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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND ESSENTIAL CONTESTABILITY No 1

KEITH M DOWDING



Department of Government

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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND
ESSENTIAL CONTESTABILITY

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1. What is 'Essential Contestability'?

The meaning of many words in moral and political discourse is highly contested. Nobody disputes that. But some people claim that at least some of these many words are not only highly contested but "essentially contestable". What does this claim mean?

A very strict thesis of essential contestability takes the word "essential" seriously. It states that if a word is "essentially" contestable then there is something about the very nature of the word which means or entails that there can never be agreement over its meaning. This is very strong claim. It does not merely state that as a matter of fact not everyone will agree over the correct application of the term, but that necessarily they will never agree. It is not merely an empirical claim, but a logical one.

It may be hard to make sense of essential contestability as a 'logical' claim. For agreeing or not agreeing are things that people do. Agreement is empirical in character, not logical. But the 'logical' interpretation can be weakened whilst remaining strict. We may suggest that people may perchance agree on a particular interpretation of a word but they can never do so decisively. Reasons may be given for various particular interpretations of a particular word, and one formulation may be accepted by all and sundry, yet the reasons for that particular interpretation do not logically rule out others. The arguments are not strictly deductive nor do the conclusions (the interpretation of the word) strictly follow from the premisses. Thus there are reasons

for one view or another but those reasons are not decisive. Connolly suggests that saying something is essentially contestable is:

"to contend that the universal criteria of reason, as we can now understand them, do not suffice to settle these contests definitely"¹

He gives three claims of essential contestability. (1) That no previous or current philosophy has secured a basic set of concepts, (2) that future attempts will fail, and (3) he offers reasons why attempts to produce closure of debate will fail.² The first two are compatible with the claim of mere contestation in political discourse and do not need to be challenged by scientific realists. No-one disputes that there has never been agreement, and there are lots of reasons why there may never be agreement. The fact that we are all subject to the problem of knowledge is one. The interest of essential contestability comes with the third claim. It is interesting if it provides logical reasons for a lack of closure. If it entails the weaker claim that it is unlikely that full agreement will occur, then there is no reason for predicating the term 'essential' to that of contestability. It would then be difficult to understand why the thesis was ever developed. It is a straw man who claims that one day we will all agree over our basic concepts; the debate is over whether it is possible to agree over our basic concepts.

Non-decisiveness comes in two forms. The first occurs where there is no extant empirical evidence decisively to prove the superiority of one theory over another.³ The second, which is more important for the claim of essential contestability, requires the truth of moral relativism. In this form, the 'logical' nature of

the claim for essential contestability is further weakened, for an empirical assumption underlies it; there are many moral theories and there is no empirical way of choosing between them. If people cannot agree over their moral theories, or at least cannot agree on the precise ordering of values within a moral theory, then necessarily they will not be able to agree over the correct application of certain words.⁴ This is because those words are polluted by the moral theories. Words like "interest", "political power" or "democracy" do have descriptive denotation, but they also have prescriptive connotations. The way they are used implies and is implied by different value commitments. Connolly simply says that each of these words is "one of those concepts that connects descriptive and explanatory statements to normative judgment".⁵ It is because they are normative that they are essentially contestable.

I will argue that the concept of essential contestability is either trivial or false. I consider it trivial if it is to be discovered that all words of any natural language suffer from non-decisiveness or underdetermination and not just moral or political ones. In order to show it false I must show that any difference between moral or political concepts and natural ones does not distinguish them as contestable to a greater extent than other words.

The first possibility for non-decisiveness is, I will argue, trivial. Many, if not all, non-political words suffer from non-decisiveness because of empirical underdetermination of theories. The second possibility of moral pollution provides a better position for those holding essential contestability. However, I will argue

that even if we assume moral relativity we cannot sustain the claims of essential contestability of concepts.

2. Empirical Non-Decisiveness

If we want to know what a word means we look it up in a dictionary. The dictionary will give us the conventional meaning or meanings of that word in our language. Living languages change. Dictionaries need to be updated. We discover new facets of the world and the scope of words increases to cover those new facets, or new words are created where the old ones will not suffice. As our science becomes more precise the opposite process may occur and the scope of a word decrease. Here its meaning becomes sharpened in order to capture a small part or mere complex of a complex reality. Or words may fall into disuse because it is felt that their use hides rather than reveals, or just because conventions change and new words take their place. But when we go about the business of conceptual analysis we are not looking up words in a dictionary, nor even writing one. We are trying to clarify an aspect of our theory on a particular part of that complex. The dictionary writing comes after the conceptual analysis. The lexicographer's lexicon of truth is that his definitions of a word truly capture it as it is used, not that this use itself makes sense given the rest of the users' language. The conceptual analyst's lexicon of truth is that her definition of a word fits into the theory under which she operates; and that the

theory she uses is consistent, coherent and, if this adds more, is itself true.

It may be argued that definitions cannot be defended decisively where the test of coherence and consistency for theories is itself indecisive. That is, if the empirical data underdetermine the theory then concepts in the theory can never be decisively defined. If the data underdetermine the theory then we may not be able decisively to test some of the implications of the theory, which in turn will not allow us decisively to demonstrate preferred formulations for some of the concepts. This is not just a problem for moral or political terms. It is an epistemological problem for many concepts in many theories about the world. Often the evidence that would show one side to be correct and the other false is not available to us and never will be and this just as much the case for some propositions in the natural sciences as it is in the moral sciences. The cause of certain evolutionary changes, for example the precise causes of the extinction of the New Zealand Moa, may never be settled conclusively because the evidence that would have been available at the time is lost; certain propositions about the nature of the universe beyond our perceptual range may not ever be decidable. Popperians console themselves with the proposition that the debate is scientific and empirical if the hypotheses are verifiable or falsifiable in principle.⁶ This only produces a problem for those who hold a verification theory of meaning.⁷ The lack of decisive argument for one concept over another on the grounds of lack of empirical evidence is not therefore grounds for a case for essential contestability of political concepts. However, I take this to be mere ground-clearing for the major arguments for the

thesis of essential contestability rely upon the normative nature or moral pollution of political concepts.

3. The Moral Pollution of Political Concepts

Anti-positivism is the major ground for the claim of essential contestability. Positivists hold that there is no reason why a dispassionate study of society should not result in a common theory which can be used as a battleground for competing moral and political philosophies. Anti-positivists suggest that this is nonsense since any theory about society is already value-laden. The battle commences before a common theory can get started. If we accept this anti-positivist stance and also agree that competing moral viewpoints will never be reconciled, do we have to admit that there are terms over which there can never be common agreement? I think not. This would only follow if each of us was unable to understand the others' theories, and thereby misunderstand their use of the 'common' words like 'interest', 'political power' and 'democracy'. If, however, we can understand others' theories, and can understand their use of the 'common' words, even though they differ from ours, then we do not have words that are essentially contestable. For all we need to do is to mark each 'common' word that does a different job within each theory with the theory it applies to. Thus if we have three theories which disagree over the correct application of the word 'interest' then we can mark that word 'interest₁' 'interest₂' and 'interest₃'. When a theorist of

the first school states that we should do x (a word over which there is common agreement in all three theories) because x is in i's interest, a theorist of the second school can translate that as 'we should do x because x is in i's interest₁'. She can then reply that doing x may be in i's interest₁ but that hardly recommends it, especially since it is not in his interest₂. He should rather do y, which is in his interest₂. The theorist of the third school will likewise disagree. The debate may be tedious but there is no question of essential contestability over the three words 'interest₁', 'interest₂' and 'interest₃'.

It could still be objected that there is still essential contestability over the term 'interest' unmarked. Each theorist disagrees over its correct application and its correct application depends upon the truth or falsity of the three theories. As we are unable to discover the truth or falsity of the three theories (being relativists we do not think they have truth values) then we will never agree over which understanding of 'interest' is the correct one. But if we are relativists then we cannot ask the question; "which of the three ways of understanding 'interest' is the correct one?" since we do not think that moral theories have a truth value. Questions of correctness do not arise.⁸ If we cannot ask which of the three is the correct interpretation of the 'common' word 'interest' then we cannot say that there is one common concept, just three words which we all agree have different meanings. There is no essential contestability.

The argument has so far assumed the truth of relativism. But what about objectivism? If objectivism is true, then are some words essentially contestable? At first glance the question seems absurd.

If one is an objectivist then one holds that moral theories do have a truth value. Of the three moral theories only one, at most, can be true. The others must be false. Thus the truth of one of the theories gives the correct meaning of the word 'interest'; the other two therefore ultimately drop out as nonsensical, or at least as having no correct application to the actual world. But we could hold that while moral theories do have a truth value we have no way of finding out what that truth value is. Thus we can ask "which of the three ways of understanding 'interest' is the correct one?", but we can never answer the question because the data underdetermine. Whether social power should be attributed to individual actors or to social structures does not seem to have an simple empirically verifiable answer. Collectible evidence for one side may often be used equally well by the other,⁹ yet there is no question that each side is giving a different answer. If one is true then the other is false, but there is no way of finding out which is which.

I believe that this seeming possibility is a chimera. Only if we can understand that the two theories are different can we perceive that there is a problem. But we can only see that the two theories are different if we know what evidence would show that one was true and the other false. There are limits to metaphysical speculation after all; even if the positivists were wrong to put those limits on the actually verifiable. But if we can understand what would show the truth of one theory and the falsity of the other, then we do not have essential contestability of concepts. We have contestability in the actual world, but we do not have contestability in all possible worlds; for in some of them we can see which theory is true and which false. For under objectivism the

claim of essential contestability can only be one of necessary contestability and thus contestability in all possible worlds.

In actual fact, given theories with unknown and unknowable truth values we are no worse off than with relativism. We can still talk about 'interest₁', 'interest₂' and 'interest₃' ending confusion about what 'interest' really means and any contestability of concepts. We can agree to disagree over the use of a word, and can continue our real argument over theories about the social world and our moral commitment.

Could we understand the thesis of essential contestability as the misunderstanding of terms which is so deep that we do not even understand that we are misunderstanding each other? The translation manual from your use of the term to mine cannot be written because I do not know and cannot find out what you mean by the term. But that is not relevant to essential contestability. Here we have two different languages, and hence two different words, each of which one of us does not understand. It only impinges upon the question of essential contestability where we each use the same word believing, wrongly, that that is how the other is using it. This is a strange sort of contestability since there is no contest; and it would have to be shown that we could never agree over the correct application of the term in a deeper sense than we just never did. I do not see how that could be done, for the reasons suggested above. Only if we can understand the difference between the uses of the terms can we know that they are different. But that understanding requires that we know what would show the truth or falsity of one of them.

4. Methodological Issues

It may be objected that I have not really grappled with the important issues concerning essential contestability. These issues are not ones of language and relativism, though relativism is undoubtedly connected. Rather the issue of 'essential contestability' is about the proper methods of social scientific research and particularly the methods of behaviouralism. 'Essential contestability' has been embraced most wholeheartedly by those who oppose behaviouralism. Behaviouralists define a simple conception of both power and interests which makes empirical verification easy. They argue that a person's interests are what that person says they are. We can judge the interests of a group by what the individuals in that group do. I happen to think that the first claim is false.¹⁰ But that does not show that we have essential contestability, just contestability. The second claim is false. Even careful behaviouralists think so. The collective action problem shows that only behaviouralists without a theory of action (or the behaviouralists with whom the behaviouralists are so often confused) could hold such a view.¹¹ The behaviouralists also have a simple conception of power. A power relation exists where A gets B to do something she would not otherwise do. Both Connolly and Lukes have good arguments against the simple views of the 'one dimensionalists'.¹² But their arguments naturally lead to the thesis of 'essential contestability' since they both believe that behaviouralism could only be opposed by a thesis about interests

that goes beyond the subject's own awareness of them. This does not seem to be an empirical claim.¹³ In fact the collective action problem shows that we can develop a thesis of interests which go beyond the subject's own awareness which is not incompatible with the assumptions of behaviouralism.¹⁴ However, this may not satisfy all 'radicals' and I need to show that essential contestability is false even though moral assumptions pollute conceptual analysis.

We can see how far the conceptual issues over power are methodological by the term 'nondecision'. Vital to the understanding of the second dimension of power, a 'nondecision' is not something which is not a decision, a reasonable assumption to the uninitiated but rather:

"a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker. To be more nearly explicit, nondecision-making is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced: or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena; or, failing all these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process."¹⁵

The term 'nondecision' is thus a misnomer, for it is certainly a decision, albeit one that the analyst (read behaviouralist) might not spot.¹⁶ The real issue between the first and second dimensions of power is a methodological, and note, an empirical one. The issue between the second and third dimensions is also at least partly methodological. The third dimension assumes that individuals may not always be the best judge of their own interests. This thesis can be defended without going beyond the assumptions of behaviouralism. This failure to understand one's own interests derives from a failure in belief acquisition and/or mode of

reasoning, since interests depend not only upon individual wants but also individual needs given those wants.¹⁷ Wants may also be suppressed if their realization appears to be infeasible. If their realization is not in fact infeasible then there may be failure in individual interest ascription. These types of failure do not have a necessary connection to power relations. They are related where those interests are not recognized or do not get voiced because of the power of other interests. Here individuals must act in order to keep some interests from being recognized or voiced. Gaventa, for example, shows how the power of the press was important to the dominant interests of Clear Fork Valley.¹⁸ The debate is empirical in the sense that it is won or lost by looking at empirical evidence, even if final victory is unlikely because of the difficulties of collecting the relevant data which would settle it. If it is empirical then the issues may be contestable but not essentially so.

Some readers may now be quickly pointing out that I have given myself away. I have shown my behaviouralist, individualist and empiricist bias by arguing that the issues are empirical, that it is individuals who act, and that power relations only exist where some individuals act to affect the interests of others. They may object that individuals' interests may be adversely affected by the dominant ideas and social structures of the day. Nobody needs to act in order to keep the oppressed oppressed. Nobody needs to act in order for social power to be wielded, it is wielded by the very fabric of social life itself. Any argument between this way of seeing interests and social power, and the behaviouralist,

individualist and empiricist version cannot be settled, even in theory. The terms of political discourse are essentially contested.

I have two responses to this objection. Firstly, the merits of this way of viewing power in society may be covered without making reference to the concept of power, or at least without making reference to a concept of power which contradicts the manner in which I have just used it. For the phrase "the very fabric of social life itself" may be analysed by the relations which individuals bear to each other. These relations are generally the way in which we denote individuals in models of social life.¹⁹ Secondly, if this response does not satisfy the objector, then I refer back to my earlier discussion. If indeed we do find the terms are being used so differently that they seem to refer to very different objects, then we can merely use two terms where once we used one. If we cannot find any methods for deciding the superiority of one theory over the other then we will have to stick to two. If we really are relativists then we do not mind.²⁰ But so-called relativists tend to want to stick to one theory anyway and often give good reasons for doing so.²¹ But the question still remains to be answered. If two theories really are incommensurable how do we know that they have the same subject-matter? How do we know that they are actually inconsistent with each other? How do we know that they are different? The answer in the social sciences, generally speaking, is that different social theories imply different strategies for morally correct action. Action is empirical, so we do have a testing ground for their differences. But this does not entail essential contestability, since the implications for action from one version of the concept become the

starting-point for the criticism of that version. The practical syllogism reveals the moral implications which may then reflect back onto the theory underlying the concept. It is not the concept which causes the problem but the moral theory which justifies the action implied by that use of the word.

5. Theories not Concepts

Essential contestability leads analysts to concentrate dispute at the level of the word rather than that of the theory. For example, whilst Gallie recognizes that the grounds for different concept use lie within different theories, he asks 'how do we know that the two disputants are really talking about the same concept?'. He suggests that we can do so when two conditions are satisfied; the first is:

"the derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all contestant users of the concept"²²

The second is:

"the probability or plausibility...of the claim that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion."²³

It is dubious whether or not any of the favourite examples of essentially contested concepts actually meet these conditions,²⁴ but is there any reason why they should? Common history gives us common language. Language allows us to be able to talk to each other and have a reasonable idea of what other people are saying. But where

one person departs from another on the best use of a word, the best way of conceptualizing a state of affairs or the best way of identifying something both feel is important, common history does not matter. Disputes about concepts lead to recommendations about what we should be doing (or studying) and if the recommendations differ then we can trace the dispute back from there. But whilst we can still understand each other's use of a word we can abstract that from the dispute. We can still recognize irreconcilable beliefs about the world, without recognizing essential contestability of concepts.

Too much of the essential contestability debate concentrates upon 'words' and 'concepts' when it should be concentrating upon the grounds of those differences within theories. David Miller, for example, rightly argues against the old-style ordinary-language approach to conceptual analysis by demonstrating that terms are instantiated within theories. He rightly recognizes that the battleground is not at the level of mere 'words' but at the level of theory, or what he calls the "general standpoint"²⁵ of the protagonists. But he does not make the next move and argue that where serious disagreement occurs we need to turn the debate away from the concepts as such and justify the competing theories under which the different versions are justified. Miller and Siedentop suggest:

"The concepts used in political argument are typically contestable concepts, in the sense that each may be interpreted in a variety of incompatible ways without manifest absurdity. Such contests cannot be resolved by formal means. There is no unequivocal 'ordinary use of language' to which appeal can be made to settle disputes about the meaning of a term like 'democracy'."²⁶

But the use of any term can always be formalized to the theory within which it is instantiated. We can always say "x is democratic with respect to theory 1", "x is undemocratic with respect to theory 2" or, in the manner of the above, "x is democratic₁ but not democratic₂", etc.. Miller and Siedentop are right when they say:

"establishing a preferred meaning for such a term involves in engaging in substantive political argument, bringing forward both empirical evidence and moral principle to justify a general perspective to which the preferred meaning corresponds...the criteria employed in political philosophy are by no means purely formal: questions about moral acceptability and empirical realism of proposed political arrangements intrude upon the business of conceptual clarification."²⁷

But this neither entails nor implies essential contestability. It merely entails what it says. In the business of conceptual analysis do not think that values can be left out till last. The analysis itself may imply certain value positions and if these are unacceptable there is nothing wrong with starting again. If we discover that our conception of interests entails that the cleverest person in the community should be allowed to order the rest of us around then let us start again. We should not be embarrassed about that.

There is always a temptation in conceptual analysis to follow the ordinary-language approach and appeal to how we ordinarily use the terms.²⁸ But this temptation is not so dire as it is sometimes made out to be; after all, the way we ordinarily use the term does reflect the way in which we look at the world. Our grand theories about the world should be consistent with our ordinary reflections about it, unless our grand theories demonstrate that our ordinary reflections are misleading. What we must not think, however, is

that our concept-building from armchair reflections will get us to our theories unaided. Raz succinctly writes "(o)ne can derive a concept from a theory but not the other way round"²⁹, which is just to say that conceptual analysis is theory-laden.

There is another danger in the old style linguistic analysis which Skinner demonstrates. If we only carry out conceptual analysis in the light of our current modes of thought (the dominant ideology) we will never be able to perceive the possibility of a wider perspective which may change our view of the world.³⁰ This is a strong argument in favour of Skinner's 'Cambridge' approach to the study of texts,³¹ and something to be remembered in conceptual analysis. But I do not understand why Skinner seems to think that dialogue between the masters of the past and present writers is not possible. We must sort out what the theories were before criticizing and using them, but we must do that, too, for our present-day opponents. And there is nothing wrong with suggesting that some aspects of theories are false but others are worth re-examining, even though we may choose the wrong aspects.³² As long as we can translate across paradigms then dialogue is possible, and as long as theories are not incommensurable³³ then the possibility of conclusion remains.

6. Conclusion

Why have I spent so much time denying the thesis of essential contestability when I agree with many of the anti-positivist claims

of those who proclaim it? I have two reasons. Firstly, if essential contestability is true, then we really have no business in continuing a debate about concepts. We can knock out certain versions of concepts perhaps, but when it comes down to it, the concepts by their nature are irresolvable and that's that. But we learn a great deal through discussion of supposedly 'essentially contestable' concepts. What we learn through dispute is the basis of that dispute, that is, what leads different analysts to consider concepts in a different light. Which leads me to my second reason. The important debate is between theories and not concepts. If two people differ about the correct application for the term 'democracy' then we must examine why. We may find that in fact there is no substantive dispute. They may agree both upon a common core meaning and also in a general moral theory, yet still manage to differ about the emphasis to be placed upon a good democratic form. One may lay emphasis upon voting and majoritarian or pluralitarian principles, another upon rights and freedoms to participate through organized groupings. They may agree here in general moral principles but disagree over the best manner of promoting those moral principles. There may be substantive dispute however. Two individuals may agree about aspects of a core meaning; they may both agree that 'democracy' implies the need for political equality, yet disagree upon this aspect. The libertarian may believe that political equality entails 'one person one vote' and no more, the socialist may feel that political equality requires some degree of economic, social - even moral - equality without which 'one person one vote' is vacuous. Again the substantial theories of the two sides provides the interesting aspects of the dispute.

But we may also have a disagreement where there is no core concept. We may imagine someone who felt that 'democracy' was not about social or political relations at all but about an inner feeling that each individual has about his or her own destiny. But in each case the analysis of the word can proceed formally. We can mark each occurrence of the term 'democracy' with the name of theory which gives it its meaning. The proponents of the two different types of democracy may then proceed to discuss and criticize the others version of good democratic form. But generally there is a core concept which all theories share within their own conception of it. I struggled to provide a sensible idea of a theory about democracy that shared no features with other theories. Generally speaking, dialogue across theories is easy and the areas of dispute and implications of the disagreement easy to pin down. This should not be surprising. If political philosophy does not lead to recommendations for action then it is not much of a political theory. Action is empirical, and it is easy to spot different recommendations. If theories do not provide different recommendations and the dispute is purely theoretical or metaphysical, then we may be hard put to show that they are in disagreement. Indeed the less theories have in common the more likely it is that they will be compatible. A theory of democracy that suggests concrete institutional measures for promoting equality and political participation may well be compatible with a theory involving self-awareness and control over one's destiny.

Removing the level of dispute from mere 'words' or even 'concepts' to general theories is important. Conceptual analysis is only justifiable where one can talk about the correctness or

incorrectness of the concepts. We can only do so when we can see that deep disagreement occurs at the level of general theory. Conceptual analysis is not something that occurs in a vacuum. But we can talk, within a theory, about a concept's being 'right' or 'correct'. The manner in which we engage in conceptual analysis is to attempt to show how others' use of a concept is inconsistent with their use of other concepts in the vocabulary of their theory. It is the theory which provides the truth conditions for the concepts, even though, of course, it is the concepts which make the theory. (Only if theories are true or false can we then talk about concepts being right and wrong simpliciter, but that is another story.)

The thesis of 'essential contestability' makes 'concepts' hang in thin air. It implies there is a 'something' about which there can never be agreement. A relativist thesis suggests that there may be irresolvable disagreement but the battle is at the level of theory not at a conceptual one. Each of us can still challenge the others use of concepts. We can show that the usage does not fit in with other aspects of the theory - both theoretical and empirical - often aspects which all the theories share. Conceptual debate can still take place. We can still talk about rightness or correctness of concepts but do so in recognition that the terms are theory laden. We can even talk about truth value as long as we recognize that the criterion of truth is consistency with other aspects of the theory and so is itself theory relative.

It is often considered that linguistic political philosophy, particularly in its 'ordinary language' form, is long gone. But in reality political philosophers still engage in conceptual debate that refers to intuitive feelings about how we ordinarily use words.

Political philosophers still refer to dictionaries in debate.³⁴ This 'leftover' is hardly surprising. I have talked about rival theories, even rival vocabularies of theories, but in fact we debate in the same language. It both colours our view of the world and provides the common core and medium for our rival views of the world. When attacking the concepts of our opponents by showing that they are inconsistent with other concepts in their theory, we are also (often) trying to show that our version of the concept is a better fit. We also try to show that the aspects of our theory that differ from our opponents' fit better with those aspects which they both share. (Again I want to emphasize that if the theories really have no aspects in common then we cannot even know that they are rival theories, so we can hardly contest them.)

Often definitional proposals hide moral implications. Such implications may not be recognized for a long time. But this just states that there is no common battleground for competing moral theories. One plays at home or away, or does not play at all. If one plays at home one must defend one's own concepts, arguments and general theory. If one plays away one attacks concepts, arguments and general theory. But the nature of the game is argument and that can only be carried out in a common language. Conceptual analysis is thus unavoidable.

If definitional proposals hide implications then those implications may be cancellable. Implications will not flow from the proposal on its own. They can only flow from the proposal given other aspects of the instantiated theory. We may be able to keep the proposal yet jettison the implications by changing other aspects of the theory. But if we are not happy with that and are unable to

accept the implications then we either jettison the concept as an important one, or jettison the definition in favour of another one. But Connolly points to a sociological phenomenon not a logical one. If we define the term 'interests' or 'democracy' in one way then we are bolstering a particular view of life because the terms already have, in our culture, positive normative connotations. For example, Connolly argues that the term 'interests' carries positive normative connotations that cannot be removed from the word:

"To say that a policy or practice is in the interests of an individual or a group is to assert both that the recipient would somehow benefit from it and that there is therefore a reason in support of that policy."³⁵

Connolly suggests that such an implication is a prima facie judgement and not an entailment. Saying that x is in y's interest does not mean that x is good. But if it is a prima facie implication then it may be overridden by other judgements, one of which may be that the sense in which interest is being used does not carry the positive moral prescription in our favoured theory.

Thus, whilst 'interest' does indeed carry the normative implications proclaimed by Connolly, they are cancellable from any particular sentence in which the word is used. We would cancel such implications by examining the sentence in which the term is used in the light of the theory that underlies its use and our own beliefs. If we believe that an interest claim under a particular theory (say, theory 1) never implies a reason for acting to promote that interests then we can automatically cancel the implication by marking each use of the word, viz 'interest₁'. We need never be fooled by what we consider to be poor theories.

This logical argument does not really help the sociological one, though argument over the years does change the normative implications of words, for example 'democracy'. However, if we let our opponents get away with their definition then we may well see our children grow up in their image. Words of our language are in the common domain and we cannot really expect the populace to start marking each different usage in the manner I have suggested. But this important point should not lead us to ignore the logical conclusion that concepts are not essentially contestable just contestable and the real battle is between theories.

Are political theories 'essentially contestable'? The truth of relativism has been an assumption of this paper and not an argument. The proposition that moral theories do not have a truth value seems to me a better way of expressing the point. But it is a boorish argument to suggest that normative theories are indeed essentially contestable because there is no empirical evidence to choose between them. It is still open to the realist to proclaim that only one moral theory will ultimately be found to be internally and externally consistent. But put in that way is just as much an assertion as the belief that there will always be competing moral theories. I leave that debate for another time.

- ¹ W. Connolly, The Terms of Political Discourse, 2nd edn. (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1984), p. 225.
- ² Connolly, Political Discourse, p. 229.
- ³ This is sometimes explained as the open-textured nature of some concepts, for example W. Runciman, 'Relativism: Cognitive and Moral' Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volume, 68 (1974). But many simple concepts are open-textured, J. Gray, 'On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts', Political Theory, 5 (1977), 331-48, p. 340 and D. Miller, 'Linguistic Philosophy and Political Theory' in D. Miller and L. Siedentop eds. The Nature of Political Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 41-3, and some supposedly contestable ones not, J. Gray, 'On Liberty, Liberalism and Essential Contestability', British Journal of Political Science, 8 (1979), pp. 392-3. I will explain this type of non-decisiveness as a type of underdetermination.
- ⁴ This is still a strong claim, for it still involves necessity, but that modality is not strict necessity because the prior operator is the contingency of competing moral theories. I do not know how one could try to show the necessity of moral relativism.
- ⁵ Connolly, Political Discourse, p. 46.
- ⁶ For example, K. Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery (London: Hutchinson, 1972), p. 42.
- ⁷ See below p. 8.

- 8 This is not to say that some moral and political theories may be falsified, ones which rely upon false empirical assumptions for example.
- 9 I try to show how the argument of structure versus actor may be made more empirical in K. Dowding, 'Individualism versus Holism: Making the Issues Empirical'.
- 10 See K. Dowding, 'Wants, Needs and Interests'.
- 11 Dowding, 'Wants, Needs and Interests' and 'Collective Action and the Dimensions of Power'.
- 12 Connolly, Political Discourse; S. Lukes, Power: A Radical View (London, Macmillan, 1974).
- 13 See Lukes, Power, pp. 37-45, for how far it may be empirical.
- 14 See Dowding, 'Wants, Needs and Interests' and 'Collective Action and the Dimensions of Power'.
- 15 P. Bachrach and M. Baratz, Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 44.
- 16 Though Bachrach and Baratz, Power and Poverty manage to spot them as does J. Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980) - probably the best community study of power ever done.
- 17 Dowding, 'Wants, Needs and Interests'.
- 18 Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness, especially ch. 8.
- 19 I show this with relation to game theory in K. Dowding, 'Individualism and Rational Choice' (paper for ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Amsterdam 1987).

- 20 Surely, for the true relativist it really does not matter which theory we choose to follow. Indeed why have one theory when three can do just as nicely?
- 21 For example, the tension between Lukes' avowed belief that power is essentially contested and the supposed greater explanatory and predictive power of the third dimension has been noted by B. Barry, 'The Obscurity of Power: Review of Lukes' Power: A Radical View', Government and Opposition, 10 (1975), 250-4; and Gray, 'On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts', pp. 333-4. Connolly, Political Discourse, pp. 226-8, correctly argues that the tension is not a reductio ad absurdum of the concept of essential contestability, but it does suggest that there are justifications for holding one view over others. Justification (as opposed to certainty) is all that philosophers of science require.
- 22 W. Gallie. 'Essentially Contested Concepts', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 56 (1955-6), 167-98, p. 180.
- 23 Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', p. 180.
- 24 Miller, 'Linguistic Philosophy and Political Theory', p. 42.
- 25 Miller, 'Linguistic Philosophy and Political Theory', p. 50.
- 26 D. Miller and L. Siedentop, 'Introduction' in Miller and Siedentop, Political Theory, p. 10.
- 27 Miller and Siedentop, 'Introduction' in Miller and Siedentop, Political Theory, p. 10.
- 28 Those who have succumbed recently include J. Raz, 'On Lawful Governments', Ethics, 80 (1970) 296-305, pp. 303-4; J. Feinburg, Social Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.,

- Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 2; and F. Oppenheim, Political Concepts (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 179-89.
- 29 J. Raz, The Morality of Freedom (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 16.
- 30 Particularly in Q. Skinner, 'The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives' in R. Rorty, Q. Skinner and J. Schneewind eds., Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also Connolly, Political Discourse, p. 47.
- 31 See Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', History and Theory, 8 (1969), 3-53; J. Dunn 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', Philosophy, 43 (1968), 85-104.
- 32 Here I am referring to Skinner's attack upon Mackie: Skinner, 'The Idea of Negative Liberty', pp. 200-1.
- 33 Skinner is opposed to incommensurability, 'The Idea of Negative Liberty', p. 193, n. 2. P. Feyerabend, Against Method (Trowbridge, Verso, 1975) is, I suppose, the best argument for it. An excellent review is provided by H. I. Brown, 'Incommensurability' Inquiry, 26 (1983), 3-29.
- 34 For example, S. Lukes, Marxism and Morality (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 1.
- 35 Connolly, Political Discourse, p. 46.