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CONFESSIONS OF A CONCEPTUAL HISTORIAN[*]

Let me begin by saying how delighted I am to be here in Finland on my first — though not, I hope, my last — visit, and to be in the company of scholars from whom I continue to learn so much. I should also like to thank my hosts for their very kind hospitality, and to applaud them for their efforts to establish an ambitious and wide-ranging Finnish conceptual history project.

I want today to say something about my own attempts to think and write about the history of political concepts. More particularly, I want to retrace some of the steps — and missteps — that led me to hold certain views and to abandon or modify others. My address will therefore be part autobiography and part confession, wherein I take responsibility for my past deeds and misdeeds. I tell this story not because it is inherently interesting (it is not) but because my route toward the history of concepts is, I suspect, vastly different from that followed by my European friends and colleagues. These differences may be worth noting and perhaps exploring.

I begin with a widely held misconception about the character and history of conceptual history: that the German and Anglophone variants are, if not identical twins, then fraternal twins born of the same

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parents and sharing close and crucial family resemblances as regards aim, outlook, and method. This misconception is perhaps more common in North America than in Europe,[1] and persists despite my old friend Melvin Richter's astute attempt at rectification in *The History of Political and Social Concepts* (1995, ch. 6). I want this morning to add an autobiographical footnote to his book by recounting my own formative experiences as a fledgling conceptual historian who after many years is still learning his craft.

From about age twelve until my twentieth year I wanted to be a theoretical physicist, and most of my education was directed to that end. Most of what little history and philosophy I knew centered on the history and philosophy of the natural sciences. While an undergraduate at the University of California I read and was greatly impressed by the work of Stephen Toulmin and Norwood Russell Hanson (my reading of Kuhn, Popper, Feyerabend and Lakatos came later). It was in the work of Toulmin that I first encountered the expressions 'conceptual history' and 'conceptual change' (Toulmin 1969; 1972). Toulmin and Hanson were concerned, in the main, with concepts in the natural sciences — 'motion', 'force', 'inertia', 'momentum', etc. — and the ways in which their meanings changed over time and in accordance with theoretical innovations. They showed that there was a considerable degree of theoretical discontinuity and conceptual incommensurability across time. One upshot of their way of narrating the history of science was to discredit the commonly held view that scientific advance is piecemeal, continuous, and cumulative. There are instead discontinuities, breaks, ruptures that Kuhn (1962) likened to 'revolutions' in which an older theoretical regime is overthrown and replaced by a newer one, which is itself subsequently challenged and overthrown. In the heady days of the 1960s, with our own cultural revolution just beginning to get underway, this picture of permanent revolution held considerable appeal for scientists and left-leaning students alike.

The Viet Nam War, and Political Theory

My scientific studies were interrupted and subsequently derailed by the Viet Nam war. Shortly before my twentieth birthday I was sum-

moned for a physical examination, found fit for service, and waited to be drafted into the armed forces of the United States. I confess that I did not know where my duty lay. Everything I could learn about the war convinced me that it was both immoral and unwinnable. If ever a war were unjust, this one was. What to do? If drafted, should I go? Should I resist and risk going to prison? Should I declare myself a conscientious objector? Should I follow the lead of some of my peers and emigrate to Canada or Scandinavia? Not knowing where to turn, I turned in desperation to a seminar in political theory in which questions of obligation and resistance were considered. We read Sophocles' *Antigone*, Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience,* and essays by Tolstoy, Gandhi, Camus, and Martin Luther King. That seminar helped clarify my thinking about matters moral and political. And, although I did not know it then, it was also my first step toward becoming a student of political theory and conceptual history.

My first experience as a conceptual historian-to-be came about in the following way. Before we read Plato's *Crito* we were told that it was about the citizen's obligation to obey and indeed to die for the state. Condemned to death and awaiting execution, Socrates is offered an opportunity to escape. He refuses to leave Athens, likening its laws to his own parents who had given him birth, educated him, and made him who he was. He could no more disobey the laws than he could cease being who and what he was. Twenty-five centuries later Socrates was duly classified as an arch-conservative who held that the citizen's obligation to live and die for his state is well-nigh absolute. As an admirer of Socrates I found this conclusion both troubling and puzzling: troubling, because of the predicament that I was then in; and puzzling, because I could not bring myself to believe that the ever-subtle Socrates could be so simplistic and conservative as he was being made out to be.

As it happens, I was then reading R.G. Collingwood's *Autobiography*, which another of my teachers (a historian) had recommended for reasons entirely unrelated to theories of obligation. The coincidence proved fortuitous. I was thunderstruck by Collingwood's approach to the history of philosophy. That history, he said, was not about an eternal but finite set of questions to which different philosophers have proposed different answers; it was, rather, about his-

torically variable problems to which particular philosophers proposed particular answers:

> If there were a permanent problem P, we could ask 'what did Kant, or Leibniz, or Berkeley, think about P?' . . . But what is thought to be a permanent problem P is really a number of transitory problems p_1 p_2 p_3 . . . whose individual peculiarities are blurred by the historical myopia of the person who lumps them together under the one name P (Collingwood 1978 [1939], p. 69).

A light-bulb went on in my head. Here is what I was looking for. There is no single unchanging problem P — in this instance 'the problem of political obligation' — but there are instead a series of quite different problems that have been lumped under that large, catch-all, ahistorical heading. And one reason why the problems change is because the entities in question — 'citizen', 'state', etc. — change. Here again Collingwood proved a most helpful guide. He noted that the Greek term πόλις (polis) can no more be translated as 'state' than τριηρης (trireme) can be translated as 'steamship' (1939, pp. 63- 4). *Polis* and state are both forms of political organization, as *trireme* and steamship are both boats; but they are not identical or synonymous concepts.

A Collingwoodian — or, as I should now say, a conceptual- historical — perspective enables one to challenge the conventional or conservative interpretation of Socrates' reasons for refusing escape and remaining in Athens to die. For Socrates did not live in a *state*, i.e. the kind of large modern nation-state with which we are familiar, but in a *polis*, a much smaller and more intimate political association. Therefore we may not lift what Socrates says about the citizen's relation to the *polis* and apply it directly to our relation to the kind of large and anonymous state to which modern men and women belong.[2] What he says about the citizen's obligation to the *polis* or city-state does not apply to the modern citizen's duty to the modern nation-state. I breathed a very large sigh of relief, as I was in no position — and under no obligation — to follow Socrates' lead. This now seems an utterly obvious commonplace; but for me then it came with all the force of revelation. My first exposure to what I now call conceptual history came as a revelation and a relief for which I remain forever grateful.

'From Plato to NATO'
and the Clarification of Concepts

When I began my graduate studies at Berkeley in 1967 there was a conventional dividing-line between the history of political thought, on the one hand, and analytical political philosophy, on the other. The former narrated the history of political ideas 'from Plato to NATO'; the latter was concerned with the critique and clarification of concepts deployed in political theory — 'freedom', 'power', 'equality', 'rights', etc. I was interested in both genres of political theory, and resolved to run my train along these parallel tracks that I foolishly believed would never cross.

Berkeley in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a surreal place. Students protesting the Viet Nam war were condemned by California Governor Ronald Reagan and others as communists or, at the very least, as communist sympathizers. Political protests were met with armed force. Squadrons of police and National Guardsmen periodically invaded and occupied the campus. The acrid smell of tear gas often hung in the air and, in one memorable instance, seeped into a seminar room and forced us, coughing and gagging, to evacuate. Many graduate students, myself included, felt ourselves tugged in two quite different directions — on one side, political engagement; on the other, scholarly withdrawal. Students of political theory were also under pressure from some of our professors to join the then-victorious 'behavioral revolution' in Political Science.

The philosophical foundations of behavioralism were, in a very broad and loose sense, positivistic. As G.H. von Wright notes, the chief tenets of positivism include the methodological unity of all sciences, natural and social; the natural sciences (particularly physics) as a model for the social sciences; and the deductive-nomological or 'covering law' model of explanation (von Wright 1971, p. 4). Another feature of positivism was its zeal for reforming the language of politics and the social sciences.

The central place accorded to language by Logical Positivism can be seen in the title (and the text) of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936; 2nd edn. 1946). Ayer's aspiration to purge and reform the language of philosophy — so as to eliminate the bugbear of 'meta-

physics' (and meaninglessness) — found a sympathetic audience among American behavioralists and some political theorists. Their aim was to purge the language of politics and political theory so as to make it more meaningful, less muddled, and more precise. But this was, by Logical Positivist lights, an exceedingly difficult task. For, viewed through positivist lenses, the language of political theory is a rather peculiar hybrid. According to Logical Positivism's classificatory scheme, statements are of three types. There are, firstly, 'synthetic' statements of empirical fact ('The cat is on the mat' was a perennial favorite). Next are 'analytic' statements about necessary truths-by-convention ('All bachelors are unmarried males' — another favorite). Thirdly there is a large catch-all category of 'emotive' utterances which are, strictly speaking, cognitively meaningless — mere 'ejaculations', in Ayer's slightly salacious term. To say, for example, that 'Stealing is wrong', says nothing about theft; it merely expresses or signals the negative 'feelings' or 'attitudes' of the speaker toward that form of activity (Ayer 1946, pp. 107-112).

From a positivist perspective political theory appeared to be an odd, not to say incoherent, admixture of the analytic, the synthetic and the emotive (or evaluative). From Plato to the present, the 'classics' of political theory are marked — and indeed marred — by muddle: 'facts' and 'values' are jumbled together; persuasive definitions are misleadingly made to appear in value-neutral guise; and fictions, metaphors and other tropes abound — states of nature, social contracts, and (we might now add) original positions and ideal speech situations (Macdonald 1951). The critical and reforming spirit of Logical Positivism was much in evidence from the early 1950s, when the behavioral revolution was just getting underway. At an American symposium on 'The Semantics of Social Science', for example, critics charged that the advance of the social sciences, and political science in particular, has been retarded by the pernicious presence of political theory, with its 'teleological, normative, or even moralistic terms'. Many if not most of 'the propositions of political theory have a character of "unreality" and futility'. As long as 'traditional' or 'normative' political theory exerts its pernicious influence, political science will consist 'mostly [of] history and ethics'. Political theory 'belong[s] to a subjective or fictitious universe of discourse quite inappropriate to a general science of society' (Perry 1950, p. 401).

From a behavioralist and positivist perspective, the only hope for political theory lay in purging its language to make its concepts cognitively meaningful. This approach was notoriously well represented by T.D. Weldon's *The Vocabulary of Politics* (1953) and a host of imitators. Weldon claimed that political theory was deficient to the degree that its practitioners attempted the impossible task of finding rock-bottom 'foundations' and, worse, to do so by reasoning with imprecise or 'muddled' terms and concepts. The first task of political theory must therefore be to clean this Augean stable by abandoning the search for foundations and be content with the humbler and more austere task of clarifying, refining and redefining the very vocabulary of politics.

Once we cut through the cant, the muddle, and the metaphysics of our inherited vocabulary (we were told), we can at last engage in meaningful debates about power, justice, equality, liberty, and the like. We therefore must, at the very least, sort out the different statement-types and keep them separate: 'This is a (persuasive) definition'. 'That is a statement of (presumed) fact.' 'That is an emotive (or horatory, or prescriptive) utterance.' And so on. Not surprisingly, this sort of 'linguistic analysis' made for minute — and (if I might register my own emotive response) dreadfully dry — dissections of Plato's *Republic*, amongst many other 'classics' of political theory (see, e.g., Murphy 1968; Oppenheim 1975 [1968]). The language of political theory should be purged, whipped into shape, and made to aspire to the transparent clarity of the language of science — at least as the natural sciences were (mis)conceived and idealized by the logical positivists. Thus the political theorist was to be like Locke's 'underlabourer', charged with the task of 'clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge'. Locke's 'Epistle to the Reader' of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was often quoted as an antidote to pride and vaulting philosophical ambition: In the natural sciences there are masterbuilders; in philosophy the would-be master-builders, from Plato to Hegel, were to be exposed for the metaphysical frauds they were, taken down ten notches, and put in their place by hard-working under-laborers — a task that Alasdair MacIntyre once likened to taking Aristotle out behind the woodshed for a good thrashing. This underlaborer view reduced the tasks of philosophy to conceptual analysis — that is, to criticism and clarification, and nothing more.

Where did this leave political theory? The duly chastened student of political theory was now to occupy himself with two modest but important tasks: on the one hand he was to take his long-dead elders and betters out to the woodshed; and, on the other, he was to perform the semantic scut-work of clarifying the terms employed by empirically-minded political scientists. The primary purpose of political theory, as a committee of the American Political Science Association once put it, was to 'define the concepts of political science' and provide precise 'definitions of political terms' that political scientists could use (Wilson et al. 1944, pp. 726, 729). Not a noble calling, perhaps, but a modest and useful one.

In the 1950s and early 1960s a number of political theorists attempted to redefine the terms of 'traditional' or 'normative' theory so as to make them useful for the empirical-scientific analysis and explanation of political behaviour. For example, 'the idea of freedom', wrote Felix Oppenheim, 'has not yet been subjected to . . . behavioral analysis'. This is unfortunate, for it has retarded the development of empirical social science. 'Whether freedom can become a subject of empirical science depends on whether "freedom" can become a concept of empirical science' (Oppenheim 1961, p. 4). And, as for freedom, so for all the other concepts of a scientized political discourse: power, influence, authority, equality, interests, and so on.

When in the mid-1960s I became a student of political theory there appeared to be two ways in which we could make ourselves useful to the discipline of Political Science. One was to abandon or modify our historical studies of the 'great books'. This involved, variously, narrating the history of political ideas so as to show the triumph of 'empirical' over 'normative' theories of politics; to pick out villains and heroes and precurors so that, for example, Plato's 'preference for imaginative and somewhat rigid theoretical notions drawn from brilliant fancy rather than hard fact' gave way to the 'solid good sense' of Aristotle, 'the first great behavioral scientist' (Dahl 1963, p. 24; Berelson and Steiner 1964, p. 13). A second role was to serve as an under-laborer whose main task was to render the terms of political discourse — 'power', 'interest', etc. — more amenable to social-scientific use by redefining them so as to render them 'purely descriptive' and purging them of any 'normative' or evaluative connotations (see, e.g., Oppenheim 1961, 1975 [1968], 1981; Gregor, 1971).[3]

I think it is fair to say that most of us at Berkeley (and elsewhere) were not eager to be recruited into the ranks of an already-aging behavioral revolution. We were much more interested in the prospects of a revolution within the revolution. This was not because (as our critics charged) we were 'anti-science', but because we believed that a positivistic political science rested upon a misgrounded conception of science and — no less importantly — because we wanted to restore the critical dimension of *political* theory. Some of us plunged into fairly intensive study of the philosophy of science (here I had a head start on most of my peers), with particular emphasis on the social sciences. We read G.H. von Wright, Alasdair MacIntyre, Peter Winch, A.R. Louch and other critics of positivist social science. To put the contrast crudely, we were interested in an anti-positivist philosophy of *action* as an alternative to the then-orthodox positivist philosophy of *behavior* that undergirded and legitimized 'behavioralist' social and political science.

In the course of our reading and discussions about an alternative *verstehende* or 'interpretive' or 'hermeneutical' model of social-scientific understanding, we came to see how deeply and decisively language shapes and colors the self- understanding of the people whose behavior we wish to explain. Very crudely, subject A cannot understand himself to be engaged in an activity or practice x (e.g., voting) without possessing the concept of x. Moreover, x is typically part of a network of concepts — a conceptual scheme — which gives x its point and meaning. To explain why A engages in x requires that we know what x means to A and others like him; it requires that we understand something about the conceptual scheme or language to which x belongs and within which it functions.

Our next — very short — step was toward the philosophy of language, or, more particularly, toward the 'ordinary language' philosophy of Wittgenstein and Austin, amongst others. Ordinary language philosophy was perhaps particularly attractive because it was highly critical of its positivist predecessor and decidedly less critical of political theory, past and present. The language of the natural sciences was no longer to serve as a standard of meaning or precision. We use language, as Austin famously put it, to *do* things — to describe, explain, excuse, endorse, appraise, warn, and to perform numerous other 'speech acts' (Austin 1970; Searle 1968). None of

these utterance-types is privileged, much less a model of cognitive meaningfulness. We analyze words and concepts, not by looking for their meaning *per se*, but for their *use* — they are meaningful only in the context of the uses to which they are put. Even the most 'empirical' of the concepts employed in ordinary discourse are not amenable to strictly drawn definitions; they are 'porous' or 'open-textured' (Waismann 1951). To the degree that their porosity is ordinarily no hindrance to communication, concepts do not need to be reformed, redefined, or made more rigorous than such communication requires. We achieve as much clarity as we need by noting 'what we [ordinary speakers] say' in certain situations and contexts.

Not surprisingly, ordinary language philosophers took a much more tolerant view of political theory than their positivist predecessors did. In the spirit of Aristotle they seemed almost to say that one should look for only as much precision as the subject admits of — and that if the language of politics often seems vague and imprecise, then so be it: that is a characteristic feature of political discourse. Ordinary language philosophy, as Wittgenstein remarked in one of his more oracular utterances, 'leaves everything as it is'. In a reversal of Marx's Eleventh Thesis, ordinary language philosophy aims to understand the world, not to change it. This led some critics to charge that ordinary language philosophy, especially when applied to the analysis of political concepts, was not normatively neutral but in fact deeply if perhaps covertly conservative. The language ordinarily used to describe and legitimize unjust social institutions and arrangments can hardly suffice for a critical philosophy, since that very language serves as an ideological mask to conceal such injustice and inhibit radical criticism (Gellner 1959: ch. 8). Linguistic analysis of this sort, as Herbert Marcuse charged, 'contributes to enclosing thought in the circle of the mutilated universe of ordinary discourse' (Marcuse 1964, p. 199). (What Marcuse did not say, but should have, is that *all* conceptual schemes, 'ordinary' or otherwise, serve both to constrain and to enable thought. That, however, would have greatly reduced the rhetorical force of his critique.)

The charge of 'conservatism' proved to be partly right and partly wrong (Wertheimer 1976). But, its alleged conservatism aside, the adjectives that are more readily applicable to ordinary language analysis are 'naive', 'parochial', and 'ahistorical'. For in emphasizing the minute analysis and clarification of 'the' meaning and use of particu-

lar concepts, ordinary language philosophy or 'conceptual analysis' tended to focus upon the language of one age and culture, namely our own. This narrowing not only blinded political theorists to the fact that meaning and usage change from one age and generation to the next but it also led them to believe their enterprise to be a politically neutral one of clarifying and analyzing what 'we' say, as though 'we' were a single speaking subject, undivided by partisan and perspectival differences (having to do with race, ethnicity, social class, gender, etc.), and employing concepts whose meanings did not change over time. In thus assuming that there is a unified, or at any rate undifferentiated, 'we', ordinary language philosophy largely ignored the twin issues of political conflict and conceptual contestation. Which is to say, with only slight exaggeration, that linguistic analysis largely ignored or was blind or indifferent to politics itself — which is not a good thing for *political* philosophy to be.

There is also the obvious historical fact that previous political philosophers almost never took 'what we say' (or what the people of their age and culture said) as sufficient or satisfactory in settling conceptual quarrels; indeed, they typically took issue with the ordinary language of their day, attempting to alter or reform the vocabulary of politics by criticizing commonly held views about 'power', 'property', 'liberty', and the like. That is to say, *the history of political thought is in large part the history of conceptual contestation and change*. Any political philosophy that ignores this obvious fact about its own history can hardly be satisfactory.

It was at this juncture that an unjustly neglected essay by W.B. Gallie was rediscovered. Gallie's *Essentially Contested Concepts* had been published in the mid-1950s and was subsequently reprinted in several anthologies. According to Gallie, a concept is 'essentially contested' if its meaning and criteria of application are forever open to dispute and disagreement. Such disputes are less apt to arise in the natural sciences than in social and political philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities. Indeed, many if not all the concepts constitutive of ethical, political and aesthetic discourse are essentially contested. Such disputes cannot be definitively and finally resolved, Gallie claimed, because there not only *are* not but there *cannot be* commonly shared criteria for deciding definitively what is to count in aesthetics as 'art' or in politics as 'democracy' or 'equality'.

I was not alone in thinking that Gallie's argument constituted a giant step toward putting politics and conflict and conceptual contestation back into political theory. The shortcomings of the essential contestability thesis were not yet entirely evident. But first let's look at its obvious strengths. Consider by way of example the concept of power. Following what they took to be Gallie's lead, Steven Lukes (1974) and William Connolly (1974) contended that 'power' is an essentially contested concept characterized by unresolved — and in principle unresolvable — disputes over its meaning and proper application. Just as art critics can never agree in all possible cases whether some object is indeed a work of art, so political actors and analysts will never agree in all instances that some particular action is an exercise of power. Applied to 'power' (and other political concepts), the thesis of essential contestability proved to be both bold and provocative. And too, it purported to explain the persistence and intractability of conceptual disagreements: if competent speakers continue to disagree over the definition and meaning of 'power' or any other concept, that must be because its very 'contestability' is an 'essential' feature of its use or application. Moreover, the thesis of essential contestability appeared to be admirably non-partisan, normatively neutral, and non-judgmental: does it not, after all, claim that no one conception of power (or freedom, equality, etc.) is clearly and demonstrably superior to any other? You have your understanding of power; I have mine; Lukes and Connolly have theirs; and none is in any knock-down or decisive way superior to any other.

For quite some time I believed that the notion of essentially contested concepts provided a kind of key to unlock the mysteries of conceptual contestation. But again I was too slow to see its shortcomings — a recognition that came somewhat belatedly. Let me jump ahead for just a moment to say what those shortcomings are, before returning to my narrative.

Shortcomings of Contestability

Sometime in the mid-1980s I belatedly discovered that the thesis of essential contestability suffered from several significant shortcomings. The first of these is that if the thesis is true, then all disputes

about 'power' (and other concepts constitutive of political discourse) are unresolvable *a priori* and *in principle*. Anyone attempting to construct a conception of power in hopes that others might agree is on a misbegotten and completely misguided mission. One cannot expect or even *hope* to construct a conception of power upon which everyone might conceivably agree, since 'power' belongs to the class of essentially contested concepts. All arguments for or against any particular conception of power would therefore appear to be beside the point, if the point is not merely to express one's views but to participate in a meaningful conversation which could conceivably conclude with some sort of agreement.

Anyone who subscribes to different views of what constitutes or counts as 'power' (or 'freedom', 'justice', etc.) would thus appear to be left with only two ways of dealing with one another: coercion or conversion. And presumably those who cannot be converted must be coerced (excluded, silenced, ridiculed, ignored, etc.). Connolly puts the point succinctly: 'Disputes about the proper concept and interpretation of power, then, are part of larger ideological debates. To convert others to my idea of power is to implicate them to some degree in my political ideology' (Connolly 1983, p. 128). But this, if true, has deeply disturbing implications. To speak of 'converting' others to one's own view may be good theology; but it is very dangerous politics (if indeed it is politics at all). It is dangerous because political argument — which is to say, politics itself — is about the public airing of differences, not as an end in itself but as a prelude to possibly resolving those differences through argument and persuasion. And this requires, as a precondition, a shared language or lexicon. As the late Bertrand de Jouvenel observed:

> The elementary political process is the action of mind upon mind through speech. Communication by speech completely depends upon the existence in the memories of both parties of a common stock of words to which they attach much the same meanings. . . . Even as people belong to the same culture by the use of the same language, so they belong to the same society by the understanding of the same moral language. As this common moral language extends, so does society; as it breaks up, so does society (de Jouvenel 1957, p. 304).[4]

But if the concepts constitutive of political discourse, and therefore of political life, are indeed *essentially* contested, then there can of course be no common moral language or civic lexicon; hence no communication; hence no community — indeed, no *hope* of establishing and maintaining a civic community or commonwealth.

If the thesis of essential contestability were true, then political discourse — and therefore political life itself — would be well-nigh impossible, and for exactly the same reasons that civility and the civic life is impossible in Hobbes' imaginary and solipsistic state of nature: each individual is a monad, radically disconnected from all other individuals insofar as each speaks, as it were, a private language of his own devising. Because the concepts comprising these individual languages cannot be translated or otherwise understood, each speaker is perforce a stranger and an enemy to every other. The result, as Hobbes rightly recognizes, would be 'a state of warre' in which everyone's life is 'nasty, poore, solitary, brutish, and short'. Hobbes's imaginary state of nature is nothing less than a condition in which the thesis of essential contestability holds true: the inability to communicate is, as it were, the essential or defining characteristic of that state.

Hence claims about the essential contestability of political concepts are not merely assertions about the limits of language and meaning, but about the severely limited possibility (or near-impossibility) of communication and thus of community. From this it follows that questions about the truth or falsity of the thesis of essential contestability are of more than abstract or academic interest but are, in fact, of profound political import. For if the essential contestability thesis holds true about political concepts, then the prospects for meaningful communication, and hence community, would appear to be exceedingly bleak.

Happily, however, our predicament appears, on closer examination, not to be so grim, after all. As I argued in *Transforming Political Discourse* (1988), the essential contestability thesis is itself contestable and problematic; and, if not false, then circular and logically vacuous. One cannot derive a claim about essentiality from a (set of) empirical or contingent statements (or, in an older idiom, a universal statement from a series of synthetic ones). It is quite clear that claims about conceptual contestability are well-supported by empirical evidence from a variety of sources. Even granting that, the thesis of *essential* contestability is circular and commits the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo prop-*

ter hoc. That is, the evidence cited in support of the claim that (say) 'power' is an 'essentially' contested concept is that some people have *in fact* disagreed about its meaning and application. But all that can be inferred from an enumeration of individual instances of disagreement, no matter how long the list, is that there *have been* disagreements, and not that there *must always* or *necessarily* continue to be. At most, all that can be concluded is that 'power', 'freedom', and the like, are what I call *contingently contested* concepts.[5]

Having said that, however, I want to emphasize that the essential contestability thesis is not without some value. For it might best be viewed, not as a valid philosophical thesis about the essential nature of political language and meaning, but as a rhetorical stratagem for reminding us of a persistent and recurring feature of political discourse — namely the perpetual *possibility* of disagreement. This possibility is intermittently actualized, and nowhere more frequently and vehemently than in disputes over 'freedom', 'power' and other moral and political concepts.

To return now to my narrative: Sometime around 1970 or so I began thinking about a topic on which to write my doctoral dissertation. I decided to try to do for Political Science what William Dray had done for History in his *Laws and Explanation in History* (1957). That is, I wanted to criticize the 'covering-law model' of explanation as behavioralists had attempted to apply it to political phenomena. But in the course of writing *Laws and Explanation in Political Science* (1973) I was, without quite knowing it, embarking on a second and closely related project.

I recently re-read my dissertation — not an altogether pleasant experience, I assure you — and found in it the germ of my later concern with conceptual contestation and change. I came to the realization that the behavioral revolution had attempted to bring about a conceptual revolution — that is, a radical alteration of the very vocabulary of politics. I focused on three concepts in particular — 'power', 'authority', and 'interest' — and the ways in which Robert Dahl, David Easton, and other American behavioralists sought to transform the language of politics so as to make political phenomena amenable to behavioral analysis. Dahl and others, for example, equated 'power' with mechanistic causation: to say that A has power over B is to say that A can cause B to do what B would not otherwise

do. Easton argued that 'authority' is anything 'that makes people obey', which effectively obliterates any distinction between power, force, violence, coercion and other concepts that we might have good reasons for keeping separate and distinct. And behavioralists treated 'interests' as causes that serve to explain political behavior (my retort was that 'interest-explanations' are paradigmatic *reason-* or 'becausal' explanations). These supplied the basis for subsequent articles on power (1975a, 1975b), interests (1979), and authority (1987), the unifying theme of which was that not all conceptual changes are desirable and that those that are not are rationally resistable. Although conceptual change, broadly speaking, is inevitable, particular changes in individual concepts are not.

In 1972 I accepted an invitation to join the Political Science faculty at the University of Minnesota. A number of my graduate students at the University of Minnesota came to share my interest in conceptual history. Two of them — James Farr and Russell Hanson — subsequently became coeditors of and contributors to *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Ball, Farr and Hanson 1989) and contributors to *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (Ball and Pocock 1988). Another former graduate students have traced changes in the meaning of 'rights' (Dagger 1989) and 'freedom of the press' in colonial and post-revolutionary American society (Martin 2001). Other has written a dissertation on the history of 'civil society' in European thought and its migration into contemporary Arabic political thought (Browers 2001).

The Future of Conceptual History

Let me conclude, not by looking backward but by looking forward toward the future. What might lie ahead for conceptual history, or at least Anglophone conceptual history? I see several possibilities. One possible direction is what I shall call 'conjectural conceptual history' in which possible worlds or parallel universes are conjured up. One example would be something like George Orwell's notion of Newspeak in his dystopian novel *1984* wherein he creates an imaginary nightmare society in which 'thoughtcrime' is made linguistically impossible:

> Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept ... will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten (Orwell 1981, p. 46).

Another more recent (and much more modest) example is my own imaginary society of Marketopia, where the language of the market has taken over and transformed human hopes and thoughts along libertarian lines (Ball 2001c).

A second and closely related possible future of conceptual history might take the form of 'counterfactual conceptual history' to parallel the broader and more recent interest in counterfactual history. What *if* Britain had defeated the American revolutionaries? How might the language of (say) 'rights' — especially 'natural and inalienable rights' — have been different? What if the North had lost the American Civil War — how might the language of civil rights and property be different? What if Nazi Germany had invaded and occupied Britain and won World War II — how might the English language have changed? What if Sweden and Russia had never succeeded in conquering and occupying Finland — how might its political and legal language have developed differently? What tasks might then confront Finnish conceptual historians today?

A third possible future for conceptual history concerns cross-cultural transfers or translations. What gets lost and gained when concepts are translated into different languages and transferred to different cultures and political contexts? The aforementioned work of my student Michaelle Browers (2001) on the 'travels and travails' of 'civil society' in contemporary Arabic political discourse is an interesting (though by no means isolated) example of such cross-cultural transfers of political concepts.

A fourth and final future for the emerging discipline of conceptual history concerns the present as history or, if you prefer, conceptual history in the making. That is, what changes are occurring right now, even as — and because — we speak and argue with one another? How, by what means, are these occurring? At what sites? By whom and with what aims are these hoped-for changes taking place? To

take two particularly prominent examples: the environmental and animal rights movements are proposing changes in the concepts of rights and obligations, such that nature itself, future generations of humans, and non-human animals may be said to enjoy rights that we are obligated to respect and protect. If successful, these efforts will almost certainly result in far-reaching changes in our moral and political vocabulary (Ball 2001b). And of course we are only beginning to see the linguistic and political effects of globalization, of the Internet and other communications technologies, of English as the new universal language, and other developments that are changing the ways in which we think and speak and interact.

To conclude: the new discipline of conceptual history — that is, the history of conceptual changes or transformations — has left its infancy and childhood and is now entering its troubled teenage years. I expect its trials and tribulations to be both numerous and interesting.

Notes

[1] I fear that I may bear some responsibility for this misunderstanding. Having belatedly discovered the German *Begriffsgeschichte* project in the mid-1980s as I was completing *Transforming Political Discourse,* I was so keen to embrace my German kinsmen that I overlooked or downplayed important differences between our respective approaches to conceptual history.

[2] On the emergence of the modern concept of 'the state', see Skinner (1989).

[3] Consider for example Felix Oppenheim's claim that his redefinitions of political concepts are purely descriptive and normatively neutral. I have argued (Ball 2001a) that they are instead thoughtful and ofttimes powerful interventions whose very point and purpose is to *change* the way we think about some concept X (say 'power' or 'equality' or 'freedom'). And since what and how we think about X has a direct bearing on our attitudes toward X and how we use X to act with or against others, the change in our thinking about X is not and cannot be normatively neutral. Thus, philosophical analyses and reconstructions of concepts can be seen as a form of political engagement that can contribute to conceptual change. A philosophical program whose purpose is to bring about conceptual

innovation can hardly be normatively neutral — especially insofar as politics is in important ways a conceptually and communicatively constituted activity.

4 Compare Reinhart Koselleck's observation that, 'Without common concepts there is no society, and above all, no political field of action'. But which concepts are to be the common coin of discourse — and what they mean — becomes, at crucial historical junctures, a veritable field of battle. 'The struggle over the "correct" concepts', says Koselleck, 'becomes socially and politically explosive' (Koselleck 1985: 74, 77). In these battles the theorists and philosophers are the sappers who set the charges.

5 Andrew Mason, taking issue with me, quite sensibly argues that political concepts are essentially contes*table*, albeit contingently contes*ted* (Mason 1993, pp. 58-9).

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