Chapter-1

INTRODUCTION

The topic of my research is “Essentially Contested Political Concepts: A Philosophical Study” which involves the most modern debates in the political philosophy throughout the contemporary world. The problem has been chosen to bring out the level of disagreement among the political philosophers on various concepts, believed to be of a vital import in the history. Political Philosophy in a concept has not impressed only the political philosophers but also the philosophers of different fields. It is interesting for the reason that such concepts are present in all realms and sciences with meager sources at my command. I have tried to explain Galie’s position the level of his debate and nature of disputability.

If we look at the history, we infer that the knowledge grows due to the disagreements and disputes about the so-called established truths. The students of philosophy are better aware of the fact that there is no established truth but they do possess the element of universality, responsible for lived debate and sagacious controversies. Such concepts are noticed not only in political philosophy but also in the realm of morality, religion, law and other social sciences. We have, however, picked up some concepts of political philosophy and have tried to explain the meaning of the essential contestedness.

We are familiar that the debate about the essentially contested concept was started by W.B Gallie in Aristotelian Proceeding Society in 1956. Since then many authors participated in the discussion and agreed with his basic frame-work. It should also be noticed that the Gallie’s idea is not hypothesis but a framework. It is needless to go into the details of this controversy. Apart from Gallie I have also discussed some of his critics like Connolly, John Gray, and Mason etc. John Gray’s criticism, as we shall see, is rather harsh but genuine and prudent.
Contemporary political disagreement is extensive and persistent, and occurs at different levels of abstraction. At a practical level, we are confronted by disagreement over what kinds of policies the state should pursue for instance, whether it should enforce a sharply progressive income tax. The central propose of this thesis is to evaluate a variety of explanations for why political disagreement is so extensive and persistent. The contestability conception maintains that political disagreements are intractable because rational constraints on the proper use of political terms allow for a variety of different applications of them, so long as there is some measure of freedom of expression, disagreement over their proper use will inevitably arise. The contestability conception gives no significant role to a theory of error in explaining why political disagreement is so intractable because it holds that in most cases when moral and political disagreement persists, the dispute is over which of a number of reasonable positions should be adopted and there is no content to the idea that any of these positions is mistaken, there need be no failures of reasoning nor insufficient attention to the argument and evidence. More sophisticated versions of the contestability conception also appear to be available. For instance, William Connolly argues that the term of political discourse are essentially contested because ‘the common recourses of reason and evidence available can illuminate …debates [over their proper use ] but are insufficient to reduce the number of interpretations rationally defensible to one.’

Terrence Ball also shows as at least some sympathy for the contestability conception when he says that ‘disagreement, conceptual contestation, the omnipresent threat of communicative breakdown, and the possibility of conceptual change are, as it were, built into the very structure of political discourse.’

The thesis of essential contestability need not deny the role of rationality in resolving disputes over the application of these concepts. It can maintain that even though disputes over essentially contested concepts are agreeable to rational
resolution, they can not be resolved by arguments of the sort that every reasonable person with sufficient logical skills must accept.

Before interring into the debate on the essentially contested concept it is necessary to discuss as to what the concept is, so that it may be clear that the concept can either be contested, competing or otherwise.

In the discourse of the meaning of a word, concept, it is rather customary an insensate to look into its etymology. We shall therefore, make an attempt to get into the philosophical and etymological palaver on the word, the concept. The religious people trace out its etymology with the creation of the world. Wittgenstein argued, for example, that (a lot of) philosophical problems originate from erroneous use of language.

He pronounced the word, ‘to be’ to push-up the world into existence. Following the command ‘Kun’ (Arabic) the action becomes its manifestation. These religious people, belonging to all religions including many philosophers of ancient and medieval streams firmly hold that the world was a concept before its existence in the mind of God. He decided to actualize it and consequently it came into existence. The concept then in the first place is a mental representation manifest into the individual entity. It is a linguistic substance carrying particular meaning being inclusive of several objects or class of objects.

Concept, then, from the ancient covered all three important branches of linguistic semantics, syntactic and phonology related to three different fields i.e., grammar and word formation (morphology). In addition to this the concept also included semantic discourse in its preview. The word of God in the forms of signs were interpreted by the messenger who could read and understand the mental representation of god through signs. Thus, the concept basically is an image transformed into words related to the class of objects.\(^3\)
The concept, etymologically speaking, is derived from the Latin words concipere almost equivalent to the English word conceive. We are aware that the words conceive has been used in English in different senses communicating different meanings. It is, however, frequently used in the sense of conception understanding. Leaving aside all other senses of the words conceive, we shall strictly only to the meaning of comprehension the basic word of the concept.

As stated the concept in Latin is a compound word constituted of con (altogether), capere (to take, seize, and lay hold of) and meant “to take effectively, take to oneself, take in and hold”. The main Latin examples are conceptum (a thing conceived), conception-em (the noun of the action of conceipere) and conceptu-s (conceiving).

In the course of time these were many transformations and acquisitions of meanings. New dimensions were sometimes added and dropped. The different editions of Oxford dictionary describe the journey of the word, its different shapes and dimensions in the phases of history. We need not go into the details of historical accounts. We are basically concerned with the modern connotation of this world.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the concept as ‘an idea of a class of objects, a general notion or idea’. And by Webster’s Dictionary describe as ‘an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances’. A concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a horse (a particular and unique horse) and having a concept of a horse (the idea of a horse). The concept of a horse is not a thing but an ‘idea’, an idea composed of the various attributes that give a horse its distinctive character big, domesticated, used for riding and so on. In the same way the concept of ‘government’ refers not to any specific government, but rather to
set of ideas about the organization of all its powers (executive, legislative and judicial) power. Concepts are therefore ‘general’ in the sense that they can refer to a number of objects, in fact to any object that refers to the general idea itself. Concept formation is an essential step in the process of reasoning. Concepts are the ‘tools’ with which we think, criticize, argue, explain and analyze. Simply perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must, in a sense, impose meaning upon it, and we do this through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a horse as a horse, we must first have a concept of what it is. Exactly the same applies to the process of political reasoning. We build up our knowledge of the political world not simply by looking at it, but through developing and refining concepts which will help us make sense of it. Concepts, in that sense are the building blocks of human knowledge. Nevertheless; concepts are the legitimate agents particularly in the case of political thought. Amongst the problems posed by political concepts are often value-laden. Their meanings may be the subject of argument and debate.\(^5\)

The concept and the percepts are the basic tools of knowledge. They must, therefore be carefully defined and analyzed. There vital significance in the acquisition of knowledge has not been realized only in the modern times but was also anticipated in the ancient days. We are aware that other Greek Philosophers, albeit, cognized their value as the agents of knowledge, but Socrates for the first time defined concept and divested it from its opposite, the percept. To him the concept means the mental image or the idea of something, which being objectified would become the percept. The concept for Socrates means the general idea of a class. The idea of man, for example as the human species, would be regarded as the concept. After being individualized, it would be understood as idea. Thus Socrates distinguished the concept from the idea and the percept. He defined percepts as the concrete image perceivable with the five senses.\(^6\)
Plato, his renowned pupil, made it substances characterizing it as a metaphysical entity. It is evident, then, that the discourse on the concept had achieved philosophical parlance since the ancient days. Probing into the meaning of the concept, we may allude to the Oxford and Webster’s dictionaries for the determination of its lexical dynamism and socio-political connotation.\(^7\)

“Concept” are used and discussed in different philosophical projects. The concept may be approached with the aim of understanding it in the context of science. It may be understood as mental representation or its types. The states or state-types that they call concepts will then turn out to be those states or state-types that play a central role in a psychological explanation of human behavior.

In fact, not even all of the norms that provide standards for the correctness of classification will be suitable to explain the factors constituting the concept.

Consider the concept ‘LIE’ in the sense of an act of mendacity. The concept LIE, then, is a cluster of norms that provides standards for the employment of the corresponding general term LIE. In particular, the concept lie provides standards for classifying items as lies. As was mentioned above, not all of the norms that govern the application of the term will count as conceptual. Some, for instance, will concern whether an overt assertion of ones classificatory judgment of an assertion as a LIE is correct by certain other standards, e.g., standards of politeness, of prudence, of legal burdens of proof, and so on.

In a logical proposition it may be symbolized as the conceptual norms, then, are those norms that are involved in answering the question, what is it to be an F? So then how are we to determine which norms are part of the concept, or analytic or part of the meaning of a term and which ones are not? Is there any way of taking the general formulations expressed above and turning them into more concrete tests?
To be a conceptual norm is to be a norm that governs the application of the corresponding linguistic term across those cases where a thinker takes herself to have answered these unresolved questions in the case – in the case of the concept lie once it is settled by evidence or stipulation that the utterance is false, that the speaker knew it to be so, and so on. Conceptual norms then apply across the range of cases- both actual and counterfactual-where deficiencies of relevant information about the objects are taken to be resolved, either by stipulation or investigation. 

This description of the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual norms does not provide the sort of sharp, hard and fast boundaries. The norms constituting the concept may vary for different generations. 

We think that construing concepts as norms provides us with ways around some of the most common and devastating concerns about concepts, and allows us to view the philosophical predilections for conceptual analysis and intuition-pumping in a new light. 

It should not, however, be taken to mean that the palaver on the concept refers to the older generation who defined it as an intuitional entity. In our times the eluded discourse is relevant even after having a concurrence with the ancient definition considering the concept as a mental image. 

Our discussion so far emphasis the normative aspect of the concept. It is evident, then that there are norms determining the meaning of concept not only to the individuals but also the class which it refers to. 

Surely there are some rules, principles, standards for correctness, at least in some areas of human activity- wherever they come from. There is however a plausibility of skepticism and its consequent rebuttal. 

The student of the philosophy of language may be vigorously interested in the discourse of the concept. They are cognoscente with the disputes and debates
on its nature and the meanings. It should not, however, be concluded that the philosophers belonging to the other fields of philosophy would not be aware of the controversies related to the concepts and its meaning, for, it is the backbone of philosophical writings and thus, essential to have the cognizance of the disputes concerning the concepts. It is lucid then that the knowledge of the concept is indispensable for it is the tool of knowledge itself.

In the discussion on the concept we often refer to classical and modern theories. The classical theory emphasizes the cognitive aspect of its meaning and comprehends the concept as a mental representation either of God, as mentioned earlier, or of man to be discussed later. The concept according to the modern theory of its meaning either lays emphasis on its linguistic importance or gives priority to its political implication i.e., cognitive linguistic dilemma. We shall very briefly discuss two theories in the proceeding lines. The classical theory of concept covers up the categories with some other essential elements John Taylor has summarized as follows.

1. Categories are defined in terms of a conjunction of necessary and sufficient features.
2. Features are binary.
3. Categories have clear boundaries.
4. All members of a category have equal status.

In the light of above discussion we shall examine some of the important definition of the concept itself.9

According to Sartori, to have a concept is to have an ability to “distinguish A from whatever is not-A”. Sartori in the definition has defined the concept as an ability which could make distinction between one and the other. It means, the
concept determines right thinking and distinguishes the positive from the negative. Rejection of negatives yields knowledge.  

Riggs, a concept is constituted by a “mental image”. Riggs defines; a concept is constituted by a mental image. This definition is Socratic in nature. Socrates as we are aware also understands a concept as a mental entity. Lambart and Shanks concepts are the “alphabet” of the individual cognition.

Lambart and Shanks describe it as a private object being used for the enhancement of individual’s knowledge. Contrary to this Gillett holds the concept as an instrument of knowledge for a people as a whole. In the former case the concept is a mental image of an individual. In the later case it is a collective method being used for the quest of knowledge.

Sartori at another place understand the concept as an object having some necessary characteristics where as indifference to him. Freeden holds that the concept possesses semi contingent characteristics. In the earlier definition the concept possesses characteristics as its essential features meaning thereby, without them it would be in complete. In the later case the characteristics are assigned to the concept meaning thereby it is made full fledge with their addition.

In the light of this definition we can understand the classical and the modern approaches to the treatment of the word concept and also distinguishes the concept as a cognitive and a psychological representation.

This discussion on meta concept would help us to understand the meaning of the word from cognitive and linguistic point of view. It should also be clear that the concept is something used in all discipline of knowledge. It is related primarily to the basic assumption and paradigms of all sciences, be they normative, social, or natural. These rules being normative in nature determined the values attached to a particular concept. It means the concept is a value laden idea based on a cluster
of norms. The logicians, even of our age still believe in the classical theory and analyze the concept on this ground. Moreover, they include the categories determining truth and false within its purview.

The Idealism of Plato, which initiated the discussion on the meaning and the nature of concept, parallel to the idea, created interest not only in the west but also in the east. Muslim Philosophers particularly Al-Farabi and the Sufi’s belonging to the school of unity of existence wahadat-ul-wujud keenly studied Plato and were immensely impressed with his Idealism resulting into an energetic discussion palaver on the concept and its importance to understand the existence of the world.

Farabi, for example, conceives that no knowledge is possible without the concept (tasavvur) and judgment (tasdeeq). In his tasavvur (the concept) he includes both the concepts and percepts. He understands both as the sensation of different types.

Farabi, being a logician and a pupil of Aristotle, understands the concept and the judgment both necessary for the existence. He also thinks that the possible is non-existence but a constituent of existence, the actualization of the necessary or the concept. He terms the concept as the ‘what’ and the judgment as the ‘that’ of a thing. The concept and the existence are separable in the contingent being but inseparable in the necessary being the discussion reveals that the concept in its pure form is essence which being manifested gives existence to the objects. Thus, Farabi advocates the cognitive importance of the concept. The same is carried through by the Sufi’s of wahadat-ul-wujud. God for them as a pure essence is a concept which is to be known through his manifestation. We need not go into the details we have just referred to them only to make it clear that a lively and vibrant discourse on concept is present in the Oriental philosophy as well.\textsuperscript{14}
In the light of above discussion on the meaning and definition of the concept, we have seen that many philosophers and political scientists, whom we have referred to above, have emphasized the concept being normative. If the nature of concept is believed to be normative the question ‘what ought to be’ would be more important than ‘what it is’. It is in the first place to be determined as to what the concept ‘ought to be’. The norms ascribed to the particular concept give it specific meaning in specific fields. In case of its being normative, it becomes an intuitional representation, meaning thereby, it is to be comprehended by the intuitive faculty alone. Moreover, ascribing norms to the concept also entails a discourse on its rules. It may be stated that all concepts, perhaps, can not be treated as normative, for, the concept used in intuitional sciences like ethics and aesthetics may be normative in nature. The concept in metaphysics and epistemology can also be advocated as being normative, for the reason that a great deal of their content is intuitional. If the concepts are taken to be normative there would follow a legitimate question as to where due they derive their norms from. In such a case they may be deduced either from logic, society or intuition. In this way there would be some conceptual norms which make the concept what it is. We may take the instance of the concepts of man which follows some definite norms. In its constitution it is distinguished from the concepts of other species. It again draws us back to the definition of the concept being a mental representation or creation of our own mind. The mind in order to distinguish one from the other in forces some determinates for a particular concept. These determinants may be understood as norms. It is true in the case of normative sciences but the social and positive sciences may not follow the same paradigms for the reason that they generally use inductive method to reach a particular truth. Ideas in these sciences are not the objects of the human mind but gathered from the society or instances in nature. The concept in these sciences may not be treated as normative. They are created and developed in inductive process, and are therefore, debated and disputed. In short the nature of the concept is normative as well as descriptive.
While dealing with the concept we must understand it in general perspective and not in the light of particular science or sciences. There is however a truth in its being normative. It is for this reason that the theorists defining the concept have taken into account the cognitive and psychological aspects.\(^{15}\)

Speaking of the nature of something we immediately shift our attention to the characteristics found in that particular thing. Similarly pondering over the nature of the concept, we are transported to some of its characteristics which also determined dimensions or the scope of a specific concept. We agree with the philosophers that every concept, irrespective of its type, conforms to a particular domain. To make it more clear we can understand that a concept, having acquired specific meaning over a period of history determines its dimensions. We may explain it with the example of democracy which includes in its purview a particular type of rule, having a particular government enjoying power provided by the people, manifesting certain characteristics, which are not shared by the governments of other firms.

Many authors like Archer firmly hold that a concept possesses certain attributes determining its nature based on acquired meanings and a definition distinguishing it from the other concept. It is clear than that every concept has its own purview or domain /dimension. The attributes agreed upon are as follows:

1. **Identifiability** - It means that a concept is identified by its meaning and characteristics. Identifiability also covers the relevant information that a concept passes on to the users. This may be understood by the concept government which posses certain characteristics having a particular meaning including all forms of government unless specified.

2. **Learnability** - It means the quality of its acquiastation. To make it more explicit it means that every concept can be learned. Identifiability and learnability go simultaneously.
(3) Labelability - It simply means that the concept can be named, or be understood by a term, used to communicate the meaning, assigned to that concept and further it can be taught to others.

(4) Transability - It refers to the learning of other related concepts for example the concept of state having reference to the concepts of its elements.

(5) Forgetability – It refers to a psychological process of retention recall and forgetting. All these characteristics, mentioned above, speak of the psychological nature where a concept is treated as a stumiles invoking some necessary response.

In the article on the concepts included in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) the author has stressed upon two basic points i.e., ontology and the structure. The ontology adds the outset refers to the very existence of the concepts. It means the formation of the concept. We are aware that a concept is either defined as a mental representation or ability. The author here adds fregein sense to its definition; ontology thus covers all three elements necessary for the being of a concept. It must be clear that the author over here refers to the psychological theories of its existence. The cognitive theories, however classical in nature may not agree with these elements as being essential for its existence. We need not go into the details of these elements but must bare in mind that they are included in the very nature of the concepts. Mental representation and ability have been discussed by other scholar also but the fregein sense is an addition. The concept in its embryonic form is abstract in nature. It assumes some shapes as a mental representation, though it is of course not very explicit, the abstract element, however, becomes necessary. From the ontological point of view, even in accordance with the psychological theory, the concept in its nature has both the elements, sublunary and necessary, alluding to objectivity and the abstraction.
(a) Descriptive concept

(b) Normative concept

Precisely speaking, there are two broad category of the concept namely the descriptive and normative. Descriptive concepts can simply be a numerated as those giving information or pointing out characteristics of something. Defying such a concept we can bring out that a descriptive concept aims at describing what it is. The normative concept, though apparently seems to be the opposite, is not so because we come across many border line concepts which may fit in the two categories simultaneously. Normative concept however, may be defined as value-laden or based on a cluster of norms. Normative concept then emphasizes ‘what ought to be’ instead of ‘what it is’. The normative concept lays more emphasizes on the moral principles and the rules leading to their formulation. We shall discuss these categories one by one, but very briefly, for it is not our main concern we only want to make it clear in order to facilitate our study.

As we are aware, we have a cluster of concepts in all disciplines belonging to all branches of knowledge or science. Needless to say that we express ourselves and understand others with the help of concepts. As a matter of facts while reading others we actually read their mind or the ideas and communicate our ideas to others. All this transportation of knowledge is possible only through concepts. This function of the prosecution of knowledge is performed by the concepts of both categories. The concept, thus are the only valuable vehicle for the transformation and augmentation of knowledge.

The concepts used in the social and natural sciences are mostly descriptive in nature. A descriptive concept generally represents an idea, a theory, a situation based on certain characteristics. Let us understand it with some examples. Democracy for instance is a particular type of government describing, a particular form having certain characteristics determining its nature. It is moreover an idea
different from the ideas of other forms of government like oligarchy, aristocracy and modern dictatorship. Each of these concepts has a particular reference and signifies something different from the other.

A descriptive concept speaks of a specific situation. Business, for example, envisages a cluster of situations related to the possibility of its expansion and control. In the same way a descriptive concept also aims at pointing out its characteristics. We, for example, make a mention of a building, we immediately think of its characteristics, like its hugeness, its spaciousness and its gorgeousness. We may go on explaining it with multiple examples.

There are some descriptive concepts having moral implications. They are nevertheless descriptive because they describe and communicate a particular situation, a man is faced with. Bravery, courage, timidity cowardliness are some such concepts. They are descriptive as well as normative. Their moral implications are however different. They are not moral in the sense of right or wrong, true or false, honest or dishonest. The distinction is quite sharp. The later mentioned concepts are based on some norms. They do not allude to certain acts as in the case of former concepts.

The descriptive concepts may be debated and contested. Some of these as Gallie considers are essentially contested. We are presently concern with the essentially contested concepts in politics. A careful study would reveal that such concepts can be found in other discipline as well as philosophy in particular. The descriptive concepts, it means are mostly disputed and sometimes indefinable. Their situation and characteristics may often vary and give rise to the controversy. The descriptive concepts, apparently simple, may be argued otherwise. Let us understand the concept of sovereignty which is an essential element of the state has undergone a vital transformation in our contemporary world due to the growth of recently emerged concepts of globalism and pluralism.
We have discussed the descriptive concepts which can be defined as a concept which elaborates or brings out facts or the contents of the object or the class being described. One should be clear that every concept either normative or descriptive has a content determining its correct use and application. We shall now take up the normative concept.

A normative concept has some norms determining its correct use and employment as linguistic term. We have erstwhile described that a concept is either a mental representation or a linguistic term having some meaning which needs to be expressed. It may either be cognate or psychological entity. It may be expressed in language. The normative concept is generally of a cognitive significance. It is based on certain norms which, of course, come from the society. We may understand it with the example of the concept like liberty, prudence, and lie. All these concepts have their own implications having some ethical or moral content assigning to them some norms. They are carried through as soon as the term is applied either in its full or partial connotation. Briefly speaking we may comprehend that a normative concept is of course value-laden. These values may sometimes be political in nature, but their moral content is always significant. Liberty for instance has assumed political importance, but is nevertheless a moral concept having some values or norms making it a normative concept. We should be clear that freedom of every kind is not liberty. It is, however, to be defined or has to have a definite implication. It is evident then, a normative concept is mostly definite or is made definite by its correct employment. We need not go into the details of normative concept; nevertheless, it has more philosophical implications.
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