

# Interpreting the Australian income tax G H I L Q L W L R Q    R I    μ R U G L Q D U incantation or analysis, when examined through the lens of early twentieth century linguistic philosophy?

Mark Burton

## Abstract

This article examines the interpretation of subsection 5(6) of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 (Cth). The High Court of Australia has concluded that subsection 5(1) should be understood upon the basis that it adopts some or all of the elements of the oft-quoted dictum of Sir Frederick Jordan in *Snott v Commissioner of Taxation*. The article shows that different decisions of the High Court of Australia have adopted different statements of the elements of the dictum that ought to be referred to, and some decisions of the High Court have ignored the dictum altogether. Moreover, no High Court decision has analysed the statement of Jordan CJ. This article addresses this absence of analysis by offering an analysis of that dictum having regard to the vibrant, contemporaneous linguistic philosophy of the early twentieth century. This analysis suggests that Sir Frederick - R U G D Q ¶ V G L F W X P'9#9#9#9#9." X Pš" C'9#9#D # "#w 'r 'ordinary income,

statutory interpretation, linguistic philosophy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the heart of the Australian income tax one of the core assessing provisions<sup>1</sup> section 65(1) of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 (Cth) ± V W D W H V W K D W μ assessable income includes income according to ordinary concepts, which is called R U G L Q D U \ L Q F R P H ¶ 7 K L V μ S O D L Q O D Q J X D J H ¶ G H I L Q I common public acknowledgement that a clearer id Q L W L R Q R I μ L Q F R P H ¶ Z D However, statutory guidance regarding the meaning of ordinary income is extremely limited.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the extrinsic materials provide no clear guidance upon the meaning of the statutory terms<sup>3</sup>.

In the course of considering subsection 65(1), the High Court of Australia has emphasised the significance of the statement of Jordan ~~Sciberras~~<sup>4</sup> and has indicated W K D W V H Y H U D O H O H P H Q W V R I K L V + R Q R X U ¶ V V W D W incantation; they identify the esse ~~dictio~~ Q D W X U H R Some what confusingly ¶ different majority decisions in the High Court have adopted different statements of the H O H P H Q W V W R E H H [ W U D F W H G I U R P have been held U L F N - W K L V μ H V V H Q W L D O U Q P W & W H S D M N H I also Q manifest in the specification of the test in the lower court's extrajudicial discussion and in extrajudicial scepticism as to the basis upon which amounts are characterised for income

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Committee of Public Accounts, Commonwealth Parliament, Report No 326 (1993) 76. Prior to the enactment of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 (Cth), Australian income tax legislation at both federal and state levels referred to K H J H Q H U D O F R Q F H S W R I μ L Q F R P H W D [ G

tax purposes<sup>10</sup>. Writing extrajudicially, Chief Justice French opined that judicial IR UP X O D W L R Q V RI WKH L Q F R P H F R Q F H S W e e , Z H U H p E J H Q H U D O ' L R e d i n g R o Q t h e l High Court decision in McNeil,<sup>12</sup> his Honour R E V H U Y H G W K D W W K H G H i m p l y b r a q u l e x p r e s s e d w i t h i d n K R Z the one hand attracts a plethora of judicial exposition such that some would say the true P H D Q L Q J RI WKH V W D W X W H L I .<sup>13</sup> L W K D V R Q H L V E X U L H

This confusion regarding the terms that subsection 5(16) is taken to incorporate, and also the meaning of those terms, is difficult to dispel because of the absence of close D Q D O \ V L V RI WKH H O H P H Q W V RI 6 L U ) U H G H U L F N - R U G D that apparently adopt that statement.<sup>14</sup> The absence of such analysis is cause for T X H V W L R Q L Q J WKH + L J K & R X U W ¶ V R E V H U Y D W L R Q W K D not a matter of ritual incantation, , I 6 L U ) U H G H U L F N - R U G D Q ¶ V V W D analysed, what would this analysis reveal? Would it reveal what might hitherto have been the hidden elements of the concept of income according to ordinary concepts? Or would such analysis expose irresolvable tensions between the elements of that statement?

This article W D N H V W K H + L J K & R X U W ¶ V U H M H F W L R Q RI U L W X D Q D O \ V L Q J WKH H O H P H Q W V RI 6 L U ) U H G H U L F N - R U G D Q is to determine whether that statement provides secure foundations for the concept of i Q F R P H D F F R U G L Q J W R R U G L Q D U \ F R Q F H S W V 7 K H U H L Q T X 6 l i r U M q n t g o m e r y

depict judges applying more or less determinate law in a manner consistent with the rule of law.<sup>18</sup>

My argument in this article is that it is necessary if the High Court is to move beyond ritual incantation that it should state that apparently specifies the essential nature of the inquiry into the meaning of income. Further, I suggest that such analysis is best undertaken through the lens of the vibrant debate regarding linguistic philosophy which emerged as West African Legal Philosophy worked included close consideration of different accounts of linguistic meaning. On one view advanced in the course of this debate, any linguistic element (a phrase, sentence,



2. LI WKH VWWDWXWRU\ ODQJXDJH LV QRW D µWHUP R µLQFRPH¶ LGHQWLJ\ WKH VHW FRPSULVLQJ µRUGL
3. review this broad set in order to identify receipts of a form that are comprehended as income under ordinary concepts and usages; and
4. consider the principles that are applied for determining how much of a receipt WKDW ILWV D UHTXLVLWH IRUP µRXJKW WR EH WU

7KXV IRU VWWDWXWRU\ WHUPV White Water Umbrella Co. Ltd. µWHU µRUGLQDU\ FRQFHSHV DQG XVDJHV¶ LV DQDO\VHG IRU principles governing inclusion in the relevant set. These forms and principles are then applied to identify members of the set identified by HtVWDWXWH VXFK DV µLQ approach examines what might be described as the logical fabric of our language that PD\ OLH µEHQHDWK¶ RU EH VHHQ WR XQGHUSLQ WKH concepts and usages.

However, on a different interpretation, the proviso in the latter part of Sir Frederick - RUGDQ¶V VWWDWHPHQW VXJJHVWV WKDW GLIIHUHQW V EH DGRSWHG 7KLV SURYLVR UHIHUV WR LGHQWLJ\ LQ SDUODQFH¶ 2HQW¶QHRLQWRHUNKLV DSSURDFK D MXGJH SDUODQFH¶ WR SURGXFH D OLVW RI UHFHLSWV WKDW RUGLQDU\ SDUODQFH¶ 2Q WKLV LQWHUSUHWDLRQ identified in the first part of the dictum, the second part of the statement focuses upon WKH µVXUIDFH PHDQLQJ¶ WKDW LV SUHVXPDEO\ REYLRSUHSUHG WR FRPSLOH D OLVW RI WKLCJT This UHIHUH interpretation appears WR EH VXSSRUWHG E\ 6LU )UHGHULFN REVHUYDWLRQV DUULYHG DW ZLWKRXW DQ\ SUHFHGL 6FRWW¶V FRPSHQVDWLRQ VXP ZDV QRW<sup>31</sup> pridQRFRPH¶ D DFFRUGLQJ WR<sup>32</sup> meaning. And it would reasonably interpret these REVHUYDWLRQV WR LPSO\ WKDW µLQFRPH¶ LV D ODEH LGHQWLJ\ WKH VHW RI UXOHV JRYHUQLQJ LQFOXVLRQ µLQFRPH¶ PD\ KDYH FRP Hora<sup>33</sup> things by Scott & Dr Goh WtRis DOO V UHDGLQJ RI WKH MXGJPHQW ZH GR QRW QHHG WR DQ DW WKH FRQFOXVLRQ WKDW µLQFRPH¶ GRHV QRW UHIH because we intuitively know that the label RWXOG QHYHU EH DSSOLHG WR RUGLQDU\ SDUODQFH¶

\$ WKLU G LQWHUSUHWDLRQ RI 6LU )UHGHULFN¶V UHII this is no more than a shorthand reference to the analytical extraction of forms/principles described in the first part of the statement. This approach would overcome the possibility of any inconsistency between the first and second parts of the statement, but RQO\ E\ DGRSWLQJ DQ LQWHUSUHWDLRQ RI µRUGLQD PDMRUI bishin Montgomery in which the majority appeared to treat the two elements as though they were not substitutable.

7KHVH WHQVLRQV ZLWKLQ 6LU )UHGHULFN¶V VWWDWHF section 5 of this article. However, for present purposes suffice it to say that Jordan CJ

<sup>30</sup> See the discussion of the naming theory of meaning in section 4.2.

<sup>31</sup> Scott v Commissioner of Taxation (1935) 35 SR (NSW) 215, 219.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

might be taken to have contemplated two quite different approaches to identifying the appropriate to review the adoption of the statement of the CJ by the High Court of decades<sup>33</sup>.

### 3. THE HIGH COURT'S ADOPTION OF THE JORDAN CJ DEFINITION OF INCOME WHEN INTERPRETING SUBSECTION 6-5(1)

In the course of considering the definition of ordinary income in subsection 6(1) in some decisions the High Court has emphasised the significance of the statement of Jordan CJ. The purpose of this section of the analysis is to establish two propositions with analysed by the High Court. Following from this first proposition, the second proposition is that this absence of analysis has allowed different judicial paraphrases of

6 LU ) U H G H U L F N ¶ V V W D W H P H Q W W R E H D G R S W H G Z L W

This statement of the majority Montgomery indicates that Sir Frederick V. V. W. D. W. H. P. H. Q.

Z D V D Q μ H Y L G<sup>39</sup> tQ We bledisibnUdfl COrFath CJ Scott 6 L U ) U H G H U L F N statement irScottwas therextracted in full.

Later in the joint judgment iStone the plurality noted that the existence of a business D F W L Y L W \ μ S H U K D S V Y H U \ R I W H Q ¶ Z L O O F D U U \ Z L W K L business activity are ordinary income<sup>40</sup>. However, the joint judgment appears to have

Memorandum accompanying the Bill for the ITAA 1997.<sup>46</sup> Deciding that section-3 applies without analysing its terms first is contrary to the description of orthodox interpretative practice set out in various High Court decisions.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly significant given the rebuttable presumptive rule of statutory interpretation that different statutory words are presumed to be intended to have a different meaning.<sup>48</sup>

D F F H S W D Q F H R I - X V W L F H 3 L V E @ l e r v M a c t u b e 54 W R I S U  
by the High Court<sup>55</sup>

In Spriggsthe unanimous Full High Court decision observed:

It was not disputed that these payments were income according to the concept  
R I μ R U G L Q D U \ L Q F R R P H W K X Q G 7 H \$ VW K D W L V Z L W K L  
concepts and usages of man C O n g Scotl.<sup>56</sup>

The endnote to this text referred to the decision of Jordan Sdott the decision in  
Stone and also to the Explanatory Memorandum accompanying the Tax  
Assessment Bill 1996.

In section2 of this article , V X J J H V W H G W K D W 6 L U ) U H S o t t U L F N - R U

rationale for displacing the statutory text of subsection 5(10) with some other judicial words more or less drawn from the statement of Sir Freder~~Scott~~

This proliferation of general statements of principle regarding the process for

This is the metaphysical aspect of statutory interpretation; and

2. Once

X Q L Y H U V D O V X F K D V μ L Q F R P H ¶ W K H U H I R U H H Q W D L O V  
L Q F R P H , Q 3 O D W R ¶ V P H W D S K R U ~~R t b e W i d l d h b s e r s~~ and X Q L Y H U  
the shadows of the Forms are seen on a cave wall. Unable to see the Forms directly, the  
observers are consigned to only ever seeing shadows of those Forms. One reading of  
the Cave metaphor is that ordinary people live their ~~reality~~ without ever seeing  
the purity of Forms, which have to be rediscovered by philosophers who ~~reveal~~ this  
priori knowledge by rational thought, rather than discovering knowledge by empirical  
investigation of the world.

Another form of realism is attributed to Aristotle. In broad terms, one reading of Aristotle<sup>64</sup> is that he accepted that universals exist, but unlike Plato, Aristotle considered



Prior to this renewed interest in language as a philosophical problem<sup>70</sup> was widely accepted that language meant what it referred to, and the use of language to refer to<sup>71</sup> b





F R Q Y H Q W L R Q D O D F F R X Q W P X V W D F F H S W W K D W μ W U X W  
L V Q R W F R Q V L V W H Q W Z L W K W K H X<sup>88</sup> Q L Y H U V D O L W \ W K D W

This philosophical examination of the foundations of linguistic meaning is relevant to the present examination of the dictum of Jordan CJ in several ways. First, linguistic philosophy highlights the fact that the foundations of the meaning of linguistic ~~dictum~~ cannot be taken for granted. Second, the first proposition is reflected in the echoes of the semantic and pragmatic threads, of both common understandings of the foundation of linguistic meaning and also of linguistic philosophy, to be found in ~~the~~ <sup>dictum</sup> of Jordan CJ, a matter taken up in ~~section~~ <sup>of</sup> this article. Third, the examination of the foundations of linguistic meaning, characteristic of linguistic philosophy, highlights the matters that one might expect to be considered if reference ~~to~~ <sup>of</sup> the dictum of Jordan CJ is to reach beyond ritual incantation with judicial analysis of the elements of the dictum.

## 5. UNDERSTANDING SIR FREDERICK JORDAN ¶



## 5.2 Analytical approaches to ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> interpretation of non-technical statutory language

In this context we can begin to ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~interpretation~~ of non-technical statutory language by adopting his forms/principles framework. This framework for interpreting the ~~statute~~<sup>statute</sup> commonly referred to by judges when considering the general principles of statutory construction.<sup>107</sup> When these textual formulae are adopted it seems to be implicitly assumed that the ordinary, natural or literal meaning is ~~immediately~~<sup>immediately</sup> apparent or readily accessed, for example by reference to dictionaries.<sup>108</sup>

Identifying the meaning of ~~non-technical~~<sup>non-technical</sup> language. In the same way that linguistic philosophy accepted that rules governing the linguistic meaning could be revealed by analysis, Sir Frederick indicated that language usage and concepts ~~need to be analysed~~<sup>need to be analysed</sup> in order to arrive at the meaning of natural language terms. Forms of receipt are ~~to be~~<sup>to be</sup> ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~same~~<sup>same</sup> ~~as~~<sup>as</sup> ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~meaning~~<sup>meaning</sup> of ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> word, stating that ~~it~~<sup>it</sup> both semantic analysis of the word and conventional analysis of the use of the word. The preceding overview of linguistic philosophy indicates that this part of Sir ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~state~~<sup>state</sup> ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> ~~embodies~~<sup>embodies</sup> a potentially irresolvable conflict between competing semantic and pragmatic accounts of the foundation of linguistic meaning.

It is clear whether the ~~statute~~<sup>statute</sup> contemplated by Sir ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~state~~<sup>state</sup> ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> ~~embodies~~<sup>embodies</sup> evident on the surface of ordinary language usage or it could be referring to norms that lie hidden beneath surface usage in circumstances where the usage does not necessarily reflect those





d L I I L F X O W W R V H H K R Z μ S U L Q F L S O H V ¶ F D Q E H D F F R P P  
 which things have an essence that is defined in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria.  
 If a receipt has a form of a kind that warrants its inclusion under the category of F R P H ¶  
 because its essence corresponds with the essence of income, a realist would reject the  
 S U R S R V L W L R Q W K D W W K H S D U W L F X O D U D P R X Q W F D Q Q  
 override the essential nature of the receipt. This suggests that Sir Edele cannot have  
 meant to adopt some version of philosophical realism when referring to forms of receipt.

, I 6 L U ) U H G H U L F N ¶ V U H I H U H Q F H W R μ I R U P V R I U H F H L S  
 also does not refer to philosophical realism, what are rules governing identification  
 R I W K H U H O H Y D Q W I R U P V " \$ Q G K R Z G R μ S U L Q F L S O H V ¶  
 could principles affect the types of form comprehended within the concept of income?  
 7 K H V H D V S H F W V R I 6 L U ) U H G e s b l u e d F N ¶ V V W D W H P H Q W U H

Moreover, his Honour did not elaborate upon the reasons for adopting this dual forms/principles inquiry. However, adopting the convention of interpreting statements in their best possible light, it is reasonable to speculate that his Honour had the benefit of undertaking a preliminary cull of forms of receipt that could never satisfy the concept of income described by the principles considered in the second stage of the inquiry. For example, the relatively blunt instrument of assessing forms of receipts could enable a judge to quickly dispose of many cases without recourse to the second stage identification and application of principles. If a gains concept of income were to be extracted from ordinary concepts and usages, benefiting from the provision of infrastructure could be considered to be a gain<sup>114</sup>; however, exclusion of such benefits X S R Q W K H E D V L V R I W K H L U I R U P V X F ¶ or the absence of E v H Q F H P R I D μ U<sup>115</sup> Eddle saw the need for close consideration and application of the second stage principles.

This forms/principles approach therefore has intuitive cognitive appeal because it accords with two cognitive approaches that humans routinely adopt when categorising things ± application of necessary and sufficient criteria and also consideration of concept theories when classifying more problematic cases<sup>116</sup>; however, the cognitive power of this two

CJ departed from that simplistic account of natural language meaning by suggesting that analysis of ordinary concepts and usages and ordinary parlance would reveal the forms of income receipt and principles to be applied in characterising receipts as income.

\$ O W K R X J K μ L Q F R P H ¶ Z D V W R E H H O D E R U D W H G E \ D Q D C  
CJ, the ordinariness of the language elements subjected to judicial analysis promotes

decision in Stone<sup>122</sup>. This absence of precision appears to have allowed some judges to adopt a range of approaches to the concept of ordinary income. While underpinned by the particular receipt<sup>123</sup>, while a gains concept of income can also be considered.<sup>124</sup>



### 5.9.1 Dictionary definitions

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary<sup>10</sup> also indicates two relevant senses in which together, it is plausible that  $\mu R U G L Q D U \parallel LV FR P P R Q O \parallel XV H G \mu R U G L Q D U \parallel D F F R U G D Q G \mu R U G L Q D U \parallel D F F R U G L Q J WR WKH L Q W U L Q V L F Q D$

applicable for those who subscribe to philosophical realism<sup>131</sup> because the definition may identify the necessary and sufficient criteria that must exist in reality (the real essence of the thing) or they may identify the necessary and sufficient criteria that must be satisfied by convention.<sup>132</sup>

The classical theory of concepts resonates with legal rule formalism according to rule formalism, the meaning of a legal concept (such as income) is identified having r H J D U G W R L W V V H W R I G H I L Q L W L R Q D O U X O H V D Q G W K R I W K H μ I D F W S D W W H U Q ¶ F R P S U L V L Q J R X U V H Q V R U \ S H [ D P L Q D W L R Q 2 Q H F D Q W K H Q P H F K D Q L D F D W O S D Q M H W H H U Q corresponds to the definitional rules of the concept.

Although classical theories of concepts were the predominant paradigm for concepts until the latter half of the twentieth century<sup>134</sup>, they have been subjected to considerable criticism in contemporary philosophy and cognitive psychology upon several grounds.<sup>135</sup> One limitation is that it is extremely difficult to identify a concept that satisfies the classical focus upon definitional rules that comprehensively specify necessary and sufficient conditions for their application.<sup>136</sup> A second difficulty is that the classical theory implies that all members of a class would be identified with more or less equivalent speed because of the binary nature of determining whether each of the necessary and sufficient conditions were respectively satisfied. However, experimental data indicates that this is not the case because individuals exhibit μ W \ S L F D O L W \ H I I H F W V ¶ L Q S U R F H μ V L R Q S O M H H F D S B Ø L D F D readily identified to fall wW K L Q D F R Q F H S W W K D Q μ G L I I L F X O W ¶ F D

One explanation for these typicality effects is that the definitional rules comprising concepts may be fuzzy. With respect to the concept of income, the High Court appears to have accepted that this is the case *Arlatis*, W K H P D M R U L W \ ¶ V M R L Q W M X C to acknowledge that a criterial approach to identifying the concept of income was not discernible in the income tax case law:

There is a difficulty in making good absolute propositions in this field. In *Federal Commissioner of Taxation v Montgomery*, Gaudron, Gummow, Kirby and Hayne JJ recognised that income is often (but not always) a product of

<sup>131</sup> See the discussion in section 4.1.1 above.

<sup>132</sup> A point noted, for example, by Edouard Machery, *Doing Without Concepts* (Oxford University Press, 2009) 78. Thus, the classical theory of concepts is not describing a universal thing of the kind of a Platonic bers of a

exploitation of capital; income is often (but not always) recurrent or periodical; receipts from carrying on a ~~busiss~~ are mostly (but not always) income<sup>138</sup>

By contrast, the High Court in *Montgomery* appeared to adopt a criterial approach in identifying the concept of the class of all inquiries into the meaning of income by specifying the essential nature of such *inqui*siti<sup>139</sup>. However, the vagaries of Sir



6 R Z K H Q F R Q V L G H U L Q J Z K H W K H U D Q D P R X Q W L V μ R U suggests that if the receipt matches my exemplars of income in ~~several aspects~~ (beneficially received, etc) but does not match other properties of my exemplar (ie receipt is irregular) then I apply a function (multiplicative, for example) in weighing whether the receipt is income. In the absence of express ~~considerations~~ function, it is possible for different judges and others to apply different functions in resolving a particular case, a process loosely described as determining the weight to be given to particular facts.

The unspecified application of this ~~function~~ underpinned the reservations regarding analogical reasoning ~~in the application of an exemplar concept of concept~~ expressed by the majority in Montgomery 0 gET Q Q q 0.00001 1 (in)(e )-327(a 220.1( )-.2v [(e 0 (mini

D U H W U H D W H G V L<sup>163</sup> T Q J S, U O E x a m p l e W a k t i f i c i a l P h o n e G f domains may be separated upon the principle of differentiating those things that have been created intentionally from those that arose without deliberate action. Accidental inventions may pose a challenge for this neat categorisation, but ~~theis~~ that the theory theory envisions a metatheoretical structure within which concepts (possibly comprising minitheories) will be organised.

In the context of the income tax, ~~the~~ theory theory of income could be grounded upon some concept of justice. Benefit theory<sup>164</sup> and gains theory<sup>165</sup> are alternate options that

### 5.9.8 Is there an ordinary concept of a concept

The preceding overview of different concepts of concepts indicates that there is considerable difficulty in identifying those concepts which are ordinary, in the sense of widely used or attested.

I μ Z L G H O \ X V H G R U D W W H V W H G ¶ L V X Q G H U V W R R G W R possible that K H V H W L G H Q W L I L H G E \ W K H O D E H O μ R U G L Q D U no concept of a concept is preferred. Rather, it is possible that different ideas of concepts are applied by different people and in different contexts. However, I suggest that it is appropriate to adopt the interpretative presumption against meaningless statutory words E \ S U R F H H G L Q J X S R Q W K H E D V L V W K D W μ Z L G H O \ X V H concept of a concept is preferred. Rather, widely used can be understood to mean μ F P R P R Q O \ I R X Q G L Q X V D J H ¶ 7 K X V J L Y H Q W K D W D W O H concepts described here are commonly accepted to be found in common usage, the O H J L V O D W L Y H U H I H U H Q F H W R μ R U G L Q D U \ F R Q F H S W V ¶

However, proceeding on this basis does not resolve the difficulty of identifying ordinary concepts because the ordinary concept of a concept could include all manner of theories of concepts. If so, a judge must extract a concept of income after considering a multitude of possibly incomparable, ordinary concepts of income, and that choice is not guided by any principle expressed in the legislation or the case law.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In *Montgomery v Gardiner*, the High Court stated that a statement made in the course of the trial identified the essential nature of the inquiry into the meaning of income and that this statement was not a matter of ritual incantation. In doing so, the High Court juxtaposed ritual incantation with analysis, implying that statutory meaning is an object that can be discovered by analysis of the relevant statutory text in accordance with orthodox principles of statutory interpretation.

Despite this legalist depiction of the objective discovery of law, the meaning of the subsection 6 "0\$.)

