Chapter-4

POWER

The concept of power has long been known to be “a peculiarly problematic concept” for the social sciences. The third chapter deals with power, as essentially contested concept. The term power has commonly used by the people to mean some kind of authority exercised in the favor of the user. Power is used to control the rights of the others. Moreover; it envisages some kind of option or choice in the hands of the person possessing the rights of choice. Power means to force a person to do something either for or against the other incumbent.

The Power is defined as ‘the ability to do or act’ and ‘control, influence, ascendancy, while Webster’s Dictionary defines it as the ‘possession of control, authority, or influence over others.’ Power can be possessed and exercised in all kinds of social contexts, from an office or factory to national or international society. Power is perhaps the most basic concept in the study, of world politics, but also the vaguest. Economic factor or material strength is also yet another source of power. Very often the person using power may not be physically or morally strong but the economic strength of the person may compel the other to do something against his wishes for the one who orders him to do something in his interest. Power, thus is generally used to save guard the interest of the strong. It is very often manifest in the political and the social behavior of the people. Although it is difficult to determine with precession different forms of power, yet it is evident that the power flowing from different sources is not identical. It may sometimes be legitimate or otherwise. The source would determine the form and structure of power. The legitimate power may be exercised by the state and the other political institutions. The
illegitimate power may spring from the person or persons interested in the pursuit of their own benefit without taking into account the legitimacy of their goal.

For the student of philosophy the legitimate power is important. The power always anticipates one or the other sources. Its legitimacy would be determined on the basis of the source from which its flows. Law for example is one of the valid sources of power. It provides authority or supremacy to a person or group of person’s to dictate or direct others to act accordingly. The legal provisions make one group as the able guide determining the course of action of those for whom the law is enacted. The power is thus a valid and significant concept for the establishment of the rule of law in the society in the interest of all the people living therein.

The chapter discusses different debates involving the concept. It brings to light the philosophical meaning of the concept power. The chapter focuses on the following controversies such as distinction between power and authority, power structure and different forms of power emerging out of the debates. The chapter begins with the discussion on the meaning of the concept.

Power means as Russell thinks the production of intended effects. The definition has been critically analyzed. Russell contentions are not simple. The intended effects involve several issues related to the use of power. It is not essential that the exercise of power may result into the desired effects. It may sometimes yield the opposite consequences. A for example exercises power over B with some specific intention but B may not respond to the desired affects. He may not have the capacity to fulfill the desired objectives. Moreover responding to the intended objectives may not be in the interest of the person upon whom the power is exercised.¹
Power is also defined as doing something against the interest of the other personas A, exercises power over B to compel him to do something against his interest. He sometimes has to yield to wishes of the strong. Power also involves physical and moral strength’s for example acts against his interest sometimes due to physical strength or sometimes moral strength. In the case of religion for instance, moral strength often works and the person is compelled to do something against his interest. Power flows from authority which may either be moral, political or even physical.²

"Powerful" redirects here. For other uses, see Power (disambiguation).

**Power** is a measurement of an entity's ability to control its environment, including the behavior of other entities. The term authority is often used for power perceived as legitimate by the social structure. Power can be seen as evil or unjust, but the exercise of power is accepted as endemic to humans as social beings. In the corporate environment, power is often expressed as upward or downward. With downward power, a company's superior influences subordinates. When a company exerts upward power, it is the subordinates who influence the decisions of the leader (Greiner & Schein, 1988). Often, the study of power in a society is referred to as politics.

The use of power need not involve coercion (force or the threat of force). At one extreme, it more closely resembles what everyday English-speakers call "influence", although some authors make a distinction between power and influence – the means by which power is used (Handy, C. 1993 *Understanding Organisations*).

Much of the recent sociological debate on power revolves around the issue of the enabling nature of power. A comprehensive account of power can be found in Steven Lukes *Power: A Radical View* where he discusses the three dimensions of power. Thus, power can be seen as various forms of
constraint on human action, but also as that which makes action possible, although in a limited scope. Much of this debate is related to the works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who, following the Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), sees power as "a complex strategic situation in a given society social setting". Being deeply structural, his concept involves both constraint and enablement. For a purely enabling (and voluntaristic) concept of power see the works of Anthony Giddens.

4.1 Steven Lukes of power three dimension.

In *Power: A radical view* (1974) Steven Lukes outlines two dimensions through which power had been theorised in the earlier part of the twentieth century (dimensions 1 and 2 below) which he critiqued as being limited to those forms of power that could be seen. To these he added a third 'critical' dimension which built upon insights from Gramsci and Althusser.

One-dimensional

- Power is decision making
- Exercised in formal institutions
- Measure it by the outcomes of decisions

In his own words, Lukes states that the "one-dimensional, view of power involves a focus on *behaviour* in the making of *decisions* on *issues* over which there is an observable *conflict* of *(subjective)* *interests*, seen as express policy preferences, revealed by political participation."

Two-dimensional: 1D plus:

- Decision making & agenda-setting
- Institutions & informal influences
• Measure extent of informal influence

• Techniques used by two-dimensional power structures:
  • Influence
  • Inducement
  • Persuasion
  • Authority
  • Coercion
  • Direct force

Three-dimensional: Includes aspects of model 1 & 2, plus:

• Shapes preferences via values, norms, ideologies

• All social interaction involves power because ideas operate behind all language and action

• Not obviously measurable: we must infer its existence (focus on language)

• Ideas or values that ground all social and political activity

• E.g. religious ideals (Christianity, secularism)

• Self-interest for economic gain

• These become routine – we don’t consciously ‘think’ of them.

• Political ideologies inform policy making without being explicit, e.g. neoconservatism.

In political philosophy research, the concept of power certainly is among those most often analyzed. The literature on this topic is rich, and very heterogeneous. It has frequently been stated that power is best characterized as an ‘essentially contested’ concept. The best well-known

In the context of the developing power debates of the fifties to the seventies, the perception that power is an ‘essentially contested concept’ was a move in the right direction, in the sense that it problematized the idea of a single best definition of power. However, this move did not go far enough because it does not take the next step of arguing for a plural view of power. ‘Essential contestedness’ makes it appear natural that there should be continual disagreement concerning the definition of power while, at the same time, not squarely challenging the belief that there is a single best way of conceptualizing power. On the one hand, it is naturally the case that there can never be agreement on the definition of power while, on the other hand, it is absolutely still held that there exists a single concept which captures the essence of power, even if we can never agree upon what this is. It was this contradiction that gave the three Dimensional power debate its momentum while, simultaneously rendering it irresolvable.

If a singular view of power is held on to, debates tend to be zero-sum. In place of this zero-sum situation, power consists of a cluster of concepts, each of which qualifies as ‘power’. Following Wittgenstein argues that power is a family resemblance concept, which entails that there is no single ‘best’ definition of power. Furthermore, these family members can legitimately change their meaning depending upon which language games are being played. This dual perception of power in academic discourse moves us out of the problematic situation of claiming that there will always be different definitions of power, while simultaneously maintaining that there is a best one, upon which we will never agree. The
consequence is a positive-sum situation whereby different perspectives and perceptions of power are not necessarily in mutually exclusive competition.

Some theorists may shy away from this perspective for fear that the view that there is no single essence of power entails some kind of relativism where anything goes. Against this legitimate fear, there are ways of distinguishing better and worse usages both within and between language games.

Let us begin by observing that to argue that a concept is ‘contested’, is different from arguing that it is ‘essentially contested’. The former could simply be construed as an empirical contingent statement of fact about the nature of certain debates it happens to be the case that specific political philosophers cannot agree upon the definition of some concept. This is different from claiming that the essence of that concept is somehow inherently contested. Why should power have this essential characteristic? Possibly the best statement of the reason is found in the following extract from the second edition of Power: A Radical View: When we try to understand power, how we think about it relates in a number of ways to what we are trying to understand. Our aim is to represent it in a way that is suited for description and explanation. But our conception of it may result from and be shaped by what we are trying to describe and explain. It may also effect and shape it: how we think of power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and dispute them. It may contribute to their continued functioning, or it may expose their principle of operation, whose effectiveness is increased by being hidden from view. To the extent that this is so, conceptual and methodological questions are ‘essentially contested’, in the sense that reasonable people, who disagree morally and politically, may agree about the facts but disagree about where power lies. (Lukes 2005: 62-3).
There are two issues to be distinguished here. The first is the claim that power should be characterized as essentially contested because the meanings which we use to make sense of the world affect the way in which we see the world. This is suggested by the sentence ‘But our conception of it may result from and be shaped by what we are trying to describe and explain.’ If this is all that Lukes intended to mean this is too minimum to make the description of power as ‘essentially contested’ a significant distinguishing claim. At this level, all concepts influence what virtually any post-positivist interpretive sociology and so on. If power is essentially contested in this sense, it is hard to disagree, but it is not a terribly informative observation as all concepts would qualify. In fact this is not Lukes’ intended meaning and this can be inferred from the words ‘…reasonable people, who disagree morally and politically, may agree about the facts but disagree about where power lies.’ In other words, the ‘essential contestedness’ of power does not stem from observations of empirical reality, where the ‘reasonable people’ agree, their disagreement comes from their ‘moral and political perspectives’. In other words, what is at issue is a normative debate concerning moral right and wrong.

In the original article on essentially contested concepts, Gallie (1956) analyses the way in which concepts like ‘democracy’, ‘Christian doctrine’ and ‘work of art’ can be observed to be continually contested. What he has in mind is the kind of situation in which people are arguing over whether or not a given set of complex practices is ‘democratic’, ‘Christian’ or ‘real art’. To a religious Calvinist the practices of Catholics are not really Christian; to a committed Marxist the Social Democrat is not a ‘real democrat’; and to the lover of representational art, a blue dot on a canvas is not ‘real art’.

5
As an empirical fact, the parallel between these debates and the three dimensional power debate holds. Dahl argued that pluralist democracy was ‘real democracy’ while, moving to the Left politically, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes, argued that what Dahl termed democracy was not ‘real democracy’. The definition of power was central to this affirmation and critique of the democratic nature of American democracy. All four theorists assumed that democracy entails the relatively equal distribution of power. Hence, the definition of power becomes crucial. If power is considered in a restrictive sense, then the threshold for democratic distribution becomes relatively easily reached. On the other hand, the more inclusive a concept power becomes the higher the doorstep for ‘democracy’.6

Within the three dimensional power debate, power was contested. Let us take the parallel concerning Christianity. Imagine a devout, somewhat fundamentalist, Calvinist and Catholic each of whom is convinced that there is ‘the righteous path’ for Christians to follow. Each will insist the other is not ‘Christian’ as they are following the ‘wrong’ path to salvation. However, this does not justify the conclusion that Christianity itself is ‘essentially’ contested: it is contested for them. In our thought experiment, let us for a moment replace our two fundamentalists of different Christian denominations with two anthropologists, neither of whom is Christian, and both of whom are setting out to study the diverse religious practices of Christians. We do not think it inherently the case that the hypothetical anthropologists would have to disagree on their definition of what constitutes a Christian. What is at issue for both the Calvinist and the Catholic is the fact that being a Christian is a term of commendation, it is the ‘righteous’ way of being, consequently they have a vested interest in describing their particular Calvinist or Catholic practices as Christian.
Unlike our anthropologists, they both assume that there is only a single righteous path from which it is easy to ‘stray’. The contrast between the two perspectives suggests that what makes ‘Christian’ contested is a highly specific normative standpoint. Like the term ‘Christian’ among Christians in the West, the term ‘democracy’ has become a general term of commendation. Consequently, it has become a virtual ‘hurray word’ with little substantive meaning. It is an empty signifier in a hegemonic language game, to which we all have to defer. Imagine for a moment trying to argue within popular discourse that certain undemocratic political practices are more normatively desirable than democratic ones. It would be virtually impossible. Which is why those who attempt to argue against lowering the voting age or extending the franchise usually construct complex counterintuitive arguments to the effect that restricting franchise is somehow more democratic? The intellectually honest and logically obvious path arguing that less democracy can be better than more democracy is closed because of the taken for granted nature of democracy as a term of approval. At least this is the case in popular discourse. Hyland (1987) has put forward a sophisticated argument to the effect that democratic theory would be more logically consistent if the term democracy was not used in this way and further argued in favor of acknowledging less democracy can be better than more. However, this is a scholarly academic work and, even so, he thinks it noteworthy that within democratic theory this suggested standpoint has not been used by any other democratic theorists whom he is aware of.7

Because ‘democracy’ has become a term of commendation it has become imperative that arguing in favor of specific political practices is perceived to be equivalent to maintaining that they are more democratic than alternative practices. This fact has, of course, emptied the concept of
democracy of significant substantive content, which all agree upon. Thus ‘democracy’ is contested. However, this is not inherent to the concept. It is the consequence of an epistemic normative event which has taken place with the advent of modernity. If we go back to the Ancient Classical period when, for instance, Aristotle was collecting his constitutions, or to the medieval period of Thomas Aquinas, the term democracy is not nearly as contested and emptied of positive content.

What can be said concerning Christianity and ‘democracy’ can also be said for ‘art’? The elevation of the term ‘art’ as a general term of approval is particular to Western modernity. In other civilizations it was perfectly possible to commend the aesthetic or other qualities of a human creation without arguing that it qualified as ‘art’, while in our society this is not allowed. Hence, for instance, the decision whether or not to describe a particular object as ‘craft’ or ‘art’ is not simply an empirical act of classification but a normative one of recommendation. However, this contingent fact does not justify the conclusion that ‘art’ is essentially contested. It is contested under specific circumstances.

Certain concepts become contested in specific situations and Gallie recognizes that the condition of being ‘essentially contested’ is context specific (Gallie 1956:169).  

He describes this context in terms of an analogy with an ideal type competition or championship in which each group gets the honour of winning a championship by having their particular social practices recognized as ‘the best’. He goes on to list a set of five criteria describing the circumstances under which this kind of situation arises. The first circumstance is that the term or concept defining the championship ‘must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement’ (Gallie 1956: 171).  

96
However, it follows logically that when this circumstance does not be relevant to a concept which appears ‘essentially contested’ is no longer is so. The debate between the hypothetical Calvinist and Catholic, modern Democrats, and art lovers all qualify. On the other hand, when these evaluative conditions do not be relevant these concepts are no longer contested.

The use of the term ‘essentially’ to refer to concepts that become contested under highly specific circumstances is unfortunate because it suggests that contestedness is part of the essence of the concept, rather than particular to specific language games. If there are any truly ‘essentially’ contested concepts, General terms of commendation, such as ‘good’, might seem to qualify but, on the other hand, as they lack any claim to substantive content in their own right, agreement would be possible. We can all agree that that ‘good’ is a general term of commendation and leave it at that Debate could only occur if ‘good’ were given specific content by linking it with specific practices. The terms ‘democracy’, ‘Christian’ and ‘art’ only become contested when they are both a general term of commendation and linked to specific practices. Consistent with this, Gallie argues that concepts must involve complex social practices in order to qualify as essentially Contested (Gallie 1956 172-3).10

Rather than constituting a restrictive class of concepts, ‘essentially contested concepts’ become contested within a specific language game, in which complex social practice is given evaluative connotations. Therefore, many concepts that in general usage are not contested have the potential to become so when they are embedded in such an evaluative context.

To use Wittgenstein’s terminology, there are local language games in which the definition of concepts becomes contested. However, this contestedness applies only within that specific evaluative language game in
which power is viewed negatively as a form of domination. If actor A, exercises power over B, A is somehow held responsible for the actions of B and it is evaluated that this has negative consequences for B.

The reader may, of course, legitimately ask what rides on whether or not ‘Power’ is an essentially contested concept. What difference does it make? It is significant because the idea of an ‘essentially contested’ concept has a contradiction at its core which renders such concepts, if they exist, deeply problematic for academic discourse. We have emphasized two aspects of essential contestedness. However, there is a significant third aspect, to which he alluded briefly with reference to the idea of a single righteous path that a Christian should follow. This is the idea that there can be a singular best definition that trumps all the rest.

The singular claim gives rise to incoherence when coupled with the observation of contestedness. On the one hand, it is claimed that we can never agree on the meaning of a concept and on the other that there exists a single definition which is better than all the rest. This is not simply being better and open to falsification in the Popperian sense of being the best concept we have so far been able to devise in the light of available evidence. The claim is stronger. For Popper there exist moments of consensus within a scientific community in the face of falsification, while for ‘essentially contested’ concepts there is no such moment of consent.

4.2 The ‘Essential Contestedness’ Issue

Disagreements and misunderstandings about what conceptual conventions really amount to or what exactly a term is thought to mean in a particular example of use are therefore to be expected; and if this were meant by ‘essential contestedness’, then it would not be surprising at all that such contestedness is common. The question in this case would only be
what attitude to adopt with respect to it, i.e., what conclusions to draw from it for our treatment of concepts, at least for scientific purposes.

As Felix Oppenheim has explained in all desirable detail, particularly with respect to ‘political concepts’ (among them explicitly those of power and influence), the proper implication certainly is not one of a conceptual ‘anything goes’:

(a) **Vagueness**, i.e., the existence of an area of uncertainty which it is not clear whether or not a given term can properly be applied to, is, as Oppenheim observes, a property shared by most, if not all words of ordinary language. But vagueness is not simply to be accepted in resignation. It comes in degrees, and what degree of vagueness is acceptable depends on the context in, and the purpose for, which a concept is to be used. Certainly, the entry of acceptability in this respect must be much lower for scientific purposes than in the ordinary use of language. And whenever vagueness is excessive, relative to the respective purpose in a particular instance, something should and can be done about it. The remedy against unacceptably high degrees of vagueness is an effort to reach greater precision precisely through conceptual explication.

(b) Secondly, there is **ambiguity**, that is, the use of one single term for the expression of several different concepts a “multiplicity of senses”, in Hospers’s words. This too is a source of disagreement and an obstacle for communication that can be reduced only by careful conceptual reconstruction. The important point is, in any case, that different meanings ought to be expressed by different terms. *What* the particular term is in each case is only of secondary importance provided it does not unnecessarily depart from ordinary usage.
As these two kinds of problems arising from a lack of conceptual accuracy can thus be solved through proper analysis in every particular case, we think one must conclude with Oppenheim that they cannot be the source of ‘essential contestedness’ in any interesting, relevant sense.

4.3 Value – Dependence

This is a conclusion even Steven Lukes, probably the most famous and devoted advocate of the idea that power is an ‘essentially contested’ concept, would probably agree with. In fact, on his account, what makes the contestedness of power ‘essential’ is neither vagueness nor ambiguity, but another, more significant and less common characteristic. In order to explain what he means by that, a first step is to recall his distinction of the concept of power from what he calls views of power:

“Now, the concept of power, when interpreted and put to work, yields one or more views of power that is, ways of identifying cases of power in the real world ... alternative interpretations and applications of one and the same underlying concept of power.”

The problem with the notion of power, Lukes goes on to explain, is that the concept as well as the different views of it are “ineradicably value-dependent”, “both the concept’s very definition and any given use of it, once defined, are inextricably tied to a given set of value-assumptions”. And it is “in consequence” of this, and not because of any other feature, that “the concept of power is ... what has been called an ‘essentially contested concept’ one of those concepts which ‘inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’.”
Thus, in Lukes’s view, at the root of the contestedness of the concept of power lies the fact that, although there is one “absolutely basic common core to, or primitive notion lying behind, all talk of power”, that “primitive notion” must be further specified if it is to be of any use “in the analysis of social relationships”. Only such a specification renders what he would call a ‘concept’ of the term, and there are, of course, all kinds of alternative possibilities for this. The specification favored by Lukes himself, for example, leads to a concept of power in which “interests” play a central role. But as he demonstrates with the examples of Parson’s and Arendt’s definitions there are also “conceptualizations of power” in which interests play no role at all and which, nevertheless, are “rationally defensible”.

However that may be, what we have so far is still at most ‘simple’ contestedness. What makes this contestedness ‘essential’ is the so-called fact that the competing concepts and views are “value-dependent”. Concerning the interest-based concept of power favored by Lukes himself, this is so, he argues, because “the notion of ‘interests’ is an irreducibly evaluative notion”. And with respect to the alternative concepts proposed by Parsons and Arendt, he declares without further argument that their purpose is “to lend persuasive support to the general theoretical frameworks of their authors” thus, although he does not expressly say so, he must assume that those “frameworks” rest on specific “value-assumptions”. On the other hand, with respect to views of power, Lukes likewise observes:

“One feature which these three [previously examined] views of power share is their evaluative character: each arises out of and operates within a particular moral and political perspective”
And he even goes on to say that “he would maintain that any view of power rests on some normatively specific conception of interest”.\textsuperscript{12}

But if that is the case, then Lukes must regard views of power to be ‘essentially contested’ too. And this is precisely what he asserts, at the very beginning of his analysis, about his own view of power:

In a way, then, according to Lukes, views of power are especially ‘essentially contested’: On the one hand, if the concept of power is ‘essentially contested’ i. e., if there are several “rationally defensible” concepts of power and if views of power are nothing but different interpretations of such a concept, then all views of power are necessarily ‘essentially contested’ in a derived way: they succeed to, so to speak, the ‘essential contestedness’ of the corresponding concept; but, at the same time, they are also ‘essentially contested’ in their own right, in the sense that each (per se contestable) concept, in turn, allows for several “rationally defensible” interpretations.\textsuperscript{13}

So much for Lukes’s argument in support of the ‘essential contestedness’ of the concept of power as well as of the different views one can have of it. Although often uncritically adopted by other scholars, this argument has drawn its share of criticism, so let us have a look at the different objections that have been brought forward against it.

\textbf{4.4 A pragmatic Objection}

One counter-argument put forward against this idea is of a rather pragmatic kind. Terence Ball has argued not specifically against Lukes, but in general that power simply cannot be an ‘essentially contested concept’ because that would mean that all communication and, with it, all life in community would be impossible:
“If the concepts constitutive of political discourse, and therefore of political life, are indeed essentially contested, then of course there can be no common moral language or civic lexicon; hence no communication; hence no community.” (Ball 1993, 555)

That, however, is certainly not a strong argument against the ‘essential contestedness’ of power. As long as a concept is ‘essentially contested’ it must also be a matter of permanent disagreement whether or not it is a concept “constitutive of political discourse”. In that sense, Ball’s argument begs the question since he can only assume that power is such a ‘constitutive’ concept if he presupposes that it is not ‘essentially contested. Nor is it at all self-evident that the ‘essential contestedness’ of a concept necessarily has the alleged detrimental consequences for communication and community.

4.5 An Epistemological Objection

But Ball has still another argument against the ‘essential contestedness’ thesis, and that is an epistemological one: That there has been disagreement over the concept of power in the past, he correctly notes, is not sufficient evidence not even if, as Clegg (1989, xv) thinks, power is the “most ‘contested’ of concepts” for supporting the claim that there also must necessarily be such disagreement in the future; hence, the claim that the concept of power is ‘essentially contested’ is baseless: “At most, all that can be concluded is that ‘power’ is a contingently contested concept” (Ball 1993, 556).
This argument, suggestive of the well-known argument against the rationality of inductive inference, is really a strange kind of argument to be used in a conceptual controversy.

Ball seems to think that we are dealing here with an experimental matter: the concept of power is ‘contingently contested’, in his view, because it remains an open question, impossible to answer once and for all, whether or not it will in fact be an object of controversy in the future. This disagreement may be correct, but is beside the point:

On the one hand, it would certainly be a misreading although an understandable one, because the term is really somewhat misleading of the notion of ‘essential contestedness’ coined by Gallie and then adopted by Lukes and others to understand it as implying that a concept thus qualified must necessarily be contested, in reality, at all times. Undoubtedly, it is an empirically conditional matter whether or not a concept with the properties specified by Gallie as making up ‘essential contestedness’ among them most prominently that of having an “appraisive” nature, or, in Lukes’s terms, of being “value-dependent” is actually contested at any point in time. Rather, what Gallie, Lukes and others seem to have in mind is that ‘essentially contested’ concepts are especially contest-prone, that the possibility of their being contested at any particular time is particularly high, and that, above all, contest about them can never be disqualified since there are no arguments that could settle such disagreement once and for all. In that sense, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak not of ‘contestedness’, but of ‘contestability’, not of ‘essentially contested’, but of ‘essentially contestable’ concepts. And that is, indeed, the term used by some of the participants in this debate.14

On the other hand, for the question of whether or not the concept of power really is such an ‘essentially contestable’ concept, the level to which
it is in reality contested is, if at all, of minor importance. What is at issue, instead, is the argument that the concept of power is “ineradically evaluative”.

This opens up two possible strategies for denying the essential contestedness\(^\text{15}\) of power: one is to argue that the predicate of ‘essential contestedness’ is not (in a particular case), or cannot be (generally), consistently attributed; the other is to deny that power is necessarily conceptually linked to a value-judgment. Both strategies have been employed in the literature, and we will now take them up in turn.

4.6 The Simple Inconsistency Objection

One rather obvious objection against Lukes’s conception has been forcefully formulated by several authors. It holds that Lukes’s account is internally inconsistent because his own treatment of the concept of power belies his argument of its ‘essential contestedness’: Although he insists that the concept and all views of power are ‘essentially contested’, Lukes himself does not hesitate to argue for the superiority both of his own favorite concept over the other concepts discussed, and of his own favorite view of that concept over the other views he presents. Such reasoning, however, would be pointless if the concept, in all its possible interpretations, were certainly ‘essentially contested’. This is the argument put forward, for example, by Brian Barry who, in a sharply critical early review of Lukes’s book, clearly points out the inconsistency:

“It appears that he wants to hold two positions simultaneously. The first is that the concept of power is ‘essentially contested’ ... The second position is that the third (‘three-dimensional’) conception is superior to the others... I do not
see how, if the first proposition (irreducible value-conflict) is true, there can be any room for rational arguments of the second kind.” (B. Barry 1991c, 304 f.)

In the same suggestion, Terence Ball (1993, 556) has observed that Lukes has contradicted his own so-called belief that power is an ‘essentially contested’ concept, since if he really held that belief, it would make no sense for him to advance arguments for or against any one particular concept or view of power.\(^{16}\) On the contrary, Ball adds instead of having shown “that the conceptions of power he criticizes were mistaken simpliciter”, Lukes even succeeded in reasonably arguing “that they are too narrow”; and

“Far from supporting the thesis of essential contestability, these considerations suggest that disagreements about the meaning(s) of power are rationally debatable and, at least potentially and in principle, resolvable.”

Christine Swanton (1985; 1992, ch. 1), in an extensive discussion, has attempted to refute this objection which we will call the simple inconsistency objection. In her interpretation of the concept, ‘essential contestedness’ means that there are several competing conceptions of one and the same concept. She thus identifies the idea of different conceptions with Gallie’s idea of different ‘uses’ of a concept (1985, 811; 1992, 1). The problem of essential contestedness arises when a concept has a ‘core’ meaning which, as such, is commonly accepted, but can be interpreted in different ways (1985, 813; 1992, 3). What makes this contestability ‘essential’, according to Swanton (1985, 813; 1992, 4), is the alleged fact that the inevitability and unresolvability of contests arise because of certain
features of a concept itself (rather than because of any contingent e. g., psychological facts). The features at issue here come in two versions:

(a) a “relativist” or “ontological” version, basically grounded on the understanding that some concepts involve moral judgments, and since such judgments are relative there cannot be one best (or true) conception (Swanton attributes this version to Lukes); and

(b) A “skeptical” or “epistemological” version which holds that, even if there is a best conception, we can never know whether our belief about which conception that is true (this version, according to Swanton, is the one adopted by Gallie) (1985, 814; 1992, 4 f.).

The objections usually raised against the essential-contestedness view (in either one of the two versions), she observes, are those of inconsistency or of a lack of justification (1985, 815). One example of the former is the simple inconsistency objection (Swanton here expressly refers to Brian Barry’s critique of Lukes): that for someone who really holds the essential-contestedness view, it cannot make sense to engage in any contest about an essentially contested concept. As Swanton sees it, this charge is easily brushed aside, because to say that there is no best conception of some concept (or at least that we have no way of knowing which is the best conception) does not mean that one cannot have a criterion of better or worse (1985, 815; 1992, 9).

Swanton seems to think that with this she has refuted the simple inconsistency thesis. But at least as far as Lukes’s account of the essential contestedness of evaluative concepts is concerned, her argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Although it is generally correct to say that the existence of a criterion for comparative judgments (‘better’) does not necessarily depend on the existence of a criterion for judgments of
superlativity (‘best’), “Swanton’s solution to the problem is not available to Lukes”, as Andrew Mason has plausibly argued, because on Lukes’s account of the different views of power, “there is no objective or even shared standpoint from which one of these views is, or can be justifiably regarded as, superior to the others”.17

4.7 The Sophisticated Inconsistency Objection

But even if Swanton were right on the last point, this would not mean much for Lukes’s account. Swanton herself argues that besides the simple inconsistency objection, there is another, weightier and more sophisticated inconsistency objection which Lukes (and all those who share his view about essential contestedness) must deal with.18 It concerns the question of whether or not the ‘common core’ of an essentially contested concept is itself essentially contested. That question gives rise to a dilemma: If the common core of a concept is not essentially contested, then it is difficult to see why there would not also be truth-conditions or assertibility-conditions with respect to some specification of that core concept, and thus essential contestedness would simply disappear. And if it is essentially contested, then, as Lukes himself acknowledges, one cannot even say that there is a contested concept,19 because there is then no way to determine whether there really is disagreement about one and the same thing. In Swanton’s view, the dilemma can be resolved, but only at the price of giving up the idea that essential contestedness involves interpretations of the ‘common core’ of a concept, i. e., by giving up the distinction between concepts and conceptions and stating the problem, instead, in terms of a common ‘ideal’ and different possible conceptions of it. The dilemma cannot be resolved without giving up an essential factor of essential contestedness itself, the sophisticated inconsistency objection against that concept is valid.
Criticizing Gallie and Lukes in his Article ‘Is Power essentially contested K.I. Mac Donald writes:

The proper role of the values of the doer in the doing of political theory is a continuing and vexed problem. Is the holding of values a burden or an integral part of the process? Recently Lukes has made a determined effort to argue, in the case of one particular concept, ‘power’, that theoretical and value disputes cannot in principle be disentangled: he will argue for a view of power which is radical in both the theoretical and political senses. The view he will defend is...ineradicably evaluative and “essentially contested.” The notion of ‘essentially contested’ is defined by reference to Gallie, and although the above quotation may be ambiguous, Lukes later usage makes clear that he is claiming that it is the concept of power that is ‘essentially contested. This claim is technically mistaken and the mistake, he would argue, is substantively harmful.

The parallelism between Luke’s and Gallie’s usage is limited. Gallie is concerned with competing hurrah noises which evaluate particulars where the contest arises over which instantiation is closest to some accepted exemplar; the problem lies in the differential weighting of the attributes and is almost a taxonomy problem. Lukes is concerned to note that power is one of these concepts which is ineradicably value dependent. By this he means that both its very definition and any given use of it, once defined, are inextricably tied to a given set of value assumptions which predetermine the range of its empirical application... the concept of power is, in consequence, what has been called an ‘essentially contested concept’. Lukes is dealing with the situation where the instantiation of a formal definition depends on assumptions made elsewhere, namely in the value system. Technically, the disparity can be pointed by noting that Luke’s
view of ‘power’ fails to meet two of Gallie’s criteria for an essentially contested concept. The very first defining criterion specifies:

(I) it must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued. This is not the usual usage of ‘power’. Gallie also stresses:

(IV) The derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept. Lukes rejects such a view. Granted that Luke’s reference to Gallie is more obfuscatory than precise, what follows? This. If a concept is truly essentially contested, the proper ground for contest is the essence of the concept. Our disagreements in here in that concept. If Luke’s account of the usage of ‘power’ is correct, value disagreements about ‘power’ are properly contests about the values from which the concept depends. Contest about the concept itself is fruitless, since there is not the source of the disagreement. But Lukes, having attached a mistaken label of ‘essentially contested’, is then led off course by it to opt for the former analysis, not the latter. Admittedly there are problems with Gallie’s original definition.

Gellner, for example, is ill at ease with Gallie’s talk of an ‘original exemplar’, as presupposing a historically invalid and logically irrelevant ‘point’ of origin. But even Gellner agrees that defining a concept as essentially contested locates disputes within the concept: Gallie’s central point is that a kind of inner turbulence, a permanent disequilibrium between various elements within a complex concept, is an essential and inherent part of the very life of certain important concepts’. Luke’s failure to make the distinction renders him vulnerable to Barry’s charge that he holds two incompatible positions: ‘the first is that the concept of power is “essentially contested”... The second position is that the third (three-dimensional) conception is superior to the others, where this apparently does not simply mean that it happens to fit in with Luke’s own values or moral and political
perspective? We are Lukes to restrict himself to providing a formal analysis of the concept of power then the academic exercise would be possible, and the value disputes could take place elsewhere.
References


8 W.B. Gallie, op. cit, ref. 5, p. 169

9 W.B. Gallie, ibid, p. 171

10 W.B. Gallie, ibid, p. 172-3


17. Ibid.,


19. Ibid.,