Reviews


Reviewed by Kerri K. Morris, University of Alaska Anchorage

In 1995 Edward Schiappa argued in the introduction to Warranting Assent: Case Studies in Argument Evaluation (SUNY), an edited collection of essays, that evaluating contemporary arguments—more specifically, current deliberative and judicial texts—was the legitimate work of scholars. For the purposes of that book, he described the past practice of rhetorical analysis as a scholarly activity that refused to evaluate arguments on any other grounds than their "rhetorical" success, offering no judgments about their relative importance, value, sensibility, or effect on the context in which they occurred. As a result of this sort of rhetorical analysis, rhetoricians have created exemplar texts that are necessarily reified and static, he observes, important for their strategies but not for their ability to advocate good courses of action, to pose helpful solutions to problems, or to prevent harm.

He further argues that we have rejected our role as critics in the culture when we describe our academic practice as somehow value neutral and work hard to resist the role of advocate by embracing only the descriptive or historical aspects of our field. We ask, "Is this artful?" or "Is this successful?" or "Is this clever?" rather than asking, "Is this good?" or "Is this supportable?" or "Is this mindful of cultural values?" Schiappa’s goal in that text was to present argument evaluations engaged in both critical and normative roles and that offered theoretical models with which this might be legitimately done.

His most recent book, Defining Reality: Definition and the Politics of Meaning, could be considered volume two of that project. He offers a theoretical approach to argument evaluation by investigating the process of definition and applying it to contemporary arguments. The result is a compilation of rhetorical and pragmatic theories about the role of
language in constructing reality that Schiappa synthesizes into a practical analytical approach and a valuable critique of the ways in which metaphysical or essentializing definitions undermine our ability to propose arguments about a wide range of issues.

*Defining Reality* begins with two chapters devoted to the theoretical underpinnings of his project, attending to both linguistic and philosophical notions of language and definitions. Part Two focuses on arguments about definition contextualized within specific debates: definitions of “death” with regard to medical practices at the end of life, definitions of “rape” with regard to legal judgments about marital and date rape, definitions of “wetlands” with regard to the first Bush administration’s environmental policies, and definitions of “person” with regard to the abortion debate. In Part Three, he turns to the concept of entitlement—or, more specifically, how the Cincinnati Mapplethorpe trial succeeded in labeling controversial photographs as art, how Ronald Reagan used domestication and bureaucratization to legitimize nuclear weaponry, and how the terms “public,” “personal,” and “technical” provide political power to majorities and to scientists and other specialists. The conclusion reiterates and summarizes Schiappa’s “pragmatic approach to definition.”

His argument is straightforward. Metaphysical and essentialist definitions fail us because they seek to describe a reality that doesn’t exist. Instead, Schiappa argues that we construct reality through definitions and they are “the result of a shared understanding of the world and are both the product of past persuasion and a resource for future persuasion.” Instead of asking, “What is $X$?” we should define terms by asking, “How ought we to use the word $X$ given our needs and interests?” or we should entitle phenomena by asking, “What should count as $X$ in context $C$?” These questions should inform our discourse because, “Definitions describe the world, but they do so prescriptively.” In addition, we should be mindful that definitions are political because they “both . . . serve particular interests and because definitions involve issues of power and influence.”

Consistent with his Rortian pragmatism is Schiappa’s insistence that theory and analysis be put to work in the world so that we might live better and so that we might take responsibility for our discourse practices. At the end of the book, Schiappa refers to his readers as “citizens” who should engage in argument, summarizing the book’s goals in this way: “What I hope to have added, by focusing on definitional disputes, is a sense of urgency about the need for public engagement with the definitional
arguments that shape our world. . . . As technology and politics grow increasingly complex, the temptation to surrender the authority to define our world to those who claim to be in touch with Reality in ways that we are not will increase. If it is agreed that definitions are made, not found, then we are encouraged to resist that temptation and face the responsibility of knowing that the process of definition is social through and through.”

For Schiappa, as for Rorty, reflection and theorizing offer little value when they aim to describe true definitions, to discover the essential nature of a thing, because they fail to attend to the practices and behaviors of the language-using communities that construct and then use the definitions. Instead, Schiappa’s pragmatic theory argues that definitions should be prescriptive: we should propose our own persuasively argued construction of how a thing should be seen or understood based on what we value.

For example, chapter six is devoted to definitions of “person” with regard to the abortion debate. The focus of the chapter is to argue that our definitions of “person” should not seek to answer, “What is a person?” but rather, “How should we use “person” in the abortion debate?” Central to the popular argument against abortion is the metaphysical equation: fetus = live human being = person. Schiappa observes that despite its popular persistence, however, Kenneth Starr, representing anti-abortionists in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, resists this “real” definition because of its judicial cost. Defining a fetus as a person would result in a host of common practices being translated into murder, including abortions performed to save a woman’s life and abortions performed because a pregnancy resulted from rape. While Starr argued that the issue of whether a fetus is a person was too complex a question for the court (rather than arguing against a metaphysical position per se), he clearly understands that a “real” definition will fail to meet the practical needs of the community he represents.

Even more instructive of his claim that definitions are necessarily prescriptive and that they always invoke the political is Schiappa’s discussion of George Bush’s commitment to wetlands in the late 1980s. He reminds us that as a candidate in 1988 George Bush promised unequivocally to preserve all wetlands. When he became President of the United States, however, he realized the consequences of this pledge. While Bush was committed to not losing property designated as “wetlands,” he was also committed to not alienating the powerful pro-business contingent. Bush created a “Domestic Policy Council” to redefine “wet-
lands” so that he could fulfill a campaign promise while allowing valuable land to be developed by businesses.

The attempt to redefine wetlands was ultimately unsuccessful, but it helpfully illustrates the unstable nature of all definitions, even technical ones. Schiappa notes that critics complained about Bush’s attempt to offer a new definition because of its agenda: “The proposed redefinition was branded ‘political’ and contrasted to the current ‘scientific’ definition.” However, Schiappa argues that even “scientific” definitions are contingent and that they reverberate far outside the community of science, exerting strong influence over practice: “Power to define is power to influence behavior. . . . The success of any definition depends on how effectively its advocates persuade (or coerce) members of a given community to conform and use the term ‘properly.’” Schiappa warns that accepting scientific definitions as nonpolitical, disinterested, and as reflections of what is real is ceding power to one social group, among many. We must always investigate whose interests are at stake, because interests always are “served by definitions; the only question is whose interests.”

Both of these examples illustrate evaluations that the average, left-leaning rhetorician will find unsurprising and comforting. However, we rarely discuss these sorts of policy matters in scholarly conversations. Nor do we embrace the role of normative judgment by crafting definitions that can persuasively influence behaviors. Schiappa is quietly urging us into this role. He offers three *topoi*—history, values, and power relations—as the means through which we can analyze arguments and their attendant definitions. In doing so, Schiappa seems to embrace an expected critique, and one that is predictably lodged against pragmatists, which would accuse him of essentializing history, values, and power relations in place of the “real,” and the “true” nature of words and arguments. He readily agrees that he wants to “reverse the age-old definitional practice that can be described as ‘valorization of essence’ and replace it with the pragmatic essentializing of values.” We are asked to accept that descriptions of the world are always prescriptive, normative judgments about the sort of world that we would like to live in.

*Defining Reality* is an important book whose virtues include an enviable readability that enables it to be used as a text in an advanced undergraduate argument course and a venerable complexity that will enhance our theoretically-informed practice of argument evaluation. However, it is more radical than Schiappa leads us to believe it is. Chapters one and two and the conclusion seem at pains to establish his
theory of definition as accepted practice among philosophers and as a synthesis of already articulated ideas. Yet, his assertion that definitions are fundamentally circular would be rejected out of hand by a significant portion of analytical philosophers. His argument is at least as controversial as Richard Rorty’s claims that we have only arguments to make about how the world should work, unsupported by truth or reality.

Our obligation is only to construct a world in which we can live, to propose a world in which we should live, that is persuasive enough to be accepted by our culture, despite the inherent falsity of proof. Rorty’s project is as much a thoroughgoing attack on the practice of analytical philosophy, and one that even many pragmatists resist, as it is a proposal for how discourse can negotiate society’s conflicts. Schiappa’s project is more an anthem for rhetoric, urging us to take control away from the Platonic bonds of definition that have enslaved us than it is a synthesis of ideas that everyone agrees with. He implicitly lays the groundwork for this Platonic attack in his 1999 book, *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece*. Perhaps Schiappa wanted to clothe the theory in *Defining Reality* in unassuming practicality in order to avoid that controversy of the 1999 book, which inspired frenzied scholarly conversation about the history of rhetoric for years after its publication. But I would have been more comfortable if he had given in to the radical notions that this rhetorical statement propounds. *Defining Reality* should serve as a call for scholars of rhetoric to construct a better world through our practices of argument and through a normative scholarly enterprise of analysis.


Reviewed by Byron Hawk, George Mason University

Though early hypertext theory recognized its print precursors in the texts of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, most theorists initially linked hypertext conceptually to one medium—digital texts—and focused on one primary element to distinguish these texts from print: the link. Espen Aarseth remedied this narrow view of hypertext by articulating the