

# WHY IS POLITICS NOT ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED?

Bojan Vranic  
University of Belgrade

## **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to defend the thesis of essential contestedness against the criticism of its logical inconsistency. The author believes that such criticism results from a misconception of whether Gallie's thesis of essential contestedness can be applied to terms such as politics, law, or history. On the example of politics, the author attempts to demonstrate that this term cannot be essentially contested for at least two reasons: firstly, politics is not a concept, but a general term; secondly, it is the appraisals of the concept that are essentially contested, not the concepts themselves. The author of the paper believes that these claims will dispel the doubts about the logical consistency of the idea of essential contestability.*

**Key words:** essentially contested concepts, Gallie, politics

## **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In the second chapter of Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, three trolls, William, Bert and Bill, capture Bilbo Baggins and his company of dwarves and decide to cook them. As the night goes on, the trolls get involved in a deep dispute on the best way to cook their prey – whether to fry them, roast them, boil them, or add them to a soup. The argument lasts until late into the night, when Bilbo slyly interferes and critically states that dwarves are not a very desirable meal because they never wash themselves, have long beards, and are too fat and greasy. However they are cooked, they never make a delicious meal. Bilbo's hidden intention is to take advantage of the trolls' natural property to turn into stone when exposed to daylight, which in the end is exactly what happens. My question is: what is the actual object of the dispute among the trolls and Bilbo? It seems to be the concept of cooking. Bilbo is not even considered to be a participant in the dispute until he starts talking about cooking. To rephrase the previous question: if all participants in a dispute understand what the object of the argument is, what do they discuss? It appears that the argument is concerned with the best way to cook something. The reason why the dispute cannot be finished is that none of the participants can rely on a universal criterion on the basis of which he could say: "Yes! This is the best way to cook a dwarf!" The only thing that the trolls have at their disposal is their own appraisal of some of the ways which each of them considers the best. Therefore, such a dispute cannot be concluded using argumentation only, and indeed it ends when a natural property of

---

<sup>1</sup> A draft of this paper was presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> CEE Forum of Young Legal, Political and Social Theorists in Greifswald (Germany) 2013. I want to thank the participants for their useful and constructive comments.

trolls is activated. This example refers to the taste or aesthetic criteria of a troll. In similar situations concerning politics, religion, or history, when there is no universal criterion on the basis of which we can judge which appraisal is truly the best one, we say that the subject of the dispute is an *essentially contested concept*.

Essential contestability as a technical term was introduced into epistemology and consequently into political philosophy by W. B. Gallie.<sup>2</sup> The essential contestability of concepts in political philosophy "has not so much been rejected or refuted as subsumed into the subconscious of political studies."<sup>3</sup> Gallie's thesis belongs to a larger project of analytic philosophers of the 1950's, who expressed an anti-enlightenment attitude against reason as the absolute judge; "Gallie's basic intention was to confront such a view of reason and legitimize the disagreement in theory and politics."<sup>4</sup> Instead of universal rationality, philosophers started to show greater appreciation for diversity and pluralism. Such views, especially among British political philosophers, were based on a new reading of Mill's thesis that "Europeans owe much to 'plurality of paths'" and that from "differences and disagreements sprang toleration, variety, humanity."<sup>5</sup> Gallie's thesis should thus be read bearing in mind the context of its time, while every modification of its assumptions should be evaluated in terms of how much it encourages the affirmation of humanist pluralism.

Nowadays few papers contain more than a couple of passages defining concepts as essentially contested. Essential contestedness is most often taken as a framework used to define basic concepts which will be applied in research, or as an epistemological position which denies the possibility of universal justification. Without a more elaborate understanding of the meaning of such a framework, essential contestability can lead a political philosopher to accept a kind of skepticism or even political nihilism. Therefore, the authors who criticize essential contestability either call for a radical change of Gallie's basic theses, or completely reject the idea, claiming that it is self-defeating.

Such criticism results from a misunderstanding over the range of application of the idea of essentially contested concepts. One of the most frequent misconceptions is that essential contestedness can be applied to terms such as "politics", "law",

---

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bryce Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol 56 (1955/6): 168-169.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Vincent, *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Bojan Spaic, "O suštinskoj spornosti pojma prava: Galijev okvir primenjen na pojam prava," ("On the Essential Contestedness of the Concept of Law: Gallie's Framework Applied to the Concept of Law") *Anali Pravnog fakulteta u Beogradu* LVIII, no. 2 (2010): 231. Translation mine.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 244.

"history", etc. If such a possibility existed, the idea of essential contestedness would really be self-defeating. I will argue that politics (as an example that could be generalized for all aforementioned terms) is not an essentially contested concept, and that the idea of essential contestedness is not self-defeating. This misconception is generated on two levels. Firstly, politics is not a concept, but rather a general term. Secondly, concepts are not essentially contested. What is essentially contested is the appraisal, which relies on the (political, moral, aesthetic) value of a concept. These two claims can dispel the doubt in the logical consistency of the idea of essential contestedness. I show that both misconceptions come from a wrong interpretation of Gallie's idea. If Gallie's thesis is interpreted in the correct way, and connected to his view of history and theory of meaning, it follows that his thesis is not self-defeating.

## 2. Essential Contestedness and its Critics

Concepts of "organised or semi-organized human activities"<sup>6</sup> such as political philosophy, aesthetics, studies in religion and history, are essentially contested because there is no way to give a conclusive argument about how they could be used in a general manner. Essential contestedness is therefore not the consequence of "the sociological thesis that there will always be different interpretations in the everyday use of the words."<sup>7</sup> It is a feature which is sooner or later attributed to concepts, every time there is a discussion on normative issues in the aforementioned disciplines. Gallie does not provide a comprehensive list of all the concepts from political philosophy that can be essentially contested, but gives the examples of democracy and social justice.<sup>8</sup> Bearing this in mind, it seems that the corpus of what we call essentially contested concepts is made up of more or less all traditional concepts of political philosophy which do not have a technical meaning or are not part of some metatruths. This list includes freedom, power, equality, community, state, nation, etc. At this point it is important to note that politics does not belong to this corpus, although it is not *prima facie* plausible to say that this sphere of human activity has either technical or metalingual meaning. I believe Gallie can be interpreted in a way that enables us to morphologically define politics as a general term, which is the thesis that I will try to defend in the analysis that follows.

It would be wrong to claim that essentially contested concepts are necessarily reducible to psychologisms such as interest or distrust, or to the fact that on the philosophical level there is a plurality of metaphysical interpretations. Therefore,

<sup>6</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 168.

<sup>7</sup> Đorđe Pavicevic, *Pravda i politika: nasleđe i granice političke filozofije Džona Rolsa (Justice and Politics: Heritage and Limits of John Rawl's political philosophy)* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2011), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 180.

essential contestability is not a part of emotivist moral theories which at first glance occupy a similar position. Emotivists also argue that there is no rational way to conclusively end a *dispute*. Such an argument rests on Ayer's assumption that moral and political discussions contain "no objective validity" in the structure of the attitudes in a *dispute*, which would enable participants to rationally draw a conclusion which would end the dispute.<sup>9</sup> Since Gallie is more interested in concepts (not attitudes), his position is significantly different than the emotivist one: discussions over the concepts of political philosophy "which, although not resolvable by arguments of any kind, are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence."<sup>10</sup> Breaking away from the metaphysical position results in a narrower meaning of the adjective "essential." This adjective is related to those concepts which, whenever used, retain the feature of "contestedness." Such a position moves Gallie away from metaphysical essentialism:

The term 'essential contestability' is thus set up in direct opposition to essentialism [...]The crucial philosophical question for essentialism is therefore what is the *core* or essential element of justice [...] The same argument would hold for all political concepts. If it makes sense, we should be able to give some definition of its essence. If a word makes sense and can be defined, then it has some kind of reality. However, essential contestability directly adopts the Wittgensteinian mantle in denying that concepts and words have essences.<sup>11</sup>

One can only indirectly answer the question of whether Gallie adopted Wittgenstein's theory of meaning and it is beyond my ambition in this article. What is certain is that among Gallie's academic writings there are papers on the theory of meaning, some of which are important for an understanding of the thesis of essential contestedness. It is important to note that Gallie departed early from the so called "solipsistic theory of meaning", such as the one arguing that a sign (or a meaningful string of signs) can refer to private objects, such as sense data.<sup>12</sup> Gallie instead draws upon Russell's argument about the ostensivity of private objects, which is that sense data refer to some publicly accessible objects. Instead of opting for a division between theories of correspondence and coherence, it seems that Gallie believes it is more relevant whether we can understand signs in use or not. The process of understanding is relevant if other participants in the discussion can comprehend (and apply) the word in the same way as I can, and if they are willing to support my position. Put in another way, signs are social instruments which we can

---

<sup>9</sup> Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936), 161-168.

<sup>10</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 169.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Vincent, *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Bryce Gallie, "Solipsistic and Social Theories of Meaning," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol. 38 (1937/8): 62.

understand only in their relation to other publicly accessible objects.<sup>13</sup> Thus Gallie, in his paper on essentially contested concepts, presupposes publicly accessible relations as a matrix for understanding the meaning of signs.

There has been a considerable amount of criticism of Gallie's thesis over past decades. The first significant criticism is found in an article by John Gray, according to whom any idea of non-existence of justification criteria leads to moral relativism and political nihilism. The idea of essential contestedness does not pose a difficulty if it is understood as a claim that there are no empirical means to conclusively end the debate of the correct use of the term. The problem arises if a political philosopher wants to elevate the thesis to a higher level by claiming that certain concepts have intrinsic values which are not reducible to some justification criterion. For Gray, the value-dependent thesis (which he identifies in Lukes's view of power as an irreducible concept in terms of values) belongs to essential contestability proper, which is a view that belongs to metaphysics.<sup>14</sup> If each of the participants in the *dispute* believes that his use of the concept cannot be replaced with any other use, then that concept is not essentially contested, but belongs to "a conflict between adherents of mutually unintelligible world-views."<sup>15</sup> This means that such metaphysical positions have nothing in common that the ones who hold them could argue about, which is indeed a paradox. Gray concludes that the strong thesis of essential contestability "in terms of incommensurability, then, is self-defeating in that it dissolves the generic identifying criteria of the concept and prevents us from characterising the conflict as a definitional dispute."<sup>16</sup>

Gray's criticism therefore refers only to the strong version of the essential contestability thesis (which he identifies in Lukes's application). Instead, he suggests that such a view can be reduced to a thesis that within one culture there are different understandings of a concept, over which a kind of consensus can be reached although the dispute itself will probably persist. The idea is that a *dispute* must have a limited scope, unless we want to end up in a state of "radical Pyrrhonian nihilism."<sup>17</sup> A decade later, Christine Swanton worked on a similar idea. While Gray only briefly mentions that the problem of essential contestability can be resolved if there is something uncontested in the dispute, Swanton explores this idea in more detail. Arguing in favour of a kind of theory of coherence, she suggests that on the basis of empirical insights we can find an "Archimedean standpoint" in every *dispute*, which is the starting point for a logically coherent procedure of

<sup>13</sup> Gallie, "Solipsistic and Social Theories of Meaning," 75.

<sup>14</sup> John Gray, "On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts" *Political Theory* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Aug. 1977): 339.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

justification.<sup>18</sup> The procedure does not necessarily have to justify the starting position of the participants in the *dispute*. Rather, its role is to ensure that each participant stays within the delineated frame of the *dispute*.

The criticism of Gray and Swanton should be understood constructively, because they suggest how to resolve a seemingly problematic position that Gallie has left open. However, in a more recent work, Glen Newey tried to make Gray's conclusion that the essential contestability thesis is self-defeating even more convincing. In his book, Newey demonstrates that despite the seemingly serious problems with the strong thesis, such approaches continuously persist in the works of contemporary theorists.

Newey's criticism thus does not target Gallie directly, but other authors do, including Connoly, MacIntyler, and Mason, who made the original thesis radical by claiming that politics and history are essentially contested concepts.<sup>19</sup> The positions of those authors can be summarized in the following way: politics is a kind of human oratorical activity which does not possess a universal criterion which parties could use to evaluate achievements and determine the best way to realize politics, but each party retains the right to believe that their evaluation is the best. The criticism is expressed through the following question: is it not the claim that politics is an essentially contested concept the one that everyone agrees upon? This is how Newey points to the contradiction contained in the essential contestability thesis:

But in that case, the thesis holds that the parties would have to *agree*, on pain of changing the subject, that the other interpretation was possible, and in this case the concept would no longer be contestable; the only way in which they could fail to do this is by making a mistake, or being in ignorance about the nature of the concept.<sup>20</sup>

It seems that we are dealing with something resembling Russell's paradox – if a concept is the case, then it is not essentially contested, and if it is not, then it is essentially contested. Something similar was noticed by Gray: "Recall Russell's paradox argument against naïve realism: 'Naïve realism leads to physics, and physics if true, is false; therefore it is false'."<sup>21</sup> However we understand the form of the paradox, the thesis is self-defeating. Even without the logical strength of the paradox, this criticism seems plausible enough. Put more simply, if there is at least one thing that we can agree upon, in this case that the object of the *dispute* is essentially contested, is that not the criterion on the basis of which the thesis can be discarded as false when applied to itself?

---

<sup>18</sup> Christine Swanton, „On the ‘Essential Contestability’ of Political Concepts,” *Ethics* Vol. 95, No. 4 (Jul. 1985): 826.

<sup>19</sup> Glen Newey, *After Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 39.

<sup>20</sup> Newey, *After Politics*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Gray, "On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts," 343.

It seems that the problem can be resolved if the position which Newey criticizes is corrected in the direction of the original thesis of essential contestedness. I believe that the very proposition that politics is an essentially contested concept opens up room for criticism; both the supporters and the critics of the thesis didn't interpret it properly. Firstly, politics is not a concept. To state the opposite is a categorical mistake. Secondly, it is not concepts that are essentially contested, but their evaluations and appraisals which signify the (political, moral, aesthetic) value of a concept.

In the sections that follow I will use the terms "concept," "appraisals," "the use of concept," and "general term." The last three require an additional explanation.<sup>22</sup> The terms "appraisals" and "the use of concept" are coextensive. Both were used frequently during the mid-20th century. The difference between the two is that appraisal refers to a value judgement in a nonphilosophical or everyday context. The latter term was used in conceptual analysis. Today, both terms are slightly obsolescent, and in political philosophy the term "conception" is used instead, as defined by John Rawls.<sup>23</sup> In the analysis of essential contestedness there are authors, such as Gerald Gaus, who believe that Gallie's thesis can be better understood using Rawls's distinction concept – conception.<sup>24</sup> However, there are at least two reasons why this distinction is inadequate for understanding essential contestedness. The first is that Gallie does not use the term "conception." The second is that the distinction "concept – conception" itself, however useful in the analysis of political concepts (social justice, state, power, etc.), turns out to be useless when it comes to explaining where politics is located on the conceptual map of political philosophers. I will try to clarify this issue.

As will be shown in the following section, Gallie uses the term appraisals to mean something that is essentially contested. It is important to stress that appraisals are a type of value judgement. This means that concepts need to possess intrinsic value, for the terms "appraisals" and "the use of concept" to be used meaningfully. In what way is this different from conception and why is it relevant? At this point one cannot analyze the structure of Rawls's theory in more detail, but can believe that he was sufficiently clear when he emphasized that conceptions are "a set of related principles."<sup>25</sup> Appraisals, as it will be argued, are neither principles, nor are subjected to any kind of deduction. If they were, then they would not be essentially

---

<sup>22</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose valuable comments resulted in these clarifications.

<sup>23</sup> See: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Gerard Gaus, *Political Concepts and Political Theories* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 30-32.

<sup>25</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 10.

contested. In other words, appraisals are elements of the value judgements of those who take part in a dispute. This thesis will be further elaborated on in this text.

The relation between social justice and various sets of principles of those who are its subjects seems plausible enough within the distinction "concept – conception." If politics is understood as a concept, what then is its relation to the concept of social justice? Is social justice a conception of politics? In addition, is the conception of social justice the conception of the conception of politics? Such structure is rather confusing, to say the least. One of the solutions to this strange situation is that politics should be declared a subject of a higher order. However, this is not too helpful, because it results in a categorial mistake, because politics and social justice are placed at the same conceptual level. This article therefore suggests that politics should be understood as a general term, in the same way as "man," "tree," or "lion. I will provide an argument for the plausibility of this claim by analyzing Gallie's idea of championship. If my argument is accepted, the consequence of comprehending politics as a general term is that politics can be understood only linguistically. Politics only signifies and selects the concepts which belong to it. Finally, it would imply that there is no special theory of politics. That does not mean that there is no political theory, but rather that this discipline always refers to what politics signifies. Those are political concepts such as social justice, democracy or power, as well as their contested appraisals.

### 3. What can be Essentially Contested?

Criticism of the idea of essential contestedness can be narrowed down to the question of whether contestability can be defined as an intrinsic or extrinsic feature of a concept. Gallie's argument, *prima facie*, is vague regarding this issue. At one point in his essay, Gallie says that contestedness is a kind of consequence of the concept's characteristic that it "must be *appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievements."<sup>26</sup> If the term "sense" is understood as a criterion of use on the basis of which some "valued achievements" can be appraised, then contestedness appears as an extrinsic consequence of perceiving the concepts of political philosophy, aesthetics, or history through their evaluative dimension. Further reading of the text leads one to a different conclusion. In order for the concept to be essentially contested, along with its evaluative dimension it needs to be "of an internally complex character", and "any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features."<sup>27</sup> This means that the value of the concept is of an intrinsic character; it is not expressed only through its evaluative dimension. Concepts therefore represent ends in themselves. This is a slippery slope, with a great likelihood that

---

<sup>26</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 171.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

Gallie's thesis will end up in a metaphysical world or in moral relativism. This would happen if it turned out that evaluative dimension and internal complexity are in a way synonymous. In order for a concept to be internally complex, it needs to be capable of evaluation. Evaluativity is possible only if there are alternatives which can be evaluated within the same concept. The following analysis should show whether such synonymy is really the case.

One of Gallie's formal conditions of essential contestedness is that the used concept must be such that it can be the object of evaluation or appraisal. This means that it must be possible for the term to be valued at an intersubjective (public or social) level and that it needs to possess evaluative capacity. Does the internal complexity of the concept satisfy the first condition of essential contestedness? I believe there is at least one case when those two views are compatible, without the hazard that the thesis would acquire metaphysical and morally relativistic features. That is the case when internal complexity means that the concept has some minimal empirical content. This is not the same as stating that objects designated by the concept are its essence. This weaker thesis states that the use of a concept implies the existence of a rational belief in the possibility of existential import.<sup>28</sup> At this point it is useful to recall Gallie's thesis that signs are social instruments used to understand relations at the intersubjective level, which allows referring to a large number of objects simultaneously.

When it comes to concepts in political philosophy, it seems that their internal complexity can be explained in the following way. The evaluative dimension of the concept (appraisal) refers to some descriptive content. Such content constitutes the empirical dimension of the concept, which is the basis of a rational *dispute*. Although this does not lead to a conclusive decision or a general consensus, the descriptive content at least limits the scope of the *dispute*. On the other hand, the evaluative potential of the concept is the decisive criterion upon which relevant empirical content is selected. In other words, a participant in the *dispute* should use the concept in a way that enables other participants to "have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying concepts in question."<sup>29</sup>

The function of empirical content therefore results in the concept not being essentially contested. Each participant in the *dispute* knows that a particular concept is being discussed and not another, as well as they know that parts of that concept have different value for other participants. Put more simply, there is no

---

<sup>28</sup> This view was present in epistemology during the middle of the last century by Lloyd . See: A. C. Lloyd, „How Concepts Contain Beliefs," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol 58 (1957/8): 290-291.

<sup>29</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 172.

dispute over the fact that participants in the discussion have the same sense data, which are signified by the concept in use. The dispute arises over the meaning of that empirical content. If the internal complexity of the object is understood as a cluster of descriptively susceptible objects which the concept designates, then this does not contradict the evaluative dimension. Does this result in synonymy? The answer seems to be negative. Instead, we seem to be dealing with supervenience: the evaluative dimension has the ability to change the descriptive content, and in some cases it can be the other way around. In Gallie's words, "the accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances."<sup>30</sup>

Two conditions complement each other although each retains its function without reducibility: the empirical one ensures that participants stay within the *dispute*, i.e. that the *dispute* is rationally limited in its scope, and the evaluative one ensures that argumentation is relevant for the given concept in dispute. If we go back to the example from Tolkien's book, it is now clear that Bilbo Baggins would not be able to advocate for his use of the concept of cooking before joining the *dispute* on cooking dwarves. If the *Hobbit* by any chance had suggested that the trolls make porridge instead of cooking a dwarf, however convincing his arguments may have been, the trolls would have very soon realized that his suggestion was intended to deceive them. By talking about the taste of a cooked dwarf, Bilbo was recognized by the trolls as an important participant in the *dispute*. More importantly, the objective state of affairs largely depended on Bilbo's success in discussing the value of a cooked dwarf.

According to Gallie, there are two ways for participants to know that they are discussing the same object. The easier way is to draw upon the belief that one's use of the concept is the best one. This obliges the participant in the *dispute* to acknowledge alternatives to his view, because otherwise the superlative adjective "best" would not make sense. Gallie does not make it clear how one develops such beliefs (and even less so how one justifies them). Still, this seems to be a kind of inductive conclusion that the participant in the *dispute* reaches before hearing all the alternatives.

The claim that induction is an easy answer reflects Gallie's skepticism about such an approach. In a text published shortly before the thesis of essential contestability, Gallie noticed that inductive conclusions in social sciences are often truistic, because they only confirm the initial assumption. The aim of research should be explanation and not confirmation of what we believe to be right. Gallie claims that there can be no explanation if the use of the term is seen as a conjunction of individual cases. The use of the term should instead be seen as a disjunction

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

between continuity and discontinuity; a concept is either improved through continuous use or its meaning is changed.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that in both cases one is dealing with the same concept, so it seems that there is no interruption in the communication between those who are in favour of the improvement and those who believe that the meaning of the concept should be understood in a significantly different way. In order to justify the stability of communication among the participants in a *dispute* over essentially contested concepts, Gallie introduces the idea of an exemplar.

The idea of an exemplar has often been criticized because Gallie openly argued that this idea could defend historicism. The exemplar itself should be understood as a technical term which comprises individual patterns of behaviour, formed in whatever way: imitating the behaviour of an exemplar, acquired in socialisation or inherited through tradition.<sup>32</sup> As such, the exemplar is also an essentially contested concept, which consists of historical memory of what such a concept should be like. The difference between the exemplar and the concept being discussed is in their fullness: while the first one has only evaluative content, the other one in addition contains empirical information. Namely, Gallie's idea that the motivation to participate in the *dispute* is always connected with the assumption that each participant believes that their use of the exemplar is the best. This does not imply mechanical imitation, but a normative improvement of the idea of the exemplar. I believe that with this manoeuvre Gallie came significantly closer to normative political philosophy: not only did he demonstrate that the object of the *dispute* was the normative use of the term, but also that the possibility of the use itself makes the concept descriptively dense. In other words, the concepts of political philosophy are not empty.

The belief in the best use and the exemplar leads to the conclusion that it is not essentially contested which particular concept is being discussed, but rather how the participants evaluate or recommend the use of that concept:

In general, it would seem to be quite impossible to fix a *general principle* for deciding which of two such teams [participants in a *dispute* – B.V] has really 'done best' - done best in its own peculiar way to advance or sustain the characteristic excellence revealed in the exemplar's play.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, concepts themselves cannot be contested. This ultimately also goes for freedom, power, equality and other concepts of political philosophy: participants in the *dispute* on these concepts rarely or never challenge that they are political; what

---

<sup>31</sup> Walter Bryce Gallie, "Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences," *Mind* Vol 64, No. 254 (Apr. 1955): 162.

<sup>32</sup> Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 176.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

is disputable is the use of the concept. If some of the uses happened to lead to contradictory conclusions (i.e. that the object of the *dispute* is not politics), then the concept itself would stop being essentially contested. If my interpretation of Gallie's thesis of essential contestedness is correct, that is if the concept itself is not essentially contested, but its evaluation or appraisal, then this interpretation seriously challenges the views that the whole thesis is self-defeating.

It has already been said that Gallie does not give a comprehensive list of concepts that can be essentially contested. Nevertheless, he gives a list of criteria on the basis of which we can both identify and test essential contestedness. As a frame for his explanations he uses the example of championship, which means that there are different teams, each of whom has their own style of play, and who periodically win the support of the audience.<sup>34</sup> The game lasts infinitely long, and there is no referee who would decide who the champion is. That temporary title is deserved through audience's support – whoever has the most supporters is the champion. The ones who do not support the champion “continue with their efforts to convert others to their view, not through any vulgar wish to be the majority party, but because they believe their favored team is *playing the game best*.”<sup>35</sup> The competition is not a metaphor for parliamentary elections or beauty pageants, which do possess clear criteria on the basis of which they are initiated and ended. On the contrary, those are continuous debates which cannot be finished due to the essential contestability of champions: “Clearly, we would never expect the dispute to be settled: who was the champion would always be contested.”<sup>36</sup>

It follows that we have several elements of a championship: teams, the object of the championship, style of play, the audience and the competition itself. Translated into terms from the conceptual map of political philosophy, it looks like this: teams are political philosophers; their argumentation the style of play; what they compete for are the uses of concepts such as justice or democracy; and the audience are their followers. But what is the championship? I believe it is politics. This seems to put me into a strange position, because it appears that I am claiming that the object of the championship is synonymous with the championship itself. Therefore it is necessary to further clarify the premises to make the argument sustainable.

The championship itself is not what the teams compete for, but rather has a broader meaning and involves the concepts as objects of competition, the audience, and the competitors. Championship is the context in which the game is played, which Gallie himself also says as a side remark.<sup>37</sup> This may seem confusing, bearing in mind that

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>36</sup> Gaus, *Political Concepts and Political Theories*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” 176.

Gallie at an earlier point in his text stated that we are all “acquainted with the concept of ‘the championship.’”<sup>38</sup> One should be cautious there as well. Gallie uses the term “acquainted,” which according to Russell’s well-known theory<sup>39</sup> of truth means that we all share the same empirical evidence regarding the fact that there is something we refer to as championship (bearing in mind Gallie’s social theory of meaning from the second part of this paper). It follows that we are familiar with championship by means of its concepts (such as the champion, audience, etc), which carry empirical content. Championship, therefore, has a broader meaning, which according to Gallie lies in the need for continuity, even when the effective champion has been declared: “There is, therefore, continuous competition between the contestant teams, not only for acknowledgement as champions, but for acceptance of (...) the proper criteria of championship.”<sup>40</sup>

The thesis can be tested using the following example. Let us imagine a debate on democracy between two political philosophers, one of whom advocates a greater degree of deliberation in public discourse, while the other calls for scrutiny over the competition of elites. If we wanted to describe the subject of the debate in neutral terms, we could say: ‘Oh, they are discussing politics!’ This statement would not be incorrect, because when we reduce the discussion to an expression meaning that it is all politics, we have not changed anything regarding the truth value of our conclusion. It appears that the term politics serves as some kind of notational abbreviation. I am not in any way suggesting that politics should be spelled with either a small *p* or a capital *P*, but it seems to me that it would be adequate to find a morphological equivalent for this authentic notational abbreviation. In that sense, politics can be classified as a general term.

Why is it better to accept politics as a general term than a concept? First of all, if we keep claiming that politics is a concept, we would then find ourselves in an awkward situation which could be described in the following way: as a concept, politics can be the object of the championship. This is probably how politics is seen in everyday discourse. In political philosophy, however, things are much more complex, because politics is seen as a context of what we actually discuss. If politics is the context of the championship, then it is possible to state something like: “The championship is about politics”. If we now replace “the championship” with “politics” we get a trivial assertion, “Politics is about politics”. This problem comes from Mill’s theory of meaning, according to which personal names do not need to have a connotation in order to possess a meaning, while general names acquire meaning only after being instantiated with a personal name (a lion has a meaning only after being realized

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>39</sup> See: Bertrand Russell, *The problems of philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) [database on-line]; available at <http://www.ditext.com/russell/russell.html>. Especially chapter V.

<sup>40</sup> Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” 171.

as the individual animal Simba, for instance). Gallie's thesis eliminates such a problem through the requirement that concepts in political philosophy need to have a political context, which means that they need to be related to some political objects which are susceptible for description. Note that political objects need not be actual ones; it is sufficient that the one who uses the political concept can refer to some relevant empirical content which is verifiable by other potential users. Therefore, politics should be left out from a list of things that can be essentially contested. In that way, politics is not a concept, but at the same time represents its formation (morphology) at a metalevel. Finally, a concept is formed when the general term (politics) is extended to comprise political objects.

#### 4. Conclusion

The thesis of essentially contested concepts cannot and should not be applied to itself. I have argued that Gallie's thesis is not meaningless. Each participant in the *dispute*, who admits that there are different appraisals of the same concept, understands the sense according to which it can be claimed that evaluations and arguments related to the used concept are essentially contested. When parties in the dispute acknowledge essential contestability, the *dispute itself* becomes more rational and claims are justifiable:

Put less artificially, what I am claiming is that a certain piece of evidence or argument put forward by one side in an apparently endless dispute can be recognized to have a definite logical force, even by those whom it entirely fails to win over or convert to side in question; and that when this is the case, the conversion of a hitherto wavering opponent of the side in question can be seen to be *justifiable* – not simply expectable in the light of known relevant psychological or sociological laws [...] It is for this reason that we can distinguish more or less intellectually respectable conversations from those of a more purely emotional, or yet those of a wholly sinister kind.<sup>41</sup>

What prevents the *dispute* from being conclusive is the absence of an objective criterion that would decide among different appraisals of the concept. This is not the same as saying that there is no normative criterion for making a *dispute* justifiable. Finally, essential contestedness enables the involvement of tolerance and understanding of other people's position, as well as the need of others to acknowledge our effort. In this view, *disputes* are rational because they require the involvement of criticism in the decision-making process. *Disputes* are, however, not conclusive – each decision regarding acceptance of someone's appraisal can be brought into question, which is a position that I believe deserves attention.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 190.

**Bibliography**

- Ayer, Alfred J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Connolly, William. "Essentially Contested Concepts," in *William E. Connolly: Democracy, Pluralism and Political Theory*, ed. Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Gallie, Walter Bryce. "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol 56 (1955/56): 167 – 198.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1955. "Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences." *Mind* Vol 64, No. 254: 160 – 180.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Solipsistic and Social Theories of Meaning," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol. 38 (1937/8): 61 – 84.
- Gaus, Gerard. *Political Concepts and Political Theories*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.
- Gray, John. "On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts," *Political Theory* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Aug. 1977): 331 – 348.
- Evans, J. L. "Knowledge and Behavior," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol 54 (1953/4): 27 – 48.
- Lloyd, A. C. "How Concepts Contain Beliefs," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol. 58 (1957/8): 289 – 304.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. "The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts," *Ethics* Vol. 84, No. 1 (Oct. 1973): 1-9.
- Newey, Glen. *After Politics*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Pavičević, Đorđe. *Pravda i politika: nasleđe i granice političke filozofije Džona Rolsa. (Justice and Politics: Heritage and Limits of John Rawl's political philosophy)*. Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2011.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Russell, Bertrand. "On Verification," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* Vol 38 (1937/8): 1 – 20.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The problems of philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972. Database on-line. Available at <http://www.ditext.com/russell/russell.html>.
- Spaić, Bojan. "O suštinskoj spornosti pojma prava: Galijev okvir primenjen na pojam prava" ("On the Essential Contestedness of the Concept of Law: Gallie's Framework Applied to the Concept of Law") *Anali Pravnog fakulteta u Beogradu* LVIII, no. 2 (2010): 213 – 234.
- Swanton, Christine. "On the 'Essential Contestedness' of Political Concepts," *Ethics* Vol. 95, No. 4 (Jul. 1985): 811 – 827.
- Vincent, Andrew. *The Nature of Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.