

## A Dialogue with Beau

I always have trouble explaining the concepts of necessary and sufficient condition to my students. No matter what I say, the students get confused. Ironically, these concepts are among the most important in a philosopher's repertoire. This time around, I decided to use an example. It's based on a discussion I had with my six-year-old nephew, Beau, in the summer of 1987. I wanted to find out how he understood (i.e., conceived of, conceptualized) breakfast. The setting is a picnic table on the deck of his house in Vassar, Michigan.

**Keith:** Beau, let me ask you some questions.

**Beau (curious, as ever):** Okay.

**Keith:** If you woke up this morning and ate Cheerios, would that be breakfast?

**Beau (a look of bewilderment on his face):** Yeah.<sup>1</sup>

**Keith:** What if you got up this morning and ate a hamburger and French fries? Would that be breakfast?

**Beau (giggling):** Yeah, but it would be a *weird* breakfast! One time me and Jared had pizza for breakfast. Mom got mad.<sup>2</sup>

**Keith:** Beau, your dad goes to work in the afternoon and comes home late at night, doesn't he?

**Beau (visibly puzzled by this line of questioning):** Yeah.

**Keith:** What time does he get up?

**Beau:** I don't know; about ten o'clock. Then he goes to the garden. I don't know why he goes to that darn garden.

**Keith:** Did your dad ever go to work later than that—at night?

**Beau (distracted, then perky):** No. *Yeah*, a long time ago. He would leave for work after me and Jared went to bed.

**Keith:** What if your dad was still working that shift? What time would he get home from work?

**Beau:** In the morning, when we were waking up. Sometimes he brought gum.

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1. I already know a lot about Beau's conception of breakfast. Three things are jointly sufficient: (1) that it be a certain kind of meal (Cheerios); (2) that it be in the morning; and (3) that it be the first meal after waking. Whenever these three things occur, together, there is breakfast. But are they individually necessary? That's the next line of inquiry.

2. This response shows that eating Cheerios (or some other traditional breakfast food) is *not necessary* for a meal to be breakfast. In other words, it would still be breakfast, according to Beau, if a person were to eat a hamburger and French fries after waking in the morning. Note: A "weird breakfast" is still a breakfast.

**Keith:** What if your dad was still working that night shift and ate Cheerios when he got home in the morning? Would that be breakfast?

**Beau (laughing):** He didn't *eat* Cheerios when he got home!<sup>3</sup>

**Keith:** But what if he did? What if he came home in the morning after working all night and ate a bowl of Cheerios? Would that be breakfast?

**Beau (frustrated by my persistence):** I don't *know!* Why are you asking me all these dumb questions, anyway?

**Keith:** I'm just trying to find out what breakfast is.

**Beau (indignant):** You *know* what breakfast is! You're in college!

**Keith:** I want to know what breakfast is to *you*. Here's the question again: What if your dad was still working that night shift and came home to eat Cheerios? Would that be breakfast?

**Beau:** I guess. But it never happened.<sup>4</sup>

**Keith:** All right. Now imagine something different. Imagine that when your dad was working all night, he came home and went to sleep. That's what he did, didn't he?

**Beau:** Sometimes—but sometimes he stayed up and worked in that stupid garden. He makes us work out there, you know.

**Keith:** That's awful. What does he make you do?

**Beau (pouting):** Carry junk. And he yells at us if we step on anything.

**Keith:** What if he went to sleep when he came home, then got up in the afternoon and ate Cheerios? Would that be breakfast?

**Beau:** I don't even know if he *likes* Cheerios.

**Keith:** Okay, but he does eat cereal, doesn't he?

**Beau:** Yeah, sometimes.

**Keith:** Then suppose he got up in the afternoon and ate cereal. Would that be breakfast?

**Beau:** Well, if he got up and ate it, then it must be breakfast.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Beau is obviously not a philosopher. Did you see how fast he dismissed my hypothetical question?

4. Assuming that Beau is sincere (i.e., believes what he says), I know that the order of the meal is *not a necessary condition* of being breakfast. Beau has admitted that a meal can be breakfast even though it's not the first meal that one eats upon waking.

5. Oddly enough, this shows that eating in the morning is *not a necessary condition* of being breakfast. On Beau's conception, none of the three conditions that I mentioned (a certain kind of meal, the meal eaten in the morning, and the first meal that one eats after waking) is necessary for a meal to be breakfast. Of course, I could have gone further with the questioning, but I'm afraid that Beau would have poked my eyes out if I had asked any more questions.

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