process is not merely unfinished but blocked: the term has remained radically incomplete across generations of intensive use, and no mechanism internal to the discourse tends toward convergence. Suspension is the condition of “justice” after Plato, “art” after Duchamp, “liberalism” after two centuries of polemic. The mark of suspension is a characteristic pattern: first-order arguments (is this policy liberal?) collapse under pressure into metalinguistic arguments (what does “liberal” mean?), then into genealogical arguments (who owns the word? who corrupted it?), and the genealogy restores no convergence, because each party's genealogy vindicates its own extension. Participants experience the cycle as progress, since each turn generates distinctions, but the completion degree does not move; empirically, the best predictor of specialists' attitudes toward *Bush v. Gore* was political alignment (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006: 232).

The pattern converts into a procedure by Chalmers's method of elimination: bar the disputed term, and ask whether the parties can locate a sentence in the restricted vocabulary over which they still disagree nonverbally (Chalmers 2011: 526–527). For a suspended term the account predicts that iteration terminates not in bedrock disagreement about the world but in an entitlement dispute about the word itself, a dispute about capture. Lewis supplies an independent criterion: a community must not tolerate a convention “to which most people want there to be exceptions” (Lewis 1969: 76–78), and for a suspended term most parties want exceptions to any rival's settlement. That is a falsifiable signature distinguishing suspension from ordinary substantive disagreement.

4.2 The Mechanism: Functional Incompletion

Why do these terms, and not others, remain suspended? Complexity cannot be the answer; “metabolism” is complex and complete. Evaluative content alone cannot be either; “rude” is evaluative and largely complete. The answer lies in a configuration of interests. A suspended term has accumulated what I will call *institutional capital*: prestige, legitimacy, or revulsion attached to the form itself and transferable to whatever the form is applied to. In semantic-theoretic terms, capital is accumulated connotative

and affective meaning that has become attached to the form (Leech 1981). The leading deflationist about verbal disputes concedes the transfer: “If the community counts an act as falling into the extension of ‘torture’ or ‘terrorism’, this may make a grave difference to our attitudes toward that act” (Chalmers 2011: 517). The classic statement is Stevenson's: hundreds of words, like “culture,” combine “a vague conceptual meaning and a rich emotive meaning,” and “the words are prizes which each man seeks to bestow on the qualities of his own choice” (Stevenson 1938: 333). Stevenson also supplies the causal link between capital and incompletion: “As the emotive meaning of the word grew more pronounced, the conceptual meaning grew more vague,” since emotive charge licenses metaphorical extension and extension erodes criteria (Stevenson 1938: 332). The phenomenon is ancient; Thucydides already recorded that after the Peloponnesian war “the meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things, but was changed by men as they thought proper” (quoted in Ogden and Richards 1989 [1923]: 18).

Where a term carries capital, every party has an interest in *capturing* it, extending it over its favored cases, and a symmetrical interest in preventing capture by rivals; Gallie's observation that such concepts are used “both aggressively and defensively” (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006: 219) records the posture without theorizing it. Pinochet described Chile as a “protected democracy” to soften perceptions of the regime, while post-1990 analysts used the same label to argue that Chile fell short of democracy; in the 2000 Florida dispute, Katherine Harris and Justice Breyer both claimed “the rule of law” for opposite conclusions (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006: 224–229). Nor is the mechanism parochially political: “neither of the two parties in the dispute over the right definition of the phoneme is willing to pick another term,” because “each party believes that their notion of phoneme is central” (Shaumyan 2006: 158), and belief in centrality is how capital is experienced from the inside. Plunkett and Sundell identify the same asset synchronically: because a concept plays its role partly in virtue of being paired with a particular word, “paraphrasing in such a context will thus be a tactically less attractive move than it will be, say, in a philosophy seminar room” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 24).

The completion account converts that tactical fact into a diachronic equilibrium. Completion of the meaning would end the game: a completed “democracy” would confer its legitimacy automatically on a fixed

extension, and every party whose favored cases fell outside it would abandon the term and mint another, taking the contest with them. The parties therefore stand in what Schelling would call a mixed-motive game (Schelling 1960): a residual common interest in intelligibility keeps the term in circulation and preserves the completed core, while distributive interest blocks convergence in the middle territory. Two refinements matter. Suspension is a property of multilateral discourses with open entry: a *bilateral* dispute can dissolve when one party ceases to disagree in interest (Stevenson 1938: 348), but in an open public any converged pair is replaced by entrants who inherit the capital. And no conspiracy is required. Peirce already observed disputants “whom it seems to vex” that their favorite questions “may ever get finally settled,” and moralized the disposition as “the very debauchery of thought” (Peirce 1878: 289); the present account structuralizes what Peirce moralized. Suspension is the unplanned equilibrium of planned captures. The functions suspended terms perform, legitimation, mobilization, condemnation, only an incompletely instituted term can perform for multiple parties at once. A completed “liberalism” would be one party’s property and every other party’s discard. The word survives as everyone’s because it is finished as no one’s.

4.3 Predictions and Test Cases

The mechanism yields a prediction distinguishing the completion account from its rivals: when institutional capital drains out of a suspended term, its dispute should quietly die, without any analysis having resolved it. The graveyard of formerly contested terms bears this out. “Christendom,” hierarchical nineteenth-century “civilization,” “the proletariat”: each was once a site of definitional warfare, and each dispute ended not in victory but in abandonment, when the term ceased to confer capital worth capturing. No one won the definition of “Christendom”; the stakes left, and the players followed. Nor were these terms eliminated by any campaign to stop using them (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b: 1103): capital drain produces exit without eliminativism. Nor is the prediction circular, for capital is legible in the institutional record independently of the dispute it fuels: “democracy” does normative work by bare occurrence in accession criteria, aid conditionality, and constitutional preambles, while “Christendom” now appears in no instrument that pays anything; read capital off that record and incompletion off the distribution of use, and the prediction relates two independent measurements. Waismann observed the

asymmetry without explaining it: “you may confute and kill a scientific theory; a philosophy dies only of old age” (Waismann 1945: 150). The capital-drain model supplies the missing mechanism and explains a contemporary case: Dahl did not complete “democracy”; he minted “polyarchy” to carry the analytic content while leaving the capital-laden form contested (Dahl 1971; Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006: 227), the exit-and-mint behavior the equilibrium predicts.

A second phenomenon confirms the limitative principle at the opposite pole: the *euphemism cycle*, in which a term for a stigmatized category is replaced, the replacement acquires the stigma and is replaced in turn. Stevenson traced the pattern to antiquity, Latin *amica* substituting for *concubina* (Stevenson 1938: 335), and supplied the reason: renaming attempts a reset while the community’s emotive dispositions migrate to the new form (Stevenson 1938: 337). A live cycle is documented in psychiatry: the professional shift from “schizophrenia” to “psychosis,” endorsed on the ground that the latter carries less pejorative baggage, selected a replacement that is by the field’s own admission less well defined, and the stigma migrated anyway (Geekie and Read 2009: 15, 139). Two apparent counterexamples sharpen the claim. The reclamation of “queer” succeeded not by decree but through convergence within a community with standing to converge. And the documented successes of language reform, *police officer* displacing *policeman* in corpus and speech alike (Curzan 2014: 126–135), are replacement institutions, settling a lexical choice within an already convergent category, not completions of a suspended term’s extension; the fate of *policewoman*, tried and abandoned, shows that decree does not determine outcome. The sociolinguists’ generalization is the completion account’s: censorship of language is effective “when it coincides with what individuals would choose to censor for themselves” (Allan and BurrIDGE 2006: 238, quoted in Curzan 2014: 115). Dispositions, not decrees, are where completion happens.

5. Relations and Debts

The completion account has ancestors, and honesty about them sharpens its claim to novelty.

Gallie. Gallie identified the class I call suspended and argued that their contestedness is essential: internal to the concepts and permanent. The textual record is subtler than the doctrine, and the concession should be made: Gallie says of democracy that its vagueness “reflects its actual inchoate condition of growth”

(Gallie 1956: 184), a developmental gloss. But Gallie has developmental language without a developmental theory: no account of what completion would consist in, no measure of degree, no mechanism of blockage, no prediction of termination. His mechanism for interminability, the absence of principles for a “judicial knock-out” between rival uses (Gallie 1956: 179), over-predicts, since peripheral cases such as “sandwich” also lack adjudicative principles yet generate no warfare; the capital-plus-capture mechanism predicts warfare only where capture pays. The completion account also wins on parsimony, using general facts about convergence and interest rather than a semantic postulate idiosyncratic to one class of terms (Väyrynen 2013: 55), and on scope, predicting both the deaths and the completions that an essentialist structure cannot accommodate.

Peirce. From Peirce the account takes the dispositional analysis of meaning and the idea that semantic finality lives at the end of a convergence process, while rejecting his optimism. Peirce concedes that “our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion,” and neutralizes the concession with a counterfactual: the true opinion is the one investigators *would* ultimately reach (Peirce 1878: 299). The escape clause is licensed only for terms whose object’s characters are settled independently of inquiry; suspended terms track no such object, the counterfactual has no truthmaker, and the account predicts the opposite of convergence.

Wittgenstein and Waismann. From Wittgenstein the account takes the constitutive role of agreement in judgments (Wittgenstein 1953: §242), in Hacker’s gloss a double agreement: “not only in definitions (explanations of meaning), but also in judgements, just as the existence of a system of measurement requires not only an agreement on the measure (the rule) but also agreement in the results of measurement” (Hacker 2019: 10). That is the structure of CT: agreement on a definition without agreement in application is an unfinished institution. From Waismann it takes the essential unfinishedness of empirical concepts, and it goes beyond both in supplying what neither sought, a differential explanation of which terms remain unfinished and why. Open texture is universal; suspension is selective.

Davidson and Lewis. Davidson concluded that “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed” (Davidson 1986: 446), since prior theories are never fully shared. The conclusion follows only if meaning must be a shared antecedent

object; CT is the reconstruction his destructive result requires, completion being a statistical property of dispositions that survives the absence of any shared object. Against Davidson, and with Dummett, the account insists that a language is “a practice in which people engage,” essentially social and constituted by custom (Dummett 1986: 473); against Dummett, it holds that the practice is a matter of degree and never a finished object. Formally, CT describes a Lewisian convention observed mid-formation (Lewis 1969), with one diagnostic addition: Lewis requires that the parties be nearly indifferent among rival regularities, and suspended terms are precisely the case where they are not, which is why “planet,” whose rival stipulations left astronomers indifferent, completed cheaply while “democracy” cannot.

Kripke. The Feynman case shows that wild divergence in speakers’ identifying beliefs is compatible with fully determinate reference, because the chain does the work (Kripke 1980: 91); why is divergence over “justice” not likewise mere ignorance of a determinate thing? Kripke’s own addendum answers on the account’s behalf. Where the world supplies no species for the chain to terminate in, as with “unicorn,” “there is no actual or possible species of which we can say that it would have been the species of unicorns” (Kripke 1980: 156–157): the application is not unknown but undetermined. “Justice” is not Feynman; it is nearer the unicorn. Kripke also explains why enforced stipulation succeeds where it does: the meter stipulation “determined the reference” of the phrase without making it synonymous with the reference-fixing description (Kripke 1980: 56). Enforcement structures can propagate a reference-fixing convention, which is why “planet” settled; they do not thereby generate convergence in application for capital-bearing terms, which is why legal codifications of “religion” settle nothing.

Stevenson. Stevenson is the account’s closest ancestor and strongest rival. He explains interminability without any thesis about unfinished meaning: “the empirical method can resolve ethical disagreement, or any other kind of disagreement in interest, only when this is rooted in a disagreement in belief” (Stevenson 1938: 349). But the account is synchronic and individual, and it over-predicts: interests diverge over “tall” and “rude” without genealogical warfare. The completion account is diachronic and social. It predicts which terms attract the interest-conflict, those with accumulated capital and low convergence, and the deaths of Section 4.3, which Stevenson cannot, since no party’s interests changed when “Christendom” expired. Stevenson

describes the repeated act of capture; the completion account explains the equilibrium, the selectivity, and the deaths.

Metalinguistic negotiation and conceptual engineering. The nearest contemporary relatives are the dynamic lexicon (Ludlow 2014), metalinguistic negotiation (Plunkett and Sundell 2013), and the conceptual-engineering program (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b; Cappelen 2018). The completion account shares their anti-static picture and adds two things. Against the negotiation model, it explains interminability: the negotiations over suspended terms cannot close, because the negotiated asset is destroyed by settlement. Against engineering, a distinction must be drawn between the *evaluative* question, which concepts we ought to use, the guiding question of conceptual ethics (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b: 1102), and the *executive* question, what would bring a community to use them. The account is silent on the first and decisive on the second: engineering proposals are interpretations, and the program's persistent "implementation problem" (Cappelen 2018: 72–79) is not an obstacle on the road but the road's absence, wherever completion must pass through an open community of interested speakers. Jorem replies that the problem dissolves once implementation is construed broadly, through speaker-meaning, modulation, or new languages (Jorem 2021: 187); the account agrees such channels exist and adds the fact they do not touch: for suspended terms every channel is blocked by parties whose interest is the blocking. The feasibility condition is jurisdictional. "Planet" is the paradigm not because the 2006 process was frictionless, the committee's proposal was overturned within days (Ludlow 2014: 41–51), but because every party with a stake in "planet" was an astronomer; and the DSM, an authority whose stakeholders extend far beyond its jurisdiction, has legislated across five editions without converging anything (Geekie and Read 2009: 139). The prediction has, so far, held.

6. Objections

The communication objection. Speakers communicate successfully with "liberalism"; therefore it has a meaning; therefore CT is false. The objection equivocates on "has a meaning." CT grants a completed core, and successful communication lives there; what it denies is a fact of the matter in the disputed region, where communication does fail: that is what the disputes are. Surface fluency is compatible with deep divergence: speakers of "the same dialect" have acquired grammars differing in far more respects than their speech betrays (Davidson 1986: 444).

The externalist objection. Meaning is fixed by reference, not convergence; "water" meant H₂O before anyone converged on that. The account accepts externalism for the class where it works: terms tracking a mind-independent kind capable of completing the meaning from outside. Two arguments confine the class. First, the founder's concession: where the world supplies no kind, application is undetermined, not merely undiscovered (Kripke 1980: 156–157). Second, the social form of externalism requires a deference stratum, and for "justice" none exists, or several compete, which is the suspension condition restated (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a: 1098). Evnine's historical externalism, on which contested terms apply via descent from "an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users" (Evnine 2014: 126), concedes the point in its condition: where exemplar authority is itself contested, as Section 4.1's genealogical warfare shows, descent fixes nothing. Externalism about "justice" is not a rival theory; it is a hope.

The shared-concept objection. Väyrynen argues that "two thinkers can have the same concept and grasp the same word meaning, thereby addressing the same topic, while having different views concerning its correct extension" (Väyrynen 2013: 165), denying the inference from divergence to incompleteness. The decoupling succeeds where an independent determinant of extension is available, context, world, or institution. CT is a claim about the limit case, where nothing outside convergence is available and divergence just is incompleteness; the objection marks a boundary condition of the account, not a refutation.

The vagueness objection. This is just vagueness renamed. No. The honest taxonomy is three-way: vagueness, fluctuating actual use remediable by stipulation; open texture, the unforeseeability of future cases, irremediable but inert (Waismann 1945: 123); and suspension, core divergence maintained by interest, irremediable and consequential. Interest alone is not the differentia, since interest-relativity infects ordinary vague adjectives too (Fara 2000; Kamp and Sassoon 2016: 390); the differentia is that in suspension the interests are opposed and organized, each completion bid actively blocked by rivals. The mechanisms can co-occur on one term: "person" is boundaryless in Sainsbury's sense and, having acquired capital, generates the genealogical warfare that borderline "tall" never does (Sainsbury 1996: 253), a mixed case the account predicts and rivals cannot.

The bedrock objection. Chalmers holds that some interminable disputes are substantive because they

involve concepts “so basic that there is no hope of clarifying the dispute in more basic terms” (Chalmers 2011: 543). Concede that bedrock disputes exist and are not suspended. But the target terms are not bedrock on Chalmers’s own criteria: “justice” reduces under elimination to “desert,” “due,” and “ought,” the definer’s dilemma in his idiom. The discriminator is Section 4.3: bedrock disputes are capital-independent and should not die when prestige drains; the suspended ones died, and “Christendom” had the same conceptual structure after its stakes left as before. Suspension is a third kind of dispute for which the verbal/bedrock partition has no slot: verbal in Chalmers’s sense, yet neither pointless nor resolvable, because something does rest on it, the capital he himself concedes (Chalmers 2011: 517).

The overgeneration objection. “Knowledge” and “cause” carry institutional capital, law trades on both, yet post-Gettier epistemology is not capture warfare. The reply is that their capital is held through completed surrogates: courts convict on “beyond reasonable doubt” and compensate under doctrinal tests of proximate causation, so capture of the bare philosophical term pays almost nothing and the dispute stays academic in both senses. Where no surrogate insulates the term and its bare occurrence is load-bearing, as with “person” and “religion” in constitutional law, the predicted warfare duly appears: warfare tracks the point where capital actually attaches.

The decontestation objection. Freeden observes that concepts achieve stable meaning within ideologies (Freeden 1996; Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006: 218), so convergence is achieved locally after all. But decontestation is sectoral completion, convergence within a party rather than across the community, and sectoral settlement is not partial completion but the machinery of suspension: each party’s internal settlement makes its bid credible and its blockade of rivals firm.

The reflexivity objection. Is the meaning of “completion” itself complete? The account is stated in terms whose completion degrees are high, and where its key terms are incomplete it treats its statements as bids for convergence, the standard condition of revisionary theorizing: “the case for revisionism about a given concept of philosophical interest will often be in danger of relying on that very concept” (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b: 1108), and Waismann supplies the precedent for a philosophical position that is a critical attitude rather than a completed doctrine (Waismann 1945: 134).

The quietism objection. If suspended disputes cannot be resolved, why argue? Because the account redirects rather than dissolves the arguments, and nothing in it implies that all bids are equally good. Meaning litigation is normatively governed (Ludlow 2014: 39, 63); within the penumbra “there is such a thing as better and worse judgement, just as in art there are connoisseurs” (Hacker 2019: 164). The account’s claim is narrower: assessment does not aggregate into convergence where capture pays. Knowing the dispute over “liberalism” to be a capture contest clarifies what winning would be and what it would cost.

7. Consequences

For *philosophical methodology*, the account reassigns the discipline’s task with respect to suspended terms. Analysis of “justice” cannot terminate in the correct account, since there is nothing complete to be correct about; but analysis remains the sole instrument for mapping incompleteness, locating the convergent core, and exposing the capital flows that keep the rest contested. This is Peirce’s deflation of definition given a social rationale: definition sets existing beliefs in order and adds nothing (Peirce 1878: 288). Philosophy of the suspended vocabulary is cartography and auditing, not mining, and this is a demotion only for those who thought the mine was real.

For *conceptual engineering*, the account delivers a feasibility condition. A proposal succeeds reliably only where a propagation structure exists whose jurisdiction covers the term’s stakeholders; where none exists, proposals join the debate they were meant to end. The condition is jurisdictional coverage, not authority as such: the wartime medical debates over “shock,” with criteria differing between authorities at measurable research cost (Hacker 2019: 294), and the DSM’s serial legislation of “psychosis” show maximal authority failing where stakeholders outrun the jurisdiction. Engineers should therefore evaluate targets by institutional topology before conceptual defect; the conceptual-ethics literature has opened room for the parameter in conceding that “which concepts are available for use can affect which concepts ought to be used” (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b: 1106).

For the *ethics of debate*, the diagnosis must carry Stevenson’s guardrail: to point out persuasion “is not necessarily to condemn it” (Stevenson 1938: 339), and advocacy through a suspended term is not itself a fault, since every party must speak from some extension. The fault comes in two grades. The innocent case is the speaker who cannot see his bid as a bid,

a misperception the negotiation literature predicts to be systematic (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 23). The culpable case is the speaker who can, and who trades on his audience's inability: wielding a suspended term as if complete, his favored extension as the meaning and dissenters as incompetent, he conceals a bid as a fact. Stevenson warned that persuasion "can so easily acquire a spurious appeal by masking itself in the guise of a logical analysis" (Stevenson 1938: 338); to choose a meaning "is to take sides in a social struggle" (Stevenson 1938: 344). A public that understood suspension would not stop fighting over "freedom," but it would know a land grab when it heard one.

8. Conclusion

The account answers the three research questions in order. Definitions fail to end certain debates because a definition is a move within an institution process, bounded by the completion degrees of its own vocabulary, and only convergence performs the task assigned to definition (RQ1). The terms whose disputes are interminable have accumulated institutional capital while remaining unconverged, so that every party gains from capture, loses from rivals' capture, and blocks completion as the price of keeping the prize in play (RQ2). Completion can be deliberately achieved where a propagation structure exists whose jurisdiction covers the term's stakeholders, which is why "planet" and "dead" completed while "democracy" cannot, and it ends spontaneously when the capital drains and the players follow the stakes out of the arena (RQ3).

The picture that results is neither skeptical nor complacent. It is, in the strict sense, unfinished, as it must be: an account of incompleteness that claimed completeness would refute itself in the asking. What it offers is a change of expectation. We have spent twenty-five centuries waiting for the definitions of our deepest words to arrive, and blaming each other, meanwhile, for the delay. The completion account suggests that the delay is the message. Some words are not late. They are suspended, and we, who hold them up, are why.

9. References

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