

“Essential”: What’s in a Word?

Are you an “essential worker” who needs to be on the job? Do you run a “non-essential business” that’s required to close and isn’t eligible for a government bailout? When you leave your home is it for “essential travel” or are you engaging in “non-essential activity?”

“Essential” versus “non-essential” may be the single most significant word pairing that’s come out of the COVID-19 panic and its associated shutdowns, lockdowns, and shakedowns.

But I haven’t seen many attempts to actually define the words (laundry lists of activities the issuing authority approves or disapproves or aren’t definitions). What do they actually mean?

Among the definitions offered in the 1913 edition of *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, I suspect this is the definition of “essential” we’re looking for:

“Important in the highest degree; indispensable to the attainment of an object; indispensably necessary.”

But that definition raises more questions than it answers: Important to whom? Indispensable to the attainment of what object? Necessary why?

Those same questions, of course, are also relevant to what makes an activity unimportant, dispensable, and unnecessary, i.e. “non-essential.”

I can’t really answer those questions, but I have a good idea how, and by whom, they can and can’t be answered.

The best mechanism for answering questions pertaining to how essential a business or a job might be is called “the market.”

If customers consider a business “essential,” they’ll do business with it. If not, they won’t.

If employers consider a job “essential,” they’ll pay what it takes to convince someone to do that job. If not, they won’t.

Yes, it really is that simple. Those judgments may change over time and for different situations, but the aggregate judgments of billions of customers and millions of business owners constitute a pretty reliable indicator of what is or isn’t important, indispensable, and necessary.

The judgments of politicians and bureaucrats, on the other hand, are only a reliable

indicator of one thing: What serves or doesn't serve the desire of politicians and bureaucrats to order the rest of us around and run our lives.

The "shutdown, lockdown, shakedown" response to COVID-19 wasn't just unnecessary: It will almost certainly turn out to have killed more people than COVID-19 itself.

Patients with non-COVID-19 illnesses have had procedures pushed back as "non-essential." Some of them are going to unnecessarily die.

Crops are rotting in the fields. Some people are going to starve. Maybe even in America.

People with debilitating mental conditions already pushing them toward suicidal thoughts are locked in their homes. Some of them are going to surrender to those thoughts.

Businesses, workers and customers were far more competent than politicians and bureaucrats to decide what needed to shut down or be re-arranged. They should have been left free to make those decisions instead of being brought under absolute despotism.

As the panic winds down and the world gets back to work, our top political priority must be to deprive politicians and bureaucrats of power to ever pull this kind of authoritarian con on us again.