Chapter-2

ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED POLITICAL CONCEPT

2.1 The notion of essentially contested concept

The idea of the essentially contested concept is the brain child of W.B. Gallie who published a very scholarly paper in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society in 1956. Since then the philosophers working in the fields of different social science have discussed it at length either by way of his appreciation or his criticism. In this chapter we have dealt with Gallie and his critics like Connolly, Gray, and Mason. The critics have argued their own point of view but agreed with the basic idea of the essentially contested concept as Gallie proposed. We shall, in the body of this chapter try to accommodate the basic contains of the appreciation and their differences with Gallie. We should bear it in mind that the notion of the essentially contested concept can not be refuted but explained otherwise with the variations observed in the level of contestability and the practical application in the taxonomy of different social sciences.

In the present chapter we shall dwell upon the meaning and the definition of the essentially contested concept. Before its explanation, it is advisable that we should understand the meaning of the contested concept the level of contestability and its opposite term, the competing concept.

Concepts and categories are of critical concern to the social sciences, where there is often significant lack of consensus about the proper definition or application of a concept. It has been suggested that such conflict results from the nature of the concepts in question (for example, democracy, art, science, or feminism) themselves; concepts which provoke such arguments are said to be “essentially contested.” Concepts and categories prepare a basic structure of all philosophical discourse. From the earliest times, philosophers have tried to explain
the accurate nature of these entities. Gallie’s work on contested concepts is of a philosophical nature. He, therefore, theorizes from his observations of the facts of theoretical debate, and laid down a series of criteria for contestedness.

A concept can be seen to be contested when thought about the application of the concept becomes debate about the proper definition of the concept. As Gallie noted, the complex concepts are more susceptible to variation.

There are few concepts which are never contested. With the exception of mathematical concepts which are clearly classically defined (e.g., “odd number”), we can often imagine possible, though unusual, situations in which even the most basic concepts might be contested. For example, “chair” might become a contested concept at a convention of furniture designers trying to decide if a piece of furniture radically different from the typical chair could be called a chair. In these circumstances, the concept becomes appraisive; calling it a chair lends it credibility. Moreover, the concept becomes contested among specialists, though its contested uses may spread to non-specialist users of the concept. “Music” is another example of such a concept.

A second question is how we can describe contested concepts in a way that motivates our understanding of the concepts and conceptual discussion, while remaining true to empirical findings about categorization. As the analysis above shows, contested concepts are structured as a central idealized cognitive model and extensions of this central model, by specification of underspecified slots or by weighting of clustered sub models, or both. This picture of contested concepts makes use of cognitive linguistic mechanisms which have been demonstrated to operate in our thinking by cognitive linguists and psychologists.

The cognitive science account of contested categories is extremely powerful as both an explanatory mechanism and an analysis of conceptual structures. Moreover, it is capable of accounting for phenomena which objectivist notions of concepts and categories can not.
As an explanatory mechanism, the cognitive science account precisely locates the source of contestedness in a concept. As noted above, concepts can be contested at either the level of the central model (which features or models are given more weight in a given version of a concept) or at the level of extension (how will the central model be extended.) Applying this framework to the debate over a particular concept can provide useful insights for users of the concept.

As an analysis of conceptual structure, the cognitive account is unique in its reliance on such features as prototypes, frames, and idealized models. Though there is sufficient experimental evidence for these mental representations, they have no place in the classical theory of categorization, which admits of no contested concepts. The relevance of these concepts of cognition in general, and it becomes clear that the existence of contested concepts is extremely problematical for traditional accounts of categorization.

At the outset, we must know unequivocally the meaning of contested concept. It will be obvious, than, that all concepts are not contested and even within the contested concept all are not essentially contested. It is suggestive then that essentially contested concept is a different idea, having different dimensions and definite nomenclature. It should also be clear that the essentially contested concepts are not limited in the field of politics but spread in the realms of ethics and aesthetics as well. The contested concept, to be understood in the first place, is one having a greater amount of disagreement which would determine the level of contestability. We must also bear it in mind that the contested concepts constitute the core of all sciences discipline belonging to either of the classes social or natural. The contestability may either be pragmatic as generally in the natural sciences, or cognitive as in the social sciences.

A contested concept is very often discussed in its all dimensions but many a time that the disagreement is dissolved. We come to a particular conclusion
deducing from the elements of agreement in a particular concept, the contestation thus is either reduced to the minimum or completely resolves.

We have try to our best to clarify the meaning of the contestedness and the level of contestability in the contested and the competing concept. We shall now take up to define the essentially contested concepts.

At one level, Gallie’s definition is brief and clear: essentially contested concepts ‘inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’. It is this definition per se, rather than any of the seven criteria, which clearly states that the concepts are, in fact, contested.¹

Along with this brief formulation, Gallie introduces two additional elements that make the definition more complex, and that must be sorted out. First, he offers a distinction between concepts that are ‘contested’, as opposed to ‘contestable’. With the latter, one might expect contestation, yet it is not occurring at the time the concept is analyzed. This outcome potentially reflects what will be discussed later as ‘decontestation’, and it complicates the task of distinguishing contested from non-contested concepts.²

Some critics of Gallie likewise employ the term ‘contestable’, and in one instance they intend the same distinction that Gallie introduces. In other instances, it is not clear that this is the case, but their labeling nonetheless points in the same direction and again suggests the difficulty of distinguishing contested from non-contested concepts. To use one criterion from Gallie’s own framework, we would therefore argue that the category of ‘contested concepts’ is ‘open’.³

A second complicating element is that Gallie at one point refers to criteria I to V as ‘establishing the formally defining conditions of essential contestedness’. Yet as will be demonstrated later in the discussion of specific concepts, these criteria may or may not be met even for concepts widely recognized as contested. We find it more productive to think of his criteria not as standing in a well
established definitional relationship to one another, but rather in a relationship that varies somewhat with the distinct constellations of features that characterize each concept.⁴

In conjunction with these contrasting perspectives on definition, it is productive to ask, overall, how many concepts are encompassed in alternative understandings of Gallie’s idea of essentially contested concepts. Jeremy Waldron, on the one hand, expresses concern that ‘the use of this term has run wild’.⁵

On the other hand, Gallie offers a surprisingly indeed, unconvincingly restricted list in one of his summary statements, where he excludes such major concepts as science, law, liberty, and government. Between these extremes, we would reiterate that the category of essentially contested concepts is open, and that the application of Gallie’s definition and his framework should be governed by whether they yield useful insight into the concept at hand.⁶

W.B. Gallie noted that there are concepts about which groups of people disagree, even when these groups are employing the concepts to serve different functions. The surprising thing, he observed, is that when it becomes apparent that different groups are using the concept to serve different functions, the various groups do not simply say that the concept has multiple meanings. Rather, each group insists that its interpretation of the concept is “proper” or “the only important” use to which the concept can be put. These disputes, he notes “are perfectly genuine…, not resolvable by argument of any kind, [and] are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence.”⁷

There are a variety of possible ways in which contestation might be associated with a concept. Initially, we need to distinguish among concepts that are candidates for essential contestation, those that just happen to be in dispute (but about which consensus is possible), and those about which we are simply hopelessly confused. The descriptor “essentially contested” must be reserved for those concepts about which contestation among all different possible uses is
heavy, but nevertheless the concepts are still of high value in ordering and explaining the world.  

If the contestation is not deeply associated with all uses of the concept then it would seem that the contestation is simply a matter of contingent fact and it would not be appropriate to call the contestation “essential” to the concept.

Christine Swanton explains Gallie’s point by breaking it into two claims. The first, which we can call the contestability claim, has two parts: “(a) that the concept admits of a variety of ‘interpretations’ or ‘uses’ and (b) is such that it’s proper use is disputable and conceptions are deployable both ‘aggressively and defensively’ against rival conceptions.” The second we can call the essentiality claim: “Those contests about proper use are ‘inevitable’ and ‘endless.’ Notice that all of these elements are themselves descriptive. Hence calling a concept essentially contested is to explain something about it, although it might still involve normative judgments and predictions about which contests are relevant for consideration in forming the explanation. Consider the concept of a building. Disputes might erupt as to whether a given structure is a building. But in most cases its use is unproblematic.

Furthermore, if the criteria for its application were made explicit, that would likely settle most disputes. If we did find a dispute once those criteria were made explicit, we would not expect it to be deep or widespread since we do not expect people to be very attached to the criteria by which they use the concept of a building. Hence the concept of a building might meet the contestability claim, but not the essentiality claim.

On the other hand if the contestation is endemic to the use of the concept but can be traced to the fact that users are talking about entirely different things, without any robust family resemblances among uses, then the use of the concept is likely hopelessly confused. Generally, this is a result of a single term being used for very different referents. Usually in such cases, more sense can be made of the
discussion by jettisoning the confused concept-word in favor of more slight distinctions in other existing concepts. Once those distinctions are made and agreed upon, we might be able to reintroduce the original term as a way of picking out only the agreed upon referents, dissolving the confusion.

Gallie originally introduced the notion of essentially contested concepts as a way of explaining why some concepts only seemed usable in the midst of an ongoing argument. In Gallie’s original understanding: (1) the concept must be “appraisive,” signifying a valued achievement; (2) it must be “internally complex;” (3) that complexity must be reflected in an estimation of the comparative worth of each of its parts, where different conceptions of the concept will rank the worth of those parts differently; (4) the concept must be “open” in that it can be modified to fit changing circumstances; and (5) each user must recognize that his or her use of the concept is contested by other users and be able to appreciate that the other users are employing different criteria for the use of the concept. Any concept that displays these five conditions might just be “radically confused,” so Gallie adds two more conditions, (6) all the current users of the concept in their various purposes must acknowledge that the concept derived from “an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged;” and (7) that the continuing competition over usage among the current users somehow sustains or develops the original exemplar’s usage.  

Beyond simply distinguishing between essentially contested concepts and radically confused concepts, we can use these last two conditions to help us see the characterization of essential contestation as one best understood in terms of its usefulness rather than simply as an empirical fact. To see a current debate over a concept as linked to its own intellectual history and to see it as developing an evolving understanding helps us to evaluate the debate itself. Whether that debate represents a healthy contribution to the understanding of the concept or idle
semantic wordplay will be crucial to any use of the concept in a larger theoretical enterprise.

Jeremy Waldron notes that if a concept is essentially contested, the issue is not merely an argument about hard or penumbral cases for the application of the concept; rather it is a dispute that goes to the very core of the concept itself. Waldron suggests three characteristics of essential contestation: The dispute is at the concept core or “central meaning” of the concept; the contestation itself is a part of the meaning of the concept; and the contestation is what makes the term useful to its users.11

An example used by both Gallie and Waldron is democracy. It is a concept with a rich and highly value-laden history. It is also a concept in which assumed component values are tested, modified, and understood through a process of debate over the meaning of the concept itself. It is in the various competing conceptions of democracy that the important value debate takes place and by which we gain greater insight into our culture and our commitments. For example, some might say that direct popular participation in government is necessary for an application of the concept, while others will say that it precludes an application of the concept. Notice that we can wade into these debates, for example by making claims about the undemocratic character of judicial review, or we can attempt to research the debate as a way of understanding our culture’s intellectual history. Of course, we can also combine these two methods, as most theorists of democracy do.

If one is advocating a particular conception of an essentially contested concept, hoping to win adherents to one’s conception, one way to do so is to test the historical usage, pointing out strengths and weaknesses and showing how one’s own conception is derived from early historical exemplars. But to characterize the concept as essentially contested is to step outside of one’s own conception for at least a brief moment; it is a claim about the concept itself (in that
it is a claim about all possible uses of the concept – all conceptions), and not any particular conception. To call something an essentially contested concept is to characterize the concept as a whole and not to engage or deploy it within a particular conception.

The notion of essential contestation is unproblematically as Gallie originally proposed with his seven criteria. Most subsequent uses of essential contestation have jettisoned at least some of them. Indeed, the fact that subsequent theorists often reject one or more of Gallie’s conditions in arguing for the application of evidence that essential contestation itself is simply a “framework” for the better understanding of certain essential contestation to a given concept is further concepts and their intellectual histories, rather than an empirical fact about those concepts. If Gallie’s criteria were supposed to be seen as dispositive of whether a concept is essentially contested, as a property of the concept, then we would expect a failure of the concept to meet one or more of his criteria would show that the concept is not essentially contested. Instead, theorists routinely discount one or more criteria when discussing certain concepts, arguing all the while that they are best understood as essentially contested.

Hence if it is ever a useful way of explaining a concept, its usefulness can at least sometimes be supported without the subject concept meeting all of Gallie’s criteria. Nevertheless, since we can understand his criteria as guidelines for determining when the “essentially contested” title would be helpful, failing to meet many or all of his criteria is a prima facie reason to reject its application.12

As mentioned earlier the essentially contested concepts are present in most of the social sciences and Arts. We remember Gallie, whom we shall discuss, in the future course, has giving the example of art itself as one of the essentially contested concepts. We shall however restrict ourselves to the parlance of the essentially contested concept in politics democracy, liberty, power etc. In the earlier passage we have differentiated the essentially contested concepts from the
other contested concepts. Dworkin has elaborately explained this distinction. We need not repeated but keep in mind that all the contested concepts are not essentially contested. It is therefore necessary that we should examine only the concepts of this nature and avoid to get into the controversies of other contested concept, like state, nation, sovereignty etc.

The discussion on the essentially contested concept can not be started without a proper attention to Gallie who, for the first time in 1956 gave the idea of such concept and also brought whom its significance in the field of politics, ethics and aesthetics justice, beauty and truth all are essentially contested concepts. They are of great importance. But due to our work compulsion we can not discuss then even briefly. Besides Gallie, Connolly, Gray, and Mason have also dealt with the problem but they all either support or critically examine. Gallie’s arguments but basically agree with him on the substance of this idea.

Gallie in his well reputed article defined at the outset the essentially contested concept and also tried to differentiate it with other contested concepts. We have already dealt with such concepts, but Gallie is of the view that a contested concept may not and generally has not that amount of disputability. He believes that the contestability is due to the variety of usages determining the variety of meaning. It is often observed that a particular concept or word is used in specific meaning by the user. It may generally be called as his own meaning or sometimes symbolic meaning different from other usual meanings. Although Gallie does not mentioned it, we may have such experience, particularly in literature and mysticism where concepts represent symbolic meaning understood when deconstructed or unfolded. This may further be clarified by some quotations from the Gallie’s article.

Any particular use of any concept of commonsense or of the natural sciences is liable to be contested for reasons better or worse; but whatever the
strength of the reasons they usually carry with them an assumption of agreement, as to the kind of use that is appropriate to the concept in question, between its user and anyone who contests his particular use of it. When this assumption cannot be made, we have a widely recognized ground for philosophical enquiry. Thus, “This picture is painted in oils” may be contested on the ground that it is painted in tempera, with the natural assumption that the disputants agree as to the proper use of the terms involved. But “This picture is a work of art” is liable to be contested because of an evident disagreement as to and the consequent need for philosophical elucidation of the proper general use of the term “work of art.”

What forms could the required elucidation take? The history of philosophy suggests three. A philosopher might in some way discover, and persuade others that he had discovered, a meaning of the hitherto contested concept to which all could henceforward agree. Alternatively, a philosopher might propose a meaning for the contested term to which, rather than continue in their previous disagreement, the disputants might decide henceforward to conform. Thirdly, he might claim to prove or explain the necessity (relative to certain explanatory conditions) of the contested character of the concept in question, as for instance Kant tried to do in his Antinomies. Recently, however, we have been taught that effective philosophical elucidations are likely to be of a much more complicated and elusive character than any of the above, and there is today a widespread repudiation of the idea of philosophy as a kind of “engine” of thought, that can be laid on to eliminate conceptual confusions wherever they may arise. Now without wishing to advocate a return to any extreme form of this latter view, in the case of an important group of concepts, how acceptance of a single method of approach of a single explanatory hypothesis calling for some fairly rigid schematization can give us enlightenment of a much needed kind.
Distinguishing the from the essentially contested concepts Gallie holds that despite the disputes being guanine the contested concepts are however agreed upon on the basis of some substantive arguments.

There are disputes, centered on the concepts, which are perfectly genuine: which, although not resolvable by argument of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence. There are concepts which are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.

In the essentially contested concepts Gallie examines the basic terms or the key words from the field of political philosophy, history of philosophy, and philosophy of religion. Essentially contested concept means which is not resolvable where there is no possibility of agreement and which is not deducible even with the strength or sustainability of arguments and evidence. Very often it is believed that the meaning of the concept is arrived at and a particular usage of the concept is given priority to the other usages but no attempt of resolution ever succeeds. Different scholars use it differently having their own arguments justifying their use but the other rejects it with the same force of argument and the strength of evidence.

2.2 Gallie's The Artificial Example.

Gallie in order to explain the essentially contested concept has given two types of examples. One he calls the artificial example and the other he presents as a live example. We shall as Gallie has done take up the artificial example and will discuss the live example thereafter. Gallie in his artificial example argues the contestedness of the concept of champion. The common sense meaning of the concept is unequivocal and hardly has any point of disagreement. In the ordinary sense a champion is judged on the basis of his performance in the game played. But Gallie imagines a champion without being judged on the basis of performance the championship on the contrary decided on the basis of the strategy of game
style of play and distinctive method. He envisages five points to be considered in the decision of the championship. They are given below.

(I) In this championship each team specializes in a distinctive method, strategy and style of play of its own, to which all its members subscribe to the best of their ability.

(II) “Championship” is not adjudged and awarded in terms of the highest number of markable successes, e.g., “scores”, but in virtue of level of style or caliber. (No doubt for this to be manifested a certain minimum number of successes is necessary.) More simply, to be adjudged “the champions” means to be judged “to have played the game best”.

(III) “Championship” is not a distinction gained and acknowledged at a fixed time and for a fixed period. Games proceed continuously, and whatever side is acknowledged champion today knows it may perfectly well be caught up or surpassed tomorrow.

(IV) Just as there is no “marking” or “points “system to decide who are the champions, so there are no official judges or strict rules of adjudication. Instead what happens is this. Each side has its own loyal kernel group of supporters, and in addition, at any given time, a number of “floating” supporters who are won over to support it because of the quality of its play and, we might add, the loudness of its kernel supporters’ applause and the persuasiveness of their comments. Moreover, at any given time, one side will have the largest (and loudest) group of supporters who, we may say, will effectively hail it as “the champions”.

(V) The supporters of every contesting team regard and refer to their favored team as “the champions” (perhaps allowing such qualifications as “the true champions”, “the destined champions”, “morally the champions” . . . and so on).
Therefore, continuous competition between the contestant teams, not only for acknowledgement as champions, but for acceptance of (what each side and its supporters take to be) the proper criteria of championship.

Gallie’s artificial examples have been forcefully argued, but in our opinion it still needs clarification. Gallie has however succeed in arguing the kind of championship, he has stipulated, as an essentially contested concept. To explain the contestedness of the concept, Gallie has anticipated some seven conditions characterizing it as essentially contested. These conditions are as follows.

2.3 The Conditions of Essential Contestedness:

(I) It must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement.

(II) This achievement must be of an internally complex character; for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole.

(III) Any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features; yet prior to experimentation there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth, one such description setting its component parts or features in one order of importance, a second setting them in a second order, and so on. In fine, the accredited achievement is initially variously describable.

(IV) The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance. For convenience he calls the concept of any such achievement “open” in character.

(V) that each party recognizes the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties, and that each party must have at least some
appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question. More simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one’s own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses. Still more simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively.

(VI) The derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept, and

(VII) The probability or plausibility, in appropriate senses of these terms, 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.16

The discussion on the seven conditions that Gallie lays out for the contestedness of a concept entails from his hypothetical artificial example which in our opinion is quite equivocal. Gallie, however, attempts to explain as to which concepts could be termed as essentially contested. These conditions also describes details involved in the application of such a concept.

Gallie begins his discourse on the conditions saying that a concept, in the first place, must be appraisive, pointing out that the essentially contested concept must accredits some valued achievement. It clearly brings out that such a concept is value laden. Gallie, however, does not specify that the valued accredited must be moral aesthetic or political. In our opinion, leaving it covert is suggestive of the fact that the essentially contested concept may be related to any of these realms. Going through the discussion we shall examine the critics of Gallie particularly on these conditions II, III, and IV.
The proceeding three conditions are tightly linked up with one another. In the second conditions Gallie points out that the essentially contested concept must be internally complex. This condition refers particularly to the character of the concept. It means that the concept must be of an internally complex nature. The third conditions aims at explaining that such a concept signifies several components or parts, we may take the example of democracy which signifies, election, social organization and parliamentary practices. It is also explicit from his artificial example of the championship which when unfolded covers up several components of the concept for example the various meaning of championship and thereafter effectiveness spin and the strategy of the game. In the fourth condition, it is explain that the concept must be variously describable. Each components of the concept can be described in different ways and none of them should be treated as contradictory. In the forth condition Gallie emphases the openness of its character. He means that the concept may be modified in accordance with the changing circumstances. These modifications moreover should not be anticipated in advance. It is clear thus all the three conditions are tightly lived and cannot be comprehended in isolation.

Gallie considers the four conditions as the necessary characteristics of the essentially contested concept. In addition to these conditions he envisages three other conditions related to the use of the concept. Gallie is very clear that even the essentially contested concept can be used to communicate different meanings. Gallie is aware that every concept be it simple or contested has different shades of meaning. As a matter of fact these dimensions make it contested, more show essentially contested. Different scholars use it in their own meanings, having, of course, the knowledge of multiplicity or plurality of meanings. Gallie believes that the disputability of the use makes it essentially contested.

The sixth and seventh conditions are related to the use of the essentially contested concept. Gallie also points out that the every term used as concept has
its own derivatives. He calls this original authority or source of the term as exemplar. The original source gives a definite shape and meaning of the term known as concept. The persons using the concept must retain the original sense or the plausibility of meanings. Thus the essentially contested concept also imbibes the later consequent conditions which make it rather more complex and disputable. Gallie is of the opinion that the level of contestability makes a concept essentially contested.

2.4 Gallie’s Live Examples

The concepts of Art, Democracy, and Social Justice, are the example of Gallie’s live example. None of these concepts conforms with perfect precision to the seven conditions. But do they conform conditions sufficiently to agree that their essential contestedness explains or goes a very long way towards explaining the ways they function in characteristic aesthetic, political and religious arguments? Of the concepts just mentioned the fourth seems to me to satisfy most nearly perfectly several conditions. Consider, as illustration of it, the phrase “a Christian life”. Clearly this is an appraisive term; on reflection it can be seen, equally clearly, to signify an achievement that is internally complex, variously describable and “open” in the senses. Too often, if not always, it is used both “aggressively” and “defensively”. That any proper use of it conforms to the two justifying conditions, (VI) above, is obvious; whilst that it conforms to my condition (VII) might be agreed (though no doubt with many different qualifying conditions) not only by liberal Christians, but by liberal spirits of other (or even of no) religious persuasions. It is the example of Gallie’s live example.

David Collier with his mates in the article on “Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications” comments on Gallie’s seven conditions, examining them critically as under:
I. Appraisiveness. An essentially contested concept ‘signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement’. As Gallie puts it, the term that refers to the concept is an ‘achievement word’. And in fact, it is highly reasonable that the positive normative valence attached to these concepts is important in spurring debates over their meaning. Two typical examples of this positive valence offered by Gallie are democracy and social justice. 17

With regard to democracy, Gallie states:

*The concept of democracy which we are discussing is appraisive; indeed many would urge that during the last one hundred and fifty years it has steadily established itself as the appraisive political concept par excellence.* 18

Most commentaries on Gallie do not dispute that the concepts under discussion are appraisive, yet they introduce three clarifications that usefully extend Gallie’s discussion. First, William Connolly underscores the fact that designating a political system as a democracy is both to ‘ascribe a value to it’, but also very crucially to describe it. Freeden makes this same point by observing that along with the complex issues of normative appraisal, essentially contested concepts do indeed refer to ‘brute facts’. Second, appraisiveness encompasses not only positive valuation but also negative valuation, a point with which Gallie would probably not have disagreed, but that he simply failed to discuss. Finally, for some major concepts the normative valence may be unclear and may depend on the theoretical framework employed, or on the specific context in which the concept is applied. 19

Beyond these specific arguments about appraisiveness, we would reiterate the observation made in the introduction. Working with Gallie’s framework does indeed present an opportunity to explore the normative component of political
research, at the same time that this exploration is linked to a spectrum of other issues concerning the formation and application of concepts.

**II. Internal complexity and III. Diverse describability.** These two criteria are tightly interrelated: the internal complexity of a concept makes it plausible that different users may view, or describe, its meaning in different ways. In fact, this outcome may or may not occur—hence the label ‘describability’, rather than description. This distinction is parallel to the contrast drawn by Gallie (noted earlier) between contested and contestable.

Gallie summarizes these two criteria as follows. With an essentially contested concept, the ‘achievement must be of an internally complex character’. It includes a variety of possible components or features although ‘its worth is attributed to it as a whole’. Further, the concept is ‘initially variously describable’, with the consequence that, a priori, ‘there is nothing absurd or contradictory’ in the existence of alternative meanings. Diverse describability may involve an exclusive emphasis on one or another facet of the concept. Alternatively, as Gallie points out, different facets may be emphasized to varying degrees, involving contrasting relative importance.²⁰

These two criteria, as with appraisiveness, are illustrated in reference to the concepts of social justice and democracy. Social justice is variously understood, according to Gallie, in terms of a liberal conception, concerned with individual freedoms; and what might be thought of as a social democratic conception, concerned with providing to the population ‘the necessities of a worth-while human life, and the distribution of products to assure such a life . . . ’. Like justice, democracy has multiple internal components. Three of those emphasized by Gallie are majority rule, equality in the right of all citizens ‘to attain positions of political leadership and responsibility’, and ‘the continuous, active participation of citizens in political life at all levels, i.e . . . self-government’. This internal complexity in
turn makes it likely that different users of the concept will characterize or describe it in different ways.

Among the commentators, Grafstein explicitly endorses Criteria II and III as highly salient. Some authors recognize their importance, but also emphasize that the salience of these criteria can be mitigated. Thus, as will be discussed in the next section, Christine Swanton maintains that it is possible to judge some meanings as better than others, Norman S. Care offers the idea of ‘practical closure’, and Freeden develops the idea of ‘decontestation’. All of these could mitigate diverse describability. Nonetheless, there is little overall disagreement that this criterion (diverse describability), as well as Criterion II (internal complexity), is important.

We would underscore a further point about internal complexity. The claim that a concept is internally complex is meaningful only if the different components are indeed part of the same concept. The idea of a ‘cluster concept’ is sometimes evoked to underscore the claim that these components do, in fact, belong together in a single concept. If, by contrast, the concept is ‘over aggregated’ i.e. it brings together elements that are only loosely related to one another then it is appropriate to ‘disaggregate’ the concept, which may eliminate, or drastically reduce, internal complexity. The decision to carry out disaggregation is complex, and in the extended example below focused on the concept of democracy, we do not consider it justified. But in discussions of Gallie’s Criterion II (internal complexity), the possibility that one is working with an over-aggregated concept must be recognized.

IV. Openness. Essentially contested concepts are viewed as open in their meaning, i.e. subject to periodic revision in new situations. The ‘accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or
predicted in advance’. In discussing the openness associated with the concept of democracy Gallie observes that:

\[ \text{...democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter, and democratic achievements are always judged in the light of such alterations.}^{23} \]

Further, Gallie discusses how advocates’ preferred conceptualization interacts with the changing context. Conceptual competitors must consider altered circumstances when defending their own version. New circumstances may be unfavorable to dominant conceptualizations, but advocates may effectively adapt to preserve their preferred conceptualization.

Most commentators on Gallie have affirmed the importance of openness. Regarding the overall significance of this criterion, Alasdair MacIntyre views openness or ‘essential incompleteness’ as a key factor that produces essential contestability. Nonetheless, various commentators argue that openness may sometimes be superseded. Norman Care points to the possibility of ‘practical closure’, or ‘temporary closure’ that may be achieved even in the absence of absolute, objective solutions to debates about concepts that are essentially contested. Even if practical closure does not preclude periodic revisions, it nevertheless suggests that ‘at least for a time’, openness can be partially overcome.

Indeed, without such closure, we cannot ‘answer for ourselves certain of the basic questions about the character of our institutions and practices’. Relatedly, Gray argues that taxonomies developed within well-defined scholarly frameworks may not be characterized by openness.\(^{24}\)

With the idea of ‘decontestation’, Freeden offers a valuable perspective on openness. Just as concepts can be contested, they can also be decontested, in that they achieve a stable meaning within a given framework. Freeden introduces this idea of decontestation in his analysis of ‘ideologies’, which can be understood
both as constellations of ideas that are ideologies as conventionally found in the real world of politics, and also as interrelated systems of meaning that are the conceptual frames of scholarly usage.\textsuperscript{25}

Freeden carefully presents the idea of decontestation as an element within his approach to analyzing ideologies. Specifically,

\begin{quote}

ideologies need, after all, to straddle the worlds of political thought and political action, for one of their central functions is to link the two. The political sphere is primarily characterized by decision-making, and decision-making is an important form of decontesting a range of potential alternatives\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Beyond Freeden’s specific formulation, in discussions of contested concepts the idea of decontestation can usefully be understood in a broader sense as well, involving a variety of circumstances under which contestation may be reduced or mitigated. This broader usage will occasionally be followed later.

\section*{V. Reciprocal recognition.} This criterion presumes that contending parties acknowledge the concept’s contested character. To some extent, they recognize their adversaries’ use of the different facets of the concept for example, of social justice and of democracy as discussed earlier that guide their respective applications. Thus,

\begin{quote}
to use an essentially contested concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one’s own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses. Still more simply, to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively\textsuperscript{27}.
\end{quote}
In subsequent commentaries, some scholars have accepted the idea of reciprocal recognition. Kenneth Smith finds that disputants may recognize and accept that they are using similar concepts in different ways, involving ‘mutually contested concepts’, rather than essentially contested concepts. Grafstein argues that the political character of certain concepts leads to an explicit contest among rival users.

Others, however, have questioned the relevance of this criterion. Freeden argues that it is irrelevant to essential contestedness, because analysts often employ concepts in a way that may simply differ from another usage, without framing their usage vis-à-vis an alternative meaning. Proponents of a particular conceptualization may not explicitly acknowledge contending variants of the concept, thus violating this criterion. Rather than question a concept’s status as essentially contested, scholars seeking to apply Gallie’s framework should recognize that this criterion is not always pertinent.

VI. Exemplars. The role of exemplars in Gallie’s framework has generated much confusion. This is due, in part, to his own terminology and to inconsistencies in his presentation. In fact, he employs this idea both narrowly in the sense of an original exemplar and broadly. To better encompass these diverse meanings, in this and subsequent sections we employ the label ‘exemplars’, recognizing that Gallie’s label in his own text is ‘original exemplar’.

In Gallie’s narrower understanding of exemplars, the contested concept is seen as anchored in an original exemplar whose ‘authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users . . .’ The link to the original exemplar plays a crucial role in allowing analysts to distinguish between essentially contested concepts and confused concepts. Confused concepts involve disagreements in which the same term refers to two different ideas. The original exemplar anchors the concept, and the issue is therefore not a simple matter of confusion, but rather contestation over the same concept. This idea of a specific exemplar is reinforced by his use of the
singular article i.e. ‘an’ exemplar as if it were indeed one instance; and also by his specific reference to the French Revolution.

Gallie also presents a broader understanding of exemplars. He notes the ‘internally complex and variously describable’ nature of the exemplar, arguing ‘it is natural that different features in it should be differently weighted by different appraisers’. And to this he adds that ‘acceptance of the exemplar’s achievement must have that ‘open’ character which we have ascribed to every essentially contested concept’. Thus, according to Gallie, an exemplar can assume many different forms, including ‘a number of historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions’, and he makes clear that ‘the vagueness of this tradition in no way affects its influence as an exemplar’.

Steven Lukes advances an understanding of exemplars that is parallel to Gallie’s broader framing, in that Lukes focuses on multiple, specific instances that constitute the concept’s common core. With regard to power, the concept he analyzes and describes as essentially contested; there are ‘standard cases of the possession and exercise of power about which all will agree’. Lukes mentions several paradigmatic examples of power, including the rule of master over slaves.

Critics who have focused on Gallie’s narrower framing of the exemplar have understandably expressed concern about his approach. Ernest Gellner, for instance, claims that ‘. . . Gallie is, implicitly, betraying his own idea: he talks as if, behind each ‘essentially contested concept’, there was, hidden away in some platonic heaven, a non-contested, unambiguously defined and fully determinate concept or exemplar’. Similarly, Freeden criticizes the narrow version of Gallie, arguing that ‘the postulation of such an exemplar is in effect inimical to the very notion of essential contestability, as it presumes an agreed or correct position from which deviations have occurred’.

Other authors in effect acknowledge Gallie’s broader understanding of the exemplar; but this leads them to express concern that if the exemplar is indeed
internally complex, variously describable, and ‘open’, it is unlikely that all parties will acknowledge its authority. It is therefore unclear how it functions as an exemplar. Whereas the challenge that basically focuses on the narrow understanding misses an important part of Gallie’s argument, this second critique is more telling.

A useful response is to return to Lukes’s view: the common core is centered on multiple, paradigmatic examples that do, in fact, anchor the concept. Correspondingly, as noted earlier, ‘exemplars’ is used in the present article to label this component of Gallie’s argument.

VII. Progressive competition. Gallie argues that a consequence of ongoing conceptual disputes ‘might be expected to be a marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties’. In fact, as with the role of exemplars just discussed, Gallie offers a narrower and a broader understanding of progressive competition. In the narrower version, this criterion specifically involves achieving more complete agreement about the original exemplar. He thus focuses on whether ‘continuous competition . . . between contestant users of the concept . . . enables the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimal fashion’. Given the issues just raised about the original exemplar, the meaning of this stipulation is ambiguous.

The broader framing, which omits reference to the original exemplar, appears more promising. Gallie admits that ‘a general principle may be unobtainable for deciding, in a manner that would or might conceivably win ultimate agreement, which of a number of contested uses of a given concept is its ‘best use’ . . . ’.

Nonetheless, ‘it may yet be possible to explain or show the rationality of a given individual’s continued use (or in the more dramatic case of conversion, his change of use) of the concept in question’.
Some commentators defend the idea of progressive competition. As noted earlier, N. Garver strongly praises Gallie for his effort to provide order and structure to a particular sort of adversarial discourse. Swanton maintains that despite the internal complexity and diverse describability of contested concepts, it is in fact possible to judge some meanings as better than others, and hence possible to move beyond relativism. Norman Care argues that practical closure benefits social inquiry, and he supports the view that achieving shared understandings of social science concepts does indeed contribute to conceptual coherence in research. For Freeden, of course, decontestation occurs within specific ideologies or conceptual frameworks.

Ian Shapiro, while implicitly rejecting Gallie’s overall approach, does point to an avenue for the progressive clarification of concepts. Shapiro is concerned that Gallie’s framework can only produce endless conceptual debates. The focus should instead be on ‘substantive interdisciplinary knowledge’ of the domains to which the concepts apply. For example, the concept of ‘freedom’ must refer concretely to ‘enabling and restraining conditions’ that shape the degree of latitude, or freedom, that individuals experience in their lives. Correspondingly, ‘many, if not most, of the politically charged questions about freedom’ will be substantive, empirical ones that cannot be resolved without this interdisciplinary knowledge. Progressive clarification which is, to reiterate, the goal of Criterion VII should be possible, but it requires attention to these empirical issues, and not simply to concept analysis.

By contrast, other scholars strongly question Gallie’s claim that conceptual disputes can lead to an improved quality of argumentation. They express concern that opposing positions may be poorly argued and outside the bounds of reasonable discussion. Eugene Garver writes that ‘there are some perhaps too many cases in which dignifying one’s opponent by treating opposition as competition over an essentially contested concept would be foolish. Charity in
interpretation is not an unconditional duty’. Garver goes on to quote Aristotle’s argument that addressing such opponents ‘can only result in a debased kind of discussion’. Similarly, Freeden maintains that conceptual debates may be of poor quality and they may improve rish rather than enrich the contested concepts. Hence, these debates may be regressive and part of the concept’s meaning may be lost or abandoned.

Gray takes the discussion in a related but somewhat different direction, finding that a belief in progressive competition conflicts with the normative source of disputes, i.e. the criterion of appraisiveness. For Gray, the strong normative resonance of essentially contested concepts results in divergent, intractable positions and values, precisely those not conducive to standardization or harmonization through continued debate.

2.5 Connolly’s argument:

Gallie’s work, however, was ignored by philosophers, never reached the social science community, and was largely unheard of until political scientist William Connolly reintroduced essentially contested concepts in his volume The Terms of Political Discourse.

Examining the concept of “politics”, Connolly applied Gallie’s criteria to show that it was essentially contested in nature. Users of the term may make reference to any or all of eight different aspects commonly associated with the political (including, for example, relating to the system of government, involving the use of power, and involving one’s own interest), making the concept both internally complex and easily contestable. (Connolly 1983:12-13)
One of Connolly’s most significant contributions to the study of contested concepts was to bring into social science the philosophical notion of a *cluster concept*. A cluster concept is a concept which has “a broad and variable set of criteria’ where “each criterion itself is relatively complex and open...We often find that various people jointly employing such a cluster concept weight the importance of shared criteria differently. They might also interpret the meaning of particular criteria jointly accepted in subtly different ways.” As we shall see later, the idea of a cluster of variably weighted criteria is an important one in understanding the operation of contested concepts.

While Gallie’s work was addressed to philosophers of language, Connolly spoke to social scientists, and his paper highlighted ramifications of this new understanding of concepts for theoretical social science. Tackling such understandings as operational concepts, descriptive vs. normative vocabularies, the analytical/synthetic distinction, and the status of ordinary language in social science, Connolly hinted at how these understanding must be modified in light of contested concepts. Moreover, he concluded by suggesting that because uses of the contested concepts are motivated by outside, often political, considerations, the recognition of their contested nature could “introduce into these contests a measure of tolerance and a receptivity to reconsideration of received views.” More about these issues will be said later.

In an important essay written in 1956 W.B.Gallie argues that people committed to partly discrepant assumptions and ideas are likely to construe shared concepts in rather different ways as well. They will share these concepts in the sense that in a number of situations they would agree in calling a particular set of practices a democracy, a Christian doctrine, or a work of art, but in other situations one party might deny that, say the concept of democracy applies while the other affirms its proper application ,or the contesting parties might disagree about the extent to which the concept applies to the situation at hand.
When the disagreement does not simply reflect different readings of evidence within fully shared systems of concepts, we can say that a conceptual dispute has arisen. When the concept involved is appraisive in that the state of affairs it describes is a valued achievement, when the practice described is internally complex in that its characterization involves reference to several dimensions, and when the agreed and contested rules of application are relatively open enabling parties to interpret even those shared rules differently as new and unforeseen situations arise, then the concept in question is an “essentially contested concept.” Such concepts “essentially involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.”

According to Gallie, democracy is such a concept, at least as it is used in western industrial societies. It is an achievement valued by most. Commonly accepted criteria of its application are weighted differently by opposing parties, and certain criteria of its application are weighted differently by opposing parties, and certain criteria viewed as central by one party are rejected as inappropriate or by marginal by others. Finally, arguments about its proper use turn on fundamental issues about which reasoned argument is possible but full and definitive resolution often unlikely. Thus, for some the central criterion of a democracy is the power of citizens to choose their government through competitive elections, for others this factor is less important than the equality of opportunity for all citizens in attaining positions of political leadership, for still others both of these criteria pale in significance if the continuous participation of citizens at various levels of political life is not attained. These disagreements proliferate further when we see that concepts used to express them, such as power political equality and participation require elucidation also, a process likely to expose further disagreements among those contesting the concept of democracy.

Gallie argues that mutual awareness among adversaries that some of their shared concepts are subject to essential disputes contributes to the intellectual
development of all protagonists. The pressure of opposing interpretations, when each sees other interpretations as capable of some degree of rational defense, is seen by each to contribute to his “own use or interpretation of the concept in question”.

To assess Gallie’s qualified celebration of the diverse use of partly shared concepts. But a crucial part of my purpose here is to expose and refute widely held presuppositions that have discouraged American social scientists from coming to grips with Gallie’s thesis and from exploring its implications for their own work. There are several aspects of Gallie’s arguments that make them difficult for contemporary social scientists to assimilate and easy for them to ignore. To those accepting prevailing views about the nature and role of concepts in political inquiry it appears that Gallie does not distinguish sharply enough between neutral, “descriptive” concepts, about which intersubjective agreement can be attained, and those “normative” concepts that are open ended and controversial in the way Gallie asserts, he does not seem to see that descriptive concepts, which are after all the ones pertinent to scientific work, can be defined operationally, enabling investigators with divergent ideologies to accept common definitions and to adopt the same impersonal tests in applying these shared concepts to determinate states of affairs, he even takes his examples from the life and discourse of ordinary people, inadvertently bypassing the technically defined terms of political science designed to meet the conditions of objective inquiry specified here. To the extent Gallie’s argument is correct, these social scientists would contend, it does not apply to the enterprise of political science; and to the extent the argument applies, it is wrong headed.

To say that a particular network of concept is contestable is to say that standards and criteria of judgment it expresses are open to contestation. To say that such a network 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 definitively. The proponent of essentially contestable concepts charges those who construe the standards operative in their own way of life to be fully expressive of God’s will or reason or nature with transcendental provincialism they treat the standards with which they are intimately familiar as universal criteria against which all other theories, practices, ideals are to be assessed. They use universalist rhetoric to protect provincial practices.

The thesis of essentially contested concepts (i.e. concepts which are contested or open to contest) has been challenged from several directions. The charge most commonly launched within the Anglo-American tradition of analysis is that the doctrine is too radical: it overlooks resources of reason or logic or tradition or neutral representation which can legitimately dissolve the definitional disputes persistently operative in moral and political philosophy. The Continental tradition of genealogy and deconstruction would criticize the thesis, as it has been developed by Hampshire, Gallie, Lukes, Montefiore, MacIntyre and myself, from the opposite direction. On this view, the proponents of the contestability thesis continue to agent—which arbitrarily confines the space in which the contests can legitimately move.

The first charge is that the doctrine is internally contradictory. It is contradictory to say first that a concept is essentially contestable and second that the particular reading one endorses is superior. Yet the thesis as Connolly endorses it does not include the latter claim; it does not pretend to show that the reading it prefers is demonstrably superior to every other reading it opposes. The thesis claims (1) that a conceptual contest involves rival parties who accept some elements of the concept in common (2) that the common resources of reason and evidence available can illuminate these debates but are insufficient to reduce the number of interpretations rationally defensible to one (3) that a strong case can sometimes be made within this remaining area of contestability in support of a particular reading. One argues for one’s reading within this space but does not
claim to demonstrate its validity. One of the points in emphasizing the contestability of concepts which enter into a way of life is to establish rational space for debate over the terms of discourse. The thesis expresses an appreciation for politics by encouraging opposing parties to discern a possible element of rationality in the reading they contest.

Some times that might be appropriate, and surely advocates of this thesis often do hold their position on particular issues in a different and more open way once they have acknowledged an element of rationality in opposing orientations. A second objection rests on the charge that the doctrine of essential contestability is by its own premises essentially contestable. The doctrine is therefore alleged to be self refuting. For of its premises allow it to be essentially contested then it is quite permissible for people to contest it.

A rational argument of this sort can be powerful against doctrines which purport to reveal some demonstrative truth, then and the argument concerning the dilemma of epistemology helps to launch the contestability thesis.

The doctrine of essentially contested concepts is incompatible with transcendental argument of the strongest type, though Connolly has supported a weaker version in this text. If one were established to secure a particular moral doctrine specific enough to guide practical judgment in concrete contexts, the thesis of contestability would be refuted.

The affirmation of essential contestability is not self refuting because it is not presented as a necessary or demonstrable truth. It does not presented as a necessary or demonstrable truth. It does not even claim that its counter thesis can not be pursued. First, it claims that no previous or current philosophy has been able to secure asset of basic concept both specific enough to guide practical judgement and immune to reasoned contestability. Second, it anticipates that future attempts to do so will falter unless they establish closure artificially through the exercise of power. Third, it promises to offer internal critiques of current and
future doctrines which purport to eliminate rational contestability. We do not know that achievements unavailable to us now will necessarily be unavailable in the future. It is therefore not irrational for someone to deny essential contestability. But the denial does not have much bite until it is linked to articulation of one theory capable of withstanding the charge of contestability.

The phrase “essentially contestable concepts”, properly interpreted, calls attention to the internal connection between conceptual debates and debates over the form of the good life, to the reasonable grounds we now have to believe that rational space for such contestation will persist into the future, to the value of such contestation will persist into the future, to the value of keeping such contests alive even in setting where a determinate orientation to action is required, and to the incumbent task for those who accept the first three themes to expose conceptual closure where it has been imposed artificially. The thesis refers to essentially contestable concepts to focus attention on the locus of space for contestation, not in some abstract space in which language is deployed as a neutral medium of communication, but in the fine meshes of social and political vocabularies themselves. Connolly happily accepts a retitlement of this thesis as long as it properly accentuated the internal connection between the concepts imperfectly shared in a way of life and the contestable standards, judgments and priorities which help to constitute that life.

The thesis that key political concepts are essentially contested appears to be a self-conscious version of the contestability version of the contestability conception of how political disagreement is to be explained. W.B.Gallie introduced the notion of an essentially contested concept by saying that they are concepts whose nature it is to be open to endless dispute. Many have regarded the nation as a fruitful one and some of them have thought that it provides an explanation for the intractability of disputes over the correct application of central social and political terms amongst professional theories and others.
2.6 Mason’s argument

Mason defends the thesis that key political concepts are essentially contested against some influential criticisms and shall argue that it contains insights about the nature of political disagreement. In its most defensible form, however, it does not constitute a genuine version of the contestability conception because in that form it does not deny that there may be uniquely correct interpretations of essentially contested concepts. Understood in the way Mason proposes essential contestedness theses combine elements from the imperfection and contestability conceptions. They hold that there is room for reasonable disagreement over the proper interpretation of key political concepts but argue that one particular interpretation nevertheless be correct and the others mistaken.

The contestability conception gives no significant role to a theory of error in explaining why 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 the arguments and evidence. In its crudest form, the contestability conception has it that deep moral and political disagreements arise as a result of differences in attitude or desire, not belief. Bertrand Russell at one time held the view that fundamental ethical disagreements, such as the agreement between a person who believes that all men count equally another who believes that one class of them alone is important, persist because the disputants have different desires, there need be no intellectual error in either of the opposing positions.

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.’
Terence Ball also shows 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.

According to Gallie, an essentially contested concept is apppraisive, it accredits a valued achievement. This accredited achievement is complex, i.e. made up a number of different elements; explanations of why the achievement is valuable make reference to these elements which disputants weight differently. Those who give particular weights to the elements acknowledge that others weight them differently. Furthermore, the accredited achievements admit of unpredictable modification in the light of changing circumstances.

As examples of essentially contested concepts Gallie gives the concepts of democracy, social justice, work of art and a Christian life. Consider his justification for classifying the concept of democracy as essentially contested. It accredits a valued achievement. This achievement is internally complex (Gallie claims) because it makes reference to three elements: the power of the people to choose and remove governments; equality of opportunity to attain positions of political leadership and responsibility; active participation of citizens in political life of all levels.

These elements which contribute to the valued achievement are weighted differently by contestants. Furthermore, the concept of democracy is open in character because ‘democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter.

Gallie might also have added, in the way that more recent writers such as William Connolly have done, that the concept of democracy is contestable not only because people can (without contradiction or absurdity) attach different weights to these elements but also because they may interpret them differently.
What counts as having the power to choose and remove governments, what counts as equality of opportunity to attain political positions and what constitutes active participation in political life, are all matters of dispute? So one essentially contested concept is related to a group of other concepts whose proper uses are themselves contested, perhaps also essentially.

Not all defenders of essentially contestability theses employ this model. Steven Lukes, for example, claims that the concept of power is essentially contested but does not characterize it in terms of different elements that disputants weight differently. According to Lukes, all can agree that A exercise power over B if A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests.

Contestants disagree over the proper use of the expression ‘exercising power over’ despite sharing an abstract definition because they interpret the term ‘interests’ differently.

According to essential contestability theses, there is a non-trivial sense in which disputes over the application of political term such as ‘democracy’ and ‘social justice’ are political disputes. If these concepts are essentially contestable, then it is mistaken to suppose that we could have value-free accounts of the correct way of using them and reserve the value judgments for the question what forms of social and political organization are desirable. Rather, a person’s use of terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘social justice’ in itself provides an account of what she thinks constitutes, or would constitute social order. Generally speaking, the use of each of these terms is related to, and in some cases presupposes, a range of uses of other key political expression in such a way that together they constitute an ideology.

Essential contestability theories go one stage further than value pluralists such as Isaiah Berlin and Bernard Williams. Williams endorses Berlin’s view that there is a plurality of values which can conflict one with another, and which are not reducible to one another; consequently, that we cannot conceive of a situation
in which it is true both that all value-conflict had been eliminated, and that there had been no loss of value on the way.

Although Williams thinks that conflicts of values are most vivid when they are experienced by a single consciousness, it is clear he believes that many moral and political disputes between people also have their source in the way in which value conflicts admit of different resolutions that are reasonable: ‘same and honorable people can attach different importance to different values, so they will not agree on the resolution of many conflict case.

But if essential contestability these are correct, people will also disagree over how to describe values such as freedom, social justice and democracy properly (and therefore over what counts as freedom, social justice and democracy) because they can reasonably disagree over how much weight to attach to the elements that contribute to the achievement accredited by theses concepts, or (on Lukes’s account) over how to interpret abstract definition of them. Gallie’s account in effect proposes that we should model disputes over essentially contested concepts on conflict between values, for disputes over an essentially contested concept occur when people attach different weights to the elements which contribute to the achievement designated by it.
References:


8 William E. Connolly, The terms of Political Discourse p.31-32, 1974


10 Gallie, op cit, Ref. 1, p. 161.


13 Gallie, ibid, p.167

14 Gallie, ibid, p.168
15 Gallie, ibid, p.170-171.

16 Gallie, ibid, p.170-171.

17 Gallie, op cit, Ref. 1, p. 171

18 Gallie, op cit, Ref. 1, p. 184. Italics in original


20 Gallie, ibid, p. 185. See also Gallie, ‘Art as an essentially contested concept’, ref.1, pp. 102–103, 108


22 Robert Grafstein, ‘A realist foundation for essentially contested political concepts’, The Western Political Quarterly, 41, 1988,

23 Gallie, ibid, p. 186.


27 Gallie, op cit, Ref. 1, p. 172.